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

Adaptation, film genre and violence in *Live Flesh* (1997) by Pedro Almodóvar: "*Yo quiero que tú sufras lo que yo sufro*"

Yo quiero que tú sufras lo que yo sufro: Adaptación, género cinematográfico y violencia en *Carne Trémula* (1997) de Pedro Almodóvar

Alejandro Soto-Chaves
Merton College, University of Oxford
alejandro.sotochaves@merton.ox.ac.uk

Abstract:
This article examines the film adaptation of Ruth Rendell's novel *Live Flesh* (1986) in *Carne trémula* (1997), exploring its narrative transformations and shifting engagement with film genre conventions. It analyses the malleability of the generic palimpsest, highlighting how Almodóvar integrates elements of *neo-noir*, melodrama, and psychological thriller into his reinterpretation. In this regard, the article addresses the adaptation strategies and the film's degree of autonomy from the novel, both in terms of narrative structure and character construction, which oscillates between two paradigmatic extremes (*cinéma d'auteur vs* film genre.) Furthermore, the article scrutinises the representation of violence through different typologies—state-ideological violence (Francoism), institutional violence (police), and symbolic-extrajudicial violence (gender and masculinity)—revealing the ways in which Almodóvar subverts certain conventions of film noir. The article also explores urban space as a narrative agent, reflecting Madrid's transformation from the final years of Francoism to late capitalist modernity in the 1990s. Finally, by emphasising its intertextual dimension and the tension between fatalism and redemption in Almodóvar's poetics, *Carne trémula* is pondered as an amalgamation of genres that remains firmly committed to discursive expansion and the director's distinctive stylistic vision.

Resumen:
Este artículo examina la adaptación cinematográfica de la novela *Live Flesh* (1986) de Ruth Rendell en *Carne trémula* (1997), explorando sus transformaciones narrativas y su concurrencia vacilante con el cine de género. Se analiza la maleabilidad del palimpsesto genérico, destacando cómo Almodóvar introduce elementos del *neo-noir*, el melodrama y el thriller psicológico en su reinterpretación. En este tanto, el artículo aborda las estrategias de adaptación y el grado de autonomía del filme respecto de la novela, tanto a nivel narrativo como en la construcción de personajes que oscilan entre ambos extremos paradigmáticos (*cinéma d'auteur vs.* cine de género). Asimismo, se estudia la representación de la violencia en distintas tipologías: estatal-ideológica (franquismo), institucional (policial) y simbólico-extrajudicial (género y masculinidad), evidenciando las modalidades de subversión de ciertas convenciones del cine negro postuladas por Almodóvar. El artículo explora el espacio urbano como agente narrativo, reflejando la transformación de Madrid, desde las últimas décadas del franquismo hasta el capitalismo tardío noventero. Finalmente, haciendo hincapié en su dimensión intertextual y la tensión entre fatalismo y redención en la poética almodovariana, se pondera a *Carne trémula* como amalgama de géneros sin claudicar del compromiso con la expansión discursiva y el estilo personal de Almodóvar.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; Ruth Rendell; Live Flesh; adaptation; violence; film genre

Palabras clave: Pedro Almodóvar; Ruth Rendell; Carne trémula; adaptación; violencia; cine de género

Received 2025/03/23 || Approved 2025/05/01

1. Introduction

As an introductory intertitle to the feature film *Carne trémula* (1997, Pedro Almodóvar), the fourteenth by the Spanish director and screenwriter, the spectator is presented with an urgent sociopolitical juncture: a state of exception declaration throughout Spanish territory for the year-end festivities and the transition into the new decade of the seventies.[1] Under the hackneyed pretext of defending peace, the progress of Spain, and the rights of Spaniards, the Francoist State suspended the constitutional articles that safeguarded freedom of expression, freedom of residence, freedom of assembly and association, "as well as Article 18, according to which no Spaniard may be detained except in the cases and in the manner prescribed by law" (Almodóvar, 1997). In a scene of sweeping visceral power, the protagonist, Víctor Plaza, is born in the very centre of the capital city, on the seat of an out-of-service bus.

Almodóvar's narration—here only sketched in its opening sequences—raises, in light of the methodological intentions of this paper, a series of questions regarding the possibilities of *genre palimpsest* within *film d'auteur*—that is to say: to what extent can cinéma d'auteur assimilate components of genre film without fully completing that displacement? It also interrogates the processes of translation, perversion (Panero *dixit*), and trans-generic adaptation from the literary to the cinematographic and—although this could be read as a commonplace within Almodóvar's oeuvre—novel thematic formulations surrounding violence. In this sense, the article has been structured in two major sections: the first concerns an analysis of Almodóvar's adaptation strategy of the British author Ruth Rendell's novel *Live Flesh* (1986); the second offers a reflection on the typologies of violence operationalised by the Spanish director as speculative nuclei articulating his cinematographic text.

