

Ausencias, presencias y despedidas. La idea del fantasma en la película *Volver* de Pedro Almodóvar y su relación con otros espectros

Absences, Presences, and Farewells: The Idea of the Ghost in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* and Its Relationship with Other Specters

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Abstract:

En esta investigación analizamos la representación del concepto de "fantasma" en la película *Volver* de Pedro Almodóvar a partir de un enfoque interdisciplinario, que establece conexiones formales y conceptuales con el arte contemporáneo, la literatura, la filosofía y otras obras cinematográficas de referencia. Se examina la evolución de la figura espectral desde sus manifestaciones tradicionales hasta sus reinterpretaciones en el ámbito artístico y cultural contemporáneo. Asimismo, el análisis abarca cuestiones fundamentales como la muerte, el duelo, el rito, la memoria y la identidad. Destacamos el papel central de la simetría y la duplicidad en la estructura narrativa de *Volver*, donde todo tiende a repetirse y a retornar. En la investigación recurrimos a establecer relaciones entre escultores como Do-ho Suh o Rachel Whiteread, así como con otras películas como *Hierro 3*, *Petite Maman* o *No mires a los ojos*. Enfatizamos la importancia de la experiencia sensorial en la construcción de lo fantasmal dentro del filme y para ello analizamos cómo entienden el duelo Derrida, Fisher, Despret o Butler entre otros.

Abstract:

In this research, we analyze the representation of the concept of the "ghost" in Pedro Almodóvar's film *Volver* from an interdisciplinary perspective, establishing formal and conceptual connections with contemporary art, literature, philosophy, and other relevant cinematic works. The research examines the evolution of the spectral figure from its traditional manifestations to its reinterpretations within contemporary artistic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the analysis addresses fundamental issues such as death, mourning, ritual, memory, and identity. We highlight the central role of symmetry and duplicity in the narrative structure of *Volver*, where everything tends to repeat and return. The study draws connections with sculptors such as Do-ho Suh and Rachel Whiteread, as well as with films including *3-Iron*, *Petite Maman*, and *Staring at Strangers*. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of sensory experience in the construction of the ghostly within the film, with particular attention to how grieving is understood by Derrida, Fisher, Despret, Butler, among others.

Palabras clave:

Pedro Almodóvar; *Volver*; fantasma; arte contemporáneo; cine; duelo.

Keywords:

Pedro Almodóvar; *Volver*; ghost; contemporary art; cinema; grief.

1. Introduction. Context, purpose, and approach

In 1991, British artist Damien Hirst (1965) created the piece *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. At that time, at just 26 years old, the young artist became one of the cornerstones of the so-called *Young British Artists* of the 1990s, under the protective wing in his early days of the advertising magnate-turned-gallerist Charles Saatchi (1943). The work, which generated much controversy, consisted of a steel and glass tank filled with a formaldehyde solution, measuring 213 cm x 518 cm x 213 cm, inside of which there was a tiger shark, suspended, frozen in time, and weightless.

Immutable to the passage of time—or so was the initial idea—, in the title of the work lies the author's statement of intent; a Cartesian assertion that total disappearance, death, would not be possible in a living mind, because its conceptual legacy would continue after the end of physical life. Nothingness could only be possible as continuity in those inhabited bodies whose minds were not thinking devices. Here, a separation is proposed between the physical body and the mental apparatus, which would continue to live on as a legacy through ideas, concepts, and archives. According to this piece by Hirst, intellect, thought, memory, etc., which act as reconstructive and constructive agents of fantasies and realities, form some of the foundations of the living. The mind, thought, projects continuity, because it is conjugated in the future.

As in the work of Pedro Almodóvar (1949), especially evident in *Pain and Glory* (2019), in Hirst's work there are obsessions with life and fear of illness and death. Eros and Thanatos beat in the background in most of his works, with special emphasis on those from the 1990s. The shark, paused in time, bracketed, seems to be awaiting a new opportunity within its tank. Like a mosquito trapped in fossilized resin, in amber, we perceive a powerful animal through glass, as if we were seeing it on a television screen. After all, an aquarium is not far from that concept. This shark is both a hologram—due to the optical effects produced by the liquid and the glass—and at the same time a fossil. A remnant that defies the idea of mortality, as Coralie Fargeat (1976) does in her film work *The Substance* (2024), an impossible possibility. A duality between life and death. As in Robert Rauschenberg's (1925–2008)

Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953), the animal gradually fades away to become a specter, a ghost.