[1] Smith (2000), Marsh (2004), and Pavlovi (2007) have noted Almodóvar's (perhaps deliberate?) imprecision in dating this late-Francoist event more than a year after its actual occurrence. Almodóvar "erroneously" refers to 1970 in order to frame Fraga Iribarne's announcement of the state of exception, which was in fact issued in 1969. Following Smith, Almodóvar's ironic introductory game incorporates (counter)indications—such as the advertisement for the Swiss watch company Certina, with its slogan of *absolute precision* affixed to the bus-turned-manger in which Isabel Plaza (Penélope Cruz) gives birth to the protagonist, Víctor (Liberto Rabal).

2. Methodology

The analysis presented here is situated at the confluence of adaptation studies, critical theory of social representation, and comparative poetics between literature and cinema, pursuing a textual, contextual, and interdisciplinary methodological strategy. This approach is grounded in the conviction that Almodóvar's operation upon Rendell's novel cannot be reduced either to the logics of fidelity or to mere formal transposition; it is, above all, a process of cultural appropriation/rewriting, in which systems of representation, traditions, and regimes of signification are transformed in their passage from page to screen.

The corpus consists primarily of the novel *Live Flesh* and Almodóvar's adaptation. Both texts are approached, first and foremost, through a comparative reading that unravels the structures of narration, the construction of characters, and the principal thematic motifs. This analysis draws upon resources from structural narratology and film semiotics, particularly the distinction Gérard Genette establishes between *histoire* and *discours*/narration—that is, the difference between the underlying order of events and the manner in which these are arranged within the text or film (1980, p. 27).

Beyond the comparison of basic narratological elements, the methodology advances toward identifying the main adaptation procedures: spatial recontextualization, genre shifts, symbolic re-signification, and discursive modulation, all distinctive of the Almodovarian imaginary. Following the conceptualisation proposed by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, adaptation is understood as a form of "intersemiotic translation" and a cultural "palimpsest" (2005, p. 27), in which the original text persists within the memory of the resulting work, albeit contaminated and creatively displaced.

In this sense, the textual analysis intertwines with a contextual exploration that considers the historical and sociopolitical processes shaping both Thatcherite England, from which Rendell's novel emerges, and the post-Franco, postmodern Spain in which Almodóvar relocates the action. Given

that violence occupies a central role in both literary and filmic texts, the methodology incorporates theoretical frameworks that problematise structural, symbolic, and gendered violence. To this end, it draws on the Benjaminian perspective of violence as institution and as spectacle, as well as on Slavoj Žižek's (2008) examination on the matter—particularly his notions of subjective (p. 9), symbolic (p. 1), and systemic (p. 2) violence—which altogether make it possible to unravel the multiple levels at which the film articulates, represents, and subverts discourses of violence.

Finally, the intertextual dimension of the corpus is tackled, more subtly, through Genette's theory of *transtextualité*, as well as through Michel Foucault's renowned approach to disseminated authorship (1998, p. 208), which proves useful for analysing the manner in which the creative voice is distributed and problematised between Rendell and Almodóvar, both inscribed within radically different regimes of cultural and political production. The analysis thus privileges a dialectical and intersectional reading, in which narrative devices are always placed in relation to formations of power, gender strategies, and the shifts in meaning generated by the adaptive process.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework shaping this paper is composed of three interconnected blocks: studies of intermedial adaptation, genre theory, and critical approaches to violence and urban spatiality in contemporary cinema.

Regarding adaptation, the point of departure is the shift proposed by theorists such as Robert Stam (2005) and Linda Hutcheon (2013, p. 7), who reject restrictive perspectives on "fidelity" in order to open the analysis to modes of "rewriting" and "dialogical relation" between literature and cinema. Such methodological dislodgment allows adaptation to be conceived as a creative and productive process in which sources dialogue with each other, producing inner tension, and, at times, subverting their own genre commitments and ideological inscriptions.

The second axis, centred on genre theory, draws upon the revision of studies on *neo-noir* and melodrama, particularly those stemming from the work of Steven Marsh (2004, p. 92) and Thomas Elsaesser's (2013) analyses on so-called "intensified melodrama" (p. 438) and its role in redefining European auteur cinema. Almodóvar's film thus emerges as a space of genre hybridisation, where the codes of the psychological thriller, film noir, and melodrama are juxtaposed and re-signified, resisting conventional taxonomies in favour of a more polyphonic stylistic and emotional palette.

The third unit is devoted to the study of violence and urban spatiality. Violence is examined both from a classical perspective—such as that of Walter Benjamin (in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* [1921] and his *Theologico-Political Fragment* [1921])—and through Žižek's later explorations on the traumatic, symbolic, and discursive logic of contemporary violence. Finally, intertextuality and hypertextuality are re-evaluated, retrospectively, through Genette and Foucault as tools for reflecting upon the dissolution of authorial boundaries and the circulation of narratives within contemporary culture.