This research article proposes an analysis around the notion of the ghost and the function it plays among the living. It examines the relationship that specters establish with those who remain in the earthly world, and the foundations on which this relationship is based. Among the aspects addressed, we emphasize the idea of the “care” that ghosts can provide to the living, taking as reference the film *Volver* (2006) by Pedro Almodóvar.

2. The idea of the ghost and its journeys

In literature, the ghost has been a powerful symbolic figure and has played a prominent role as a device to articulate narratives capable of establishing links of communication with the afterlife. "Ghosts, specters, undead, apparitions from the beyond: they are not vestiges of vain superstitions from remote times. They are the warnings of something that refuses to disappear where the night of humanity would wish only for nothingness" (Ruiz de Samaniego, 2013, pág. 10). Specters that move between absence and presence as is the case with some icons of British literature, for example King Hamlet (1603), depicted as a ghost in Shakespeare's (1564-1616) work, *The Ghost of Christmas Past*, a character from *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870), or *The Canterville Ghost* (1887) by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The ghost, charged with a remarkable conceptual density, was a connector specter between that and this.

The idea of the ghost has been transformed over the years in constant dialogue with technological, scientific advances and the consequent industrial revolutions. Development diminished its presence and transformed its identity. "Electricity appeared [...] as that which was precisely to substitute the darkness with light. Of course, electricity was able to rid the world of some of its invisible beings" (Despret, 2022, p. 55).

Parallel to the invention of electricity, we could also blame natural gas, at least in England, for the disappearance of ghosts. Indeed, natural gas replaced coal-

based gas, whose very high carbon monoxide content could produce hallucinations (Despret, 2022, pp. 56-57).

But the ghostly was not limited to its representation in literature or in the marginalized fields of occult and paranormal sciences. Its influence extends to other spheres of knowledge and sensory experience. In medicine, for example, the phantom limb syndrome is conceptualized as the perception of sensations coming from an amputated limb that the patient experiences as if it were still attached and functioning together with the rest of the body.

The concept of the ghostly transcends into other cultural manifestations, such as popular narratives about the figure of *The Flying Dutchman*, a mythical ghost ship doomed to wander aimlessly. Or also in cinema where international blockbusters like *The Sixth Sense* (1999) by M. N. Shyamalan (1970) or *The Others* (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar (1972) where living and dead inhabit the same space, blurred, where even they themselves lack full awareness of their own natural identity. In *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) by Guillermo del Toro (1964), a reflection is made on the concept of what a ghost could be and the film ends with a voice narrating:

What is a ghost? A terrible event doomed to repeat itself again and again. A moment of pain perhaps. Something dead that, for moments, seems still alive. A feeling suspended in time, like a blurred photograph, like an insect trapped in amber (Del Toro & Almodóvar, 2001).

In this analysis, it is pertinent to introduce the notion of *hauntology* formulated by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) in his book *Specters of Marx* (1993), understood as the ghostly persistence of that which, even though belonging to the past, continues to haunt the present. A past that, in some measure, scrutinizes the now.

In the filmography of Pedro Almodóvar, this ghostly dimension also manifests in a political key, as occurs in *Bad Education* (2004) or in the example of *Parallel Mothers* (2021), where the absence of a son intertwines symbolically with the absence of the executed during the Spanish Civil War. And, of course, very evidently in *Volver*. The idea about the return of the past proposed by

Almodóvar is similar to the one Derrida addresses through an iconic figure like Hamlet's ghost.

Hamlet already begins with the expected return of the dead king. After the end of history, the spirit comes as *(re)appeared*, figures *at the same time* both as a dead one who returns and as a ghost whose awaited return repeats over and over (Derrida, 1998, p. 24)

3. Death in a superstitious setting

-The villagers think you are a ghost.
-That's the good thing about these superstitious villages. For me, it was easier to go along with it than to tell the truth
(Almodóvar, 2006, p. 165).