4. Adaptation and genre

Both works are structured around themes that combine elements of melodramatic narrative, (neo)*noir*, and the psychological thriller, portraying an unrestrained synthesis of desire, obsession, guilt, and vengeance. In broad terms, Almodóvar's adaptation is fundamentally loose, nourished by the events that take place in the first chapter of Rendell's novel and by a series of schematic components that give coherence to the story of a criminal protagonist who resembles—but *is not*—Madrid's Víctor Plaza. To determine the correspondence between Almodóvar's adaptation and Rendell's original text, one must avoid simplifying reductionisms (some of them partially endorsed by the director himself) that position *Carne trémula* as a film radically independent from Rendell's work, whose incidental relation to the source novel is limited to a few protagonist names or, to paraphrase the critic

Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, to little more than *une fausse piste* (in Willem, 2002, p. 115).

In this regard, Linda Willem's study (2002) grounded Almodóvar's adaptation of the original text through a *paradigm of transformation* scheme (following Kline, 1996, p. 72), which energises the relationship between the source material and the artistic alterations of the new filmic text, thereby conferring upon the latter a certain degree of autonomy. Given the forcefulness of the final product developed by Almodóvar, it can be described, in the words of Carlos F. Heredero, as a *vampirisation* of the basic narrative materials of *Live Flesh* in order to create an entirely new entity (in Willem, 2002, p. 115). The following offers a synopsis of the corresponding events that shape both Rendell's novel and *Carne trémula* (1997): in each, guilt, as a central thematic axis, binds the characters together and determines the outcome. The events are set in motion by a shooting in which David (Javier Bardem), a police officer, is left paralysed while attempting to rescue a young woman threatened by Víctor, who has entered/trespassed on her home armed. Víctor's frustration over his subsequent imprisonment and his later reappearance in David's life constitute the backbone of both texts.

Through twentieth-century media and commercial consecration of detective and crime fiction within the British literary landscape, Ruth Rendell enjoyed considerable success among readers devoted to the genre. Almodóvar's adaptation forms part of a corpus of television and film projects that drew upon Rendell's work as their source material. Among these may be mentioned the British television series *Ruth Rendell Mysteries* (1987–2000), comprising twelve seasons and eighty-six episodes, as well as Claude Chabrol's adaptations *La cérémonie* (1995) and *La demoiselle d'honneur* (2004).

In Rendell's novel, the protagonist is, in the strictest sense, a marginalised criminal (a thief, serial rapist, and murderer) who is incapable of taking responsibility for his actions—whether through peculiar internal stratagems that displace guilt onto others or through the commission of further crimes. The similarities with Almodóvar's adaptation lie chiefly in the development of

the first chapter, which recounts Víctor's unwelcome visit to Elena's (Francesca Neri) flat and, following a neighbour's report, the ensuing confrontation between two police officers and the young man, who ends up taking the tenant hostage in an act of unconsciousness and nervous agitation.

The initial dilemma in Rendell's novel hinges on the nature of the firearm—whether it is real or a toy[2]—dispensing the sequence of struggle between Sancho (José Sancho) and Víctor for possession of the weapon. In Almodóvar's adaptation, Víctor's unacknowledged guilt is inverted through the addition of a subplot that links an affair between David and Clara (Angela Molina), Sancho's wife, his superior officer (Willem, 2002, p. 116). The character of Elena, who vanishes entirely from Rendell's novel after the first chapter—leaving only the record that Víctor's intrusion into her home was a violent and fortuitous event, with no (failed) prior sexual encounter or fragile agreement to meet again, as occurs in Almodóvar's adaptation—finds, within the intrinsic "logic" of the shooting incident, the sole possible outlet for her guilt complex, which has led her to marry David and to alleviate her drug addiction through social service.

The double paradoxical course in which the characters of Víctor and Elena are confronted—almost simultaneously and in opposition to the non-commutative ethical stiffness of Rendell's novel (*i.e.*, the bad against the good)—produces, with the revelation of the devious dispute between David and Sancho, a dual redemptive effect for each character. Namely, Elena may be liberated from her guilt regarding David's fate, giving free rein to an untameable transference of such feelings towards Víctor. The celebrated erotic encounter, immortalised in the film's promotional poster, visually condenses both poles of guilt and the reciprocity required for forgiveness.

Almodóvar's ethical conclusion enables a tragic weave in which, despite the brutal consequences endured by David, he persistently displays a ferocious

[2] In the scene of *Carne trémula* in which David realises that it was not Víctor but his colleague Sancho who had aimed and pressed Víctor's finger at the moment of the shot—causing his mobility impairment—the revelation is illustrated through a performative re-enactment by Víctor using a plastic pistol, in order to make him understand what truly happened.

severity towards Víctor's innocence, holding him responsible for the new state of brittleness in his relationship with Elena. Confronted with such a quandary, David devises his own plan for revenge, seeking Víctor's death at the hands of his own aggressor and former superior: Sancho. As Willem (2002, p. 117) incisively observes, both David's behaviour and his twilight confession detonate his relationship with Elena, producing an outcome not only antithetical to the intentions of the police officer-turned-Paralympic basketball-star, but also upturned in relation to the very conclusion of Rendell's novel. In this sense, Víctor's *victory*, for Almodóvar, is anchored in his innocence.