Starting on October 26, 1977, one day after the death of his mother, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) began a diary in which, for almost two years, he recorded intimate reflections on grief and the process he underwent to cope with his loss. A compendium of brief dated notes in which Barthes, with raw emotion, displays his feelings and reflects on death, loss, and emotions such as loneliness or emptiness.

Cold, night, winter. I am where it is warm and yet alone. And I realize that it will be *necessary* for me to get used to being *naturally* in this solitude, to act in it, to work in it, accompanied, *stuck* by the 'presence' of absence (Barthes, 2009, p. 80).

The idea of the ghost, from a traditional perspective, is inexorably linked to the idea of death. With a tone that rides between the customary and the fantastic from the very start of *Volver*, Almodóvar makes a statement of intent regarding the dead. The first scene takes place in a cemetery where Raimunda, played by Penélope Cruz (1974), and Sole, played by Lola Dueñas (1971), clean, in a communal ritual, the graves of their deceased parents (Poyato Sánchez, 2021). In this sense, Sánchez Alarcón notes that "through the practice of ritual, as a reflection of a form of spirituality with clear pagan roots, Almodóvar's characters attempt to invoke the favor of the divine forces that govern the world" (Sánchez Alarcón, 2008, p. 340).

The theme of death manifests recurrently throughout the film (in this and other films by the author), addressed from various perspectives, including deaths by natural causes and homicides. A brief overview of this idea shows us Irene, played by Carmen Maura (1945), the mother of Raimunda and Sole, presumed dead in a fire with her husband; Paco, Raimunda's husband, killed by Paula when he tried to abuse her; Aunt Paula, who died of natural causes due to her old age; Agustina's mother, who really died in the fire set by Irene in a fit of rage; and Agustina, preparing for her journey to the other world, which she will certainly undertake soon, as the illness she suffers from progresses.

The act of death, whatever its origin, is in itself a ritual. In Boris Groys' words, "essentially, death by exhaustion is natural death, while Dionysian death is violent death" (Groys, 2022, p. 46).

The tribute to the dead, the loss, mourning, etc., though constant in Almodóvar's cinema, are especially relevant in this work where everything is interwoven almost simultaneously. The very title of the film, *Volver*, refers to this issue, all the stories of the living and the dead return at some point to settle accounts. As Despret indicates, "the acts of the past 'repeated' what would later constitute the future" (Despret, 2022, p. 78). In this regard, Mark Fisher (1968–2017) takes up Derrida's hauntological thesis and expands on the idea of an unresolved past that, far from coming to an end and finding closure, remains as a force both affective and political, exerting constant pressure on the present to prevent its definitive closure. The past, with its ghostly weight, becomes facts that constantly haunt and scrutinize the present. "Hauntology can thus be understood as failed mourning. It is a refusal to let go of the ghost or—the same thing, sometimes—the refusal of the ghost to leave us" (Fisher, 2018, p. 49). In *Volver*, Irene could not leave Raimunda due to the lack of resolution of a past act.

Regarding the ritual, note the atmosphere surrounding the sequence where Aunt Paula's wake is held, played by Chus Lampreave (1930–2016). A communal performance that directly evokes the world of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1945). All the village women, in mourning, offer their

condolences to Sole. They are all women, as if tradition, custom, and emotional support belonged exclusively to women. Almodóvar, as usual, gives the female role the power of empathy and emotional management. At the wake, held in Aunt Paula's house as popular custom dictates, Agustina speaks of signs from the beyond that warned her of her death. Here, Agustina acts as mistress of ceremonies, as a medium. She is the one who mediates between Sole and the rest of the town's women, between the earthly and the spiritual. She embodies the role of what Groys calls the "Wise One."

The Wise One is not a creative genius, but a universal caretaker. And the caretaker's job is, as we said, monotonous, repetitive, and in this sense, eternal [...] The Wise One is not interested in future, posthumous fame. He finds satisfaction in the anonymous work of care. It is precisely this anonymity that guarantees that the work of care will continue in the future (Groys, 2022, pp. 60-61).