At the level of structural affinities between Rendell's original text and Almodóvar's adaptation—and in keeping with the fundamental characterisation of detective and *hard-boiled* fiction—the narrative of both works is grounded in the dynamic between urban spatiality and the disturbed perception of their protagonists. In Rendell's novel, a large part of the narrative is articulated through the hybrid experience of the *flâneur*/urban animal that defines her Victor, who is habituated to the streets, means of transportation, suburban gardens, and the analogous rows of terraced houses of Greater London (in the districts of Acton, Kensal Rise, Epping, and Theydon Bois). Drawing upon the psychological tribulation of their respective protagonists, both Almodóvar and Rendell succeed in importing the synoptic, hyper-descriptive imagery of the city as a quality consubstantial to the genre's tradition (Pérez, 2017, p. 4).

Almodóvar's adaptation—drawing, as in none of his earlier films up to 1997, on the aesthetic resources of Hollywood (neo)*noir* (*e.g.*, *low-key* lighting, unstable composition, action and violence sequences)—is also devoted to the genre's cult of representing the city and the lives of its inhabitants, particularly those who are marginalised or corrupt. It is evident that this interest stems from his connection to the *Movida madrileña* during the 1980s, yet the capital in *Carne trémula* embodies an energetic poetics of contradictions distinctive of late capitalism—and of historical moments of contrast: on the one hand, the

early 1970s (with Franco still alive), which also marks Víctor's birth; and on the other, 1990s Madrid. Postmodern overwhelming architecture, propelled by globalising inertia, is set in counterpoint to the brothel where Isabel, Víctor's mother, worked; the *lifetime* bus pass contrasts with the motorised life of Víctor in his twenties, now employed as a Pizza Hut delivery rider—an American franchise that arrived in the Spanish capital during the 1980s; and the high-society neighbourhood of the drug-addicted Elena stands opposed to the narrow confines of the prison where Víctor serves his sentence.

The dramatic intonation of the urban landscape that functions as a sign of the film is fixed in all its ambiguity from the opening birth sequence—Víctor apprehends the world primarily through snapshots of movement: the bus window, the Puerta de Alcalá, the Paseo de la Castellana (Pérez, 2017, p. 5)—and reaches its most contemporary resonance in the film's reproach of Madrid's gentrification towards the late 1990s. *La Ventilla*, the working-class neighbourhood where Víctor lived with his mother, then appears in ruins—*it looks like Sarajevo*—accentuating the logic of postmodern pastiche, in which it is asserted

> the effacement (…) of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern (Jameson, 2013, p. 2).

In Almodóvar's symbolisation of the *KIO Towers* (now *Puerta de Europa*),[3] although it may seem an ironic wink at history, much of the film's *neo-noir* temperament is exemplified. The imposing presence of these skyscrapers—an ostensibly *innocent* emblem of post-Franco Madrid's modernising project—became, in fact, a significant obstacle to Spanish urban development due to the multiple corruption scandals surrounding their construction, the perpetrators of which were imprisoned for fraud (Pérez,

[3] Already latent in Almodóvar's imaginary since *Kika* (1993), in which the towers form part of a series of ominous scale models of the urban renewal of Madrid.

2017, p. 7). The proximity, at the level of fictional space configuration, between Rendell's and Almodóvar's works is thus consolidated in the degradation of the urban landscape, increasingly approaching a postmodern condition.

5. Violence and redemption

Barely into the second sequence of the film, following the protagonist's birth, we are shown both the young, motorised Víctor and the two police officers who, a few hours later, will respond to the emergency. The patrol of these two characters, David and Sancho—immersed in the subcultural milieu of 1990s Madrid—constitutes the film's first *neo-noir* staging, not only on a formal but also on a thematic level. Here, Almodóvar reveals the ethical fragility of the law enforcement agents: one betrays his partner by maintaining an affair with his wife, while the other, harbouring his own disdain for the new liberties embraced by Madrid's youth, becomes consumed by suspicion of that infidelity, numbing himself with alcohol during working hours. This tension is metaphorically underscored through the lyrics of *¡Ay, mi perro!* by the Spanish *cantaora* Niña de Antequera, which plays on the patrol car's radio.

Following the song, Almodóvar introduces a narrative stratagem that inverts the logic of the wolf (Víctor), the sheep (Elena), and the guard dog (David). Almodóvar's device here is not limited to the song or to Sancho's disparaging remarks, but extends to the ambiguous and elusive deployment of the visual sign, later granting screen prevalence to Víctor, amid the children of the orphanage/nursery, wearing a wolf mask. Within this deliberately unstable structure, the following section will outline, for this fifth section, several interpretative lines through which the various typologies of violence present in *Carne trémula* are channelled towards a partial encounter with *neo-noir* aesthetics.

In the introduction to this article, the intricacy of situating a work from Almodóvar's corpus—always characterised by its stylistic distinctiveness and genre fluidity—outside the category of *cinéma d'auteur* was suggested. Researchers such as Ortiz (2021), nonetheless, contend that, except for his

now-classic comedies from the 1980s, Almodóvar's cinema, as unclassifiable as it may seem, also draws with striking frequency on "la presencia de tropos del género negro y/o policíaco" (p. 114).[4] Broadly speaking, *Carne trémula* has not been conceived by most specialised critics as a crime or (neo)*noir* film, since its director "parece no interesarle la intriga del relato, ni su resolución, sino las relaciones emocionales de los 'personajes que vienen a integrar un cuadrilátero compuesto por dos triángulos inestables en una geometría de carne y de amor y de odio'" (Ortiz, 2021, p. 120).[5]

It could also be argued, however, that the deciphering of every enigma in *noir* (or *neo-noir*) fiction produces either a false, transitory satisfaction that merely exposes the universal fragility of the social fabric, or a proliferation of cognitive or factual consequences even more devastating than the original crime—from the belated revelation that exposes the futility of any struggle against corruption—*Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown*—to the deaths of characters who are partially or wholly innocent, such as Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown* (1974, Roman Polanski) or Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott). In this sense, Almodóvar's indifference towards the resolution of the intrigue can be understood as an eminently *neo-noir* gesture. The revelation of the shooter, consequently, is not designed to provoke the incremental suspicion that characterises the aforementioned genres; rather, it emerges incidentally, without devoting excessive screen time to circumstantial evidentiary logic or further elaboration (Ortiz, 2021, p. 120).[6]

From *noir* and *neo-noir*, Almodóvar effectively imprints both violence and atmospheric asphyxia as inseparable symptoms of a new urban configuration in which criminals, detectives, disabled individuals, and upper-class (ex-)drug addicts coexist. These stylistic and narrative conventions of Hollywood *noir* are synthesised through the poetics of Almodóvar: few action

[4] Trans. "the presence of tropes of noir and/or crime genre".
[5] Trans. "seems uninterested in the intrigue of the plot or in its resolution, but rather in the emotional relations of the 'characters who come to form a quadrilateral composed of two unstable triangles within a geometry of flesh, love, and hate'".
[6] It should be recalled that the audience remains unaware of Víctor's innocence, since this is never shown to the camera.

sequences, and an exuberant yet effective eroticism combined with bits of authentic comedy. Given that violence constitutes a common device characterising—not only *Carne trémula* but also Almodóvar's broader filmography and the *neo-noir* tradition, which typologies of violence can be identified in the feature film?

From the outset, *state–ideological violence* as exercised by late Francoism. *Carne trémula* was one of Almodóvar's first films to make explicit reference to the dictatorship period—a formula, though focused on the historical debt owed to those disappeared during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), which he would later address with poignant radicalness in *Madres paralelas* (2021), more than two decades afterwards. In this regard, Almodóvar declared that he had deliberately avoided the slightest trace of Franco's existence (this was "his revenge") during his early period as a filmmaker, with *Carne trémula* marking a recovery of memory within his work as both storyteller–director and screenwriter (De Baecque in Morgan-Tamosunas, 2002, p. 185).

The critique of Francoist remnants—even in his prior œuvre—was expressed through satirical allusion to the rigid, conservative, and patriarchal societal structures and values that regulated all forms of family life, gender identity, and sexual orientation, largely owing to the strong synergy between the social project of Spanish Catholic dogmatism and state institutionalism. To paraphrase Benjamin (2010, p. 193), Francoist violence was prevented from any revolutionary irruption, for it merely preserves already established rights. Worse still, as suggested by the film's introductory intertitle, it even temporarily suspends acquired rights in the name of *restoring order*—which, following Benjamin again, always entails the *spectral presence* of violence. The atmospheric violence of the film does not rely on the polluted, corrupt, and murky social life typical of the *neo-noir* convention, but instead originates in a systematic exercise of force as public policy.

However, the Spain in which the majority of the film's events unfold, excluding the introductory birth sequence, no longer corresponds to Francoist Spain.

This institutional violence seeps through *anachronistically* by way of characters such as Sancho, whose behaviour reproduces the conservative ideological interests of Spain's transition period, initially embodied in the *Alianza Popular* party. Almodóvar, fully aware of the vigorous persistence of these values,[7] provides a liberal–capitalist artifice of redemption in the film's epilogue—*No sabes cómo ha cambiado esto*[8]—in which the empty streets of the 1970s are replaced by traffic jams, *fearless* citizens, bright lights, and the bustling activity of enthusiastic merchants and shoppers during the Christmas season.

The second typology of violence is perpetrated by law enforcement in three distinguishable circumstances of the film. The foremost involves immediate violence carried out by a police force in a state of degradation—a *conditio sine qua non* of *noir* and *neo-noir*. The genre, and Almodóvar's text within it, are configured as monuments to the failure of the police establishment, marked throughout by marginality, corruption, and contradiction among its agents. The calamitous consequences suffered by David whilst practising his profession, in apparent contrast to Sancho's erratic and unrestrained behaviour, form part of a causal sequence that gestures towards divine justice, since neither of the two—through alcoholism, aggression, classism, or infidelity—escapes infamy.

In a second context, focusing the analysis on Sancho, the character who most aptly embodies villainy, we encounter domestic violence—driven to the extreme of femicide—committed "paradoxically" by a police officer. This moral decay is hardly alien to the genre protagonists, deepening the claustrophobia of the narrative atmosphere through the impossibility of redemption. It is, in every sense, the circular inscription of *noir* (or *neo-noir*), *à huis clos*, Sartre *dixit*—a quality not only of the cinematographic text itself but also of the formal conventions the feature film adopts. Morgan-Tamosunas (2002, p.

[7] Pavlovi (2007), following Steven Marsh, characterises the two police officers in relation to two ideological paradigms of post-Franco Spain: the old policeman, champion of Francoist values (impulsive, violent, alcoholic, a domestic abuser), and the young one, a new man, child of the *Transition* (pp. 159–160).
[8] Trans. "You wouldn't believe how much this has changed."

188) systematised Almodóvar's photographic obsession with circular objecthood in *Carne trémula* (*e.g.*, the wheels of David's wheelchair or Víctor's motorbike, the loop of Víctor's Madrid journeys, the décor of Elena's apartment, the basketball hoop during David's games, etc.), thus reinforcing its claustrophobic character.

Sancho is, consequently, the receptacle of all sinister and destructive forces of conservative violence, manifested through the articulation of an alcohol-driven masculinity. Sancho's ruinous personality—regardless of whether the violence manifests physically or emotionally—is directly proportional to his own collapse. His object of desire, Clara, grows ever more distant from him the more violence he exerts upon her in an effort to keep her for himself. His greatest source of anguish—his wife's unfaithfulness or abandonment—deepens through his own actions. Setting aside any victimisation of the fictional victimiser, it becomes quite evident that *Carne trémula*, in the manner of *neo-noir*'s infectious relentlessness, is indifferent to the morality of its characters, who are never granted protection from death.

The final and tragic confrontation with Clara not only bears the manipulative feature typical of individuals of his ilk, but also functions—following once again Morgan-Tamosunas's exceptional reading—as evidence of the ontological vulnerability underlying the masculine position of power, which masculinity's various codes strive to conceal (2002, p. 193). Sancho's final breath, rendered via Almodóvar's lyrical punctiliousness at his finest, is a *crawling*.

The third form of violence is extrajudicial, albeit carried out by an active and a former law enforcement agent. In this context, ironically, an immoral overturn of collecting/systematising evidence police practices—namely, the mechanisation of hypothetico–deductive chains—becomes particularly patent in the petty intentions of David, who, having revealed his affair with Clara, has lost not only Elena's trust but also her loyalty. Drawing upon his experience as a police agent, he gathered sufficient evidence (regarding the relationship between Clara and Víctor) to leave in Sancho's hands—still an active agent—

the responsibility of avenging his wife's most recent unfaithfulness through Víctor's death. As previously discussed, this ruse utterly alienates Elena from her relationship with David, leading to the formation of a stable relationship with Víctor and culminating in the massacre of *La Ventilla*.

Such a trajectory may also be discerned through the commendable psychological profile of Clara developed by Morgan-Tamosunas, who examined the strategy followed by Almodóvar to portray her as a radical victim, not only of Sancho, but also of her own submission. This trait renders her wholly surrendered to the other's will without the slightest demand for reciprocity. Her greatest act of humiliation, preceding the film's climax, occurs when Víctor breaks up with her: her anguish is set in stark contrast to the protagonist's indifference. Subsequently, her sole act of self-affirmation—shooting Sancho—is simultaneously an act of self-sacrifice (2002, p. 195).

Although it may seem unusual for an Almodóvar film, there is no sexual violence in *Carne trémula*. Much of the on-screen eroticism is filtered through the aura of innocence conferred by Víctor, *born in sin*. He has come into the world to a prostitute and has suffered for being the son of a prostitute,[9] yet even after "losing" his virginity, he moves through life with an intrinsic naïveté, embodying the curiosity of a child. One should note his emotion upon seeing Clara's genitals for the first time, the conviction with which he recounts his plan for revenge to Elena, or the pride with which he shows the bus drivers his everlasting ticket/right, earned by virtue of having been born on a similar vehicle, in the middle of a public street, on the eve of the new year that would finally mark the end of Franco's rule.

Sexuality is redeemed through the affection and the grid of tenderness that Almodóvar imposes upon the bond—at once supportive and guilt-ridden—

[9] The dramatic scene of Víctor's "otherworldly dialogue" before his mother's grave confirms his inability to accept the unjust bargain of the world into which he was cast: "When I was coming here, I was trying to calculate how many times you must have fucked to save up a hundred and fifty thousand pesetas. At least a thousand times. And I've managed to get the same amount of money without having fucked even once. It's not fair. However you look at it, it's not fair." (Almodóvar, 1997.)

between a (former) addict (Elena) and her disabled husband (David), the experienced adulteress/victim (Clara), and the sex neophyte who aspires to become "the best fucker in the world." It is a synthetic redemption between the most gullible act of vengeance and the guilty transference of affection—towards the disabled man, or towards desire for the innocent.

The subtext of violence, in the "purely" sexual realm, operates through the symbolic castration of both male characters rather than through gendered aggression. David has been castrated due to his impairment of his lower body, and his sexual life is therefore condensed to the strength and dexterity of his upper body—ironically, his training shirt still reads that he is "*100% animal*." In parallel, Víctor's castration, despite all his youthful vigour, resides in his immaturity and sexual incompetence (Elena acknowledges at the beginning of the film that their previous encounter, prior to his unexpected visit, was never even *consummated*).

Víctor's vengeance, owing to the innocence that runs through him, requires a formative facilitator—in this case, Clara (or, in his past, the Bible, or his Bulgarian cellmate). David's vengeance, as has already been suggested, takes the form of a police-jealousy ploy. In this propensity, both men share the codified structure of masculinity, anchored in competitive drive and physical performance, despite the deep-seated fragility of the male ego and the disadvantaged position both occupy within the patriarchal hierarchy. In summary, sexual violence in *Carne trémula* is reduced to the symbolic and egotistical order of masculinity.

6. Epilogue, or *Ensayo de un crimen*

As concluding remarks, the discussion will now turn to a set of seemingly supplementary elements—both inscribed within and surrounding the feature film—that nonetheless offer suggestive additions for understanding Almodóvar's unorthodox approach to film genre and violence.

First, the hilarious scene in which the possibility of thinking of football as a sublimation of male aggression is hinted at, during Víctor's first confrontation with David following his reunion with Elena at the cemetery. The unequivocal narrative solution to such a circumstance would have been an unequal clash between a young man in full possession of his physical faculties and a paraplegic former law enforcement agent. Almodóvar, however, plays with irony by formulating a glimpse of solidarity within the only terrain where the homologation of masculine experience "peacefully" symbolises the territoriality in dispute: football. The breaking of the tension—not only dramatic, as suggested by Morgan-Tamosunas (2002, p. 192), but also instinctive and territorial—between David and Víctor after a goal by an Atlético de Madrid player against F.C. Barcelona, operates brilliantly as both a display of the performativity of gender and a *reductio ad absurdum* of the ethical-aesthetic porosity of machismo's (im)posturing.

Furthermore, there is a premonitory significance of Luis Buñuel's black comedy *Ensayo de un crimen* (*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz,* 1955, Luis Buñuel) as an intertextual reference. The somewhat ancillary presence of Buñuel's work—synthesising the approaches of Poyato Sánchez (2015, p. 106), Acevedo Muñoz (2009), and Ortiz (2021)—in the opening sequence in which Víctor bursts into Elena's home, leading to the ensuing struggle with Sancho, carries a series of suggestive connotations.

In Buñuel's film, Archibaldo (Ernesto Alonso) is a man who believes himself to possess the power to make all his desires come true. After wishing for a person's death, that person unexpectedly dies, plunging him into a maelstrom of guilt that leads him to believe he is a murderer. Archibaldo ultimately turns himself in to the authorities and, during the subsequent interrogation before the judge, the obvious is revealed: he has never participated in the crimes of which he declares himself guilty.

As is well known, the judge's absolution does not make Archibaldo feel any less guilty for the deaths of the women. Almodóvar plants this intertextual wink as a narrative device, for it foreshadows—at a very early stage—that his film will

explore the consequences of the concept of innocence that appears as guilt (Víctor), later synchronising a shooting scene from Buñuel's film with the first violent struggle between Elena and Víctor (which prompts the call to the police), while simultaneously hinting—through the dangling legs of one of Archibaldo's supposed victims (a mannequin)—at David's fate. The first device embodies the Buñuelian course, ambiguous to its ultimate consequences; the second inscribes the merciless causality of Rendell's work. Both are correct.

Moreover, as has been discreetly suggested earlier, *Carne trémula* also presents an inverted messianic gesture—namely: Víctor is born at Christmas from the womb of a mother who is *not* a virgin. His life is a socioeconomic penitentiary martyrdom that condemns him to a quasi-ascetic abstinence. Through these vicissitudes, almost by virtue of predestination, Víctor discovers his redemptive power amid a turmoil of violence: a) in the redemption of an adulterous woman through the systematic aggression of her husband, who prefers death to continued coexistence with him; b) in the redemption of an alcoholic abuser who chooses suicide over life without his object of desire (and whom he ultimately kills); and c) in the redemption of a (former) addict who blames herself for having participated in the event that caused the disability of the man she married, but (now) no longer desires.

Finally, by means of a *postscriptum* concerning trans-genre adaptation, the regional translations effected by Almodóvar in his version are palpable (from the marginalised compulsive rapist to the ingenuous pizza delivery boy; from Thatcher's England to post-Franco Spain). Nonetheless, it must be recognised, as Zaragoza Ninet has aptly noted, that "hay una profundización psicológica" in which "interesan los mecanismos de la mente, y en ambos predomina el toque de humor, un humor inteligente, ingenioso" (2017, pp. 327–28).[10] Paradoxically, aside from the decisions made at the level of film narrative, there exists a kinship between Rendell's work and *noir* fiction—a kinship that

[10] Trans. "'is a psychological deepening' in which 'what matters are the mechanisms of the mind, and in both predominates a touch of humour—an intelligent, ingenious humour'".

Almodóvar, in his own way, resisted to the utmost. He preferred to describe the film, as recorded in the pressbook accompanying its 1997 release, as a "very sexy film," prone towards dramatic baroquism, the sensuality of the thriller, and the concision of classical tragedy. Thus, by making mortar of eroticism, suspense, and detective fiction, the film both assumes and digests genre forms in order to reject any unilateral taxonomy. Almodóvar's *tremulous* transgression—his own alchemy—is a flirtation with the codes of film genre without relinquishing his commitment to discursive expansion and to his profoundly personal style.

Bibliography

Acevedo Muñoz, E. (2015). "Ensayo trémulo" un desencuentro literario entre Buñuel y Almodóvar. Letras peninsulares, (22) 1, 91-106.

Almodóvar, P. (director) (1997). Carne trémula. España: El Deseo S.A./Ciby 2000/France 3.

Benjamin, W. (2018). *Iluminaciones*. Taurus.

Benjamin, W. (2010). *Obras: Libro II/Vol. 1*. Abada Editores.

Caballero Gálvez, A. A., & Zurian Hernández, F. A. (2016). Machos violentos y peligrosos. La figura del maltratador en el cine almodovariano. *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social*, (71), 853–873. https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2016-1124.

Chesterton, G. K. (2011). *Cómo escribir relatos policíacos*. Acantilado.

Conard, M. T. (Ed.) (2006). *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. The University Press of Kentucky.

Del Castillo, R. (2022). *Divinos detectives. Chesterton, Gramsci y otros casos criminales*. Círculo de Bellas Artes.

D'Lugo, M., & Vernon, K. (2013). *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar* (Wiley-Blackwell companions to film directors). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Elsaesser, T. (2012). Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama. In B. K. Grant (Ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV* (pp. 433–462). University of Texas Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/742055.31.

Epps, B., & Kakoudaki, D. (2009). *All about Almodóvar* (New ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. (1998). "What is an Author?". In *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. *Volume Two*. The New Press.

Garrido Lora M. y Ramírez Alvarado M. d. M. (2020). Expresiones de machismo y violencia en los personajes masculinos del cine de Pedro Almodóvar: una revisión cronológica. *Historia y Comunicación Social, 25*(2), 519-526. https://doi.org/10.5209/hics.72282.

Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press.

Hernández, F. J. O. (2021). Noir almodovariano. A propósito de Carne trémula (1997) y La piel que habito (2011). *Quaderns de cine*, (17), 113-128.

Hutcheon, L. (2013). *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge.

Jameson, F. (1989) *Documentos de cultura, documentos de barbarie. La narrativa como acto socialmente simbólico* (Trad. Tomás Segovia). Visor.

Jameson, F. (1995). *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado* (Trad. José Luis Pardo). Ediciones Paidós.

Jameson, F. (2013). P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822378419.

Kline, K. E. (1996). "The Accidental Tourist" On Page and On Screen: Interrogating Normative Theories About Film Adaptation. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *24*(1), 70–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796701.

Marsh, S. (2004) Masculinity, Monuments and Movement: Gender and the City of Madrid in *Carne trémula* (1997). En P. Nair and S. Marsh (Eds.), *Gender and Spanish Cinema* (pp. 53-70.) Berg Publishers.

Morgan-Tamosunas, R. (2002). Narrative, Desire and Critical Discourse in Pedro Almodóvar's Carne trémula (1997). *Journal of Iberian and Latin-American Studies, 8*(2), 185-199.

Pavlovi, T. (2007). Allegorising the body politic: Masculinity and history in Saura's El jardín de las delicias (1970) and Almodóvar's Carne trémula (1997). *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas, 3*(3), 149-167.

Pérez Ríu, C. (2017). Transition, circularity and haptic space in the representation of the city. From Ruth Rendell's Live Flesh to Pedro Almodóvar's Carne Trémula. *Continuum, 31*(5), 682-693. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2017.1297989.

Poyato, P. (Ed) (2015). *El cine de Almodóvar. Una poética de lo 'trans'*. Universidad Internacional de Andalucía.

Rendell, R. (1986). *Live flesh*. Pantheon Books.

Sánchez Noriega, J. L. (2000). *De la literatura al cine. Teoría y análisis de la adaptación*. Ediciones Paidós.

_____. (2017). *Universo Almodóvar. Estética de la pasión en un cineasta posmoderno*. Alianza Editorial.

Slethaug, G. (2014). *Adaptation Theory and Criticism* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Smith, P. J. (2000). *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*. Verso.

Stam, R., & Raengo, A. (Eds.). (2005). Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation. Blackwell.

Strauss, F. (1995). *Pedro Almodóvar: un cine visceral*. El País/Aguilar.

Willem, L. (2002). Rewriting Rendell: Pedro Almodóvar's "Carne trémula". *Literature Film Quarterly, 30*(2), 115-118.

Zaragoza Ninet, G. (2017). "Carne trémula" en España: un estudio de la recepción de la novela y su adaptación cinematográfica en la prensa española. *Tropelías. Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada, 27,* 323-332.

Žižek, S. (2008). Violence: Six Sideways Reflections. Picador.