Agustina takes care of and guides a lost, dazed, and frightened Sole. Overwhelmed by the superstitious atmosphere that pervades everything and by the terror that death provokes in her. In this setting, Sole, stunned, finds herself face to face with her mother Irene.

Irene is in suspension between the real world [...] and her double, a place, in Clément Rosset's terms, of phantasmagoria. Irene does not inhabit the 'real' world, but is instead in suspension [...] understood as a principle of philosophy, her corporeality altered in an imaginary space, the result of a double created by the popular Manchegan beliefs (Villanueva Macías, 2010, pp. 451-452).

Superstition plays a role for Sole as a creative force. As Caro Baroja notes, "the superstitious person is a fearful person out of control" (Caro Baroja, 1974, p. 157). Superstition, accompanied by fears, removed from the empirical world of science and reason, is a suitable channel to create ghostly figures. It is the perfect basis for a fantasy that connects the dreamlike and surrealist universe where the dead dwell with the earthly world. As Goya (1746–1828) warned, the sleep of reason could produce monsters, or in this case ghosts, in which imagination is overwhelmed by the absence of rational limits.

As Irene points out toward the end of the film, it was much easier for her to pretend to be a ghost than to tell the truth. Her surprise at the lack of investigation into what happened underscores how, in small communities, isolated by poor connections and limited resources, conspiracy theories find fertile ground to take root faster than reality itself. In this context, the environment itself becomes the ideal scenario for the creation of a ghostly presence, where mystery and superstition prevail over rationality and evidence. In some way, her presence was accepted as a poetic form of inhabiting spaces. An acceptance of the ghostly that brings us in memory to Totoro in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), the famous Studio Ghibli animated film that tells the story of a family and its interactions with the spirit of the forest. A special phenomenon occurs here, which is translated into how the supernatural integrates into everyday life.

4. A flesh and blood ghost

- Let me in! I'm your mother, I'm not going to hurt you.
- My mother is dead, if anything you are her ghost or her spirit.
- Call me whatever you want, but get me out of here, I'm in the trunk of your car.
(Almodóvar, 2006, p. 76)

In the twentieth century, Gaston Leroux (1868–1927) published *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910). Under the name Erik, the main character of the novel was not a ghost but a flesh-and-blood person, a deformed man who hid to avoid being seen. A sort of Hunchback of Notre Dame living in the basements of the Paris Opera, whose idea of a ghost here alludes to his social invisibility. Sometimes the ghost refers to shadowy behavior, to invisibility, without the subject necessarily belonging to the world of the dead. We have moved from transparent ghosts to corporeal ghosts and other ghostly ideas. According to Olivares Merino:

In recent times, the specter has regained the plasticity and visual force of that early and iconic portrayal—already obsolete and hackneyed, almost childish nowadays—of the ghost in a white sheet, shackles and chains, which made

invisible and erased the features and identity of the returned [...] behind the explicit opacity of its shroud (Olivares Merino, 2022, p. 195)

A representative example of conceptual ghostliness can be found in the film *3-Iron* (2004) by South Korean director Kim Ki-duk (1960–2020), in which a young man, Tae-suk, played by Jae Hee (1980), illegally occupies houses. He becomes an invisible figure within homes he inhabits parasitically, living like a ghost with a postmodern combination of boldness and poetic sensitivity. He coexists like a specter with the inhabitants of the house, interacting with them choreographically, and overlays realities almost in a quantum manner to generate a reflection on the duality of presence and absence, as well as the full and the empty.

It should be noted, to avoid universalism, that the conception of the ghost in the East differs from that in the West. The ghost is not conceived solely as a supernatural apparition, but is related as a daily presence that maintains a constant link with the living.

From the representation of a paused and contemplative identity characteristic of Kim Ki-duk's cinematic approach, we move to Almodóvar's language, where a confluence of magical, surrealist, and customary connotations builds the narrative identity of *Volver*. We see how just as Tae-suk in *3-Iron*, Irene secretly, clandestinely inhabits Aunt Paula's house, establishing a parallel that highlights the connection between the visible and the invisible, as well as the permeability between the world of the living and the dead. This approach emphasizes the intertextual dialogue between both works, where the ghostly presence becomes a narrative device that transcends the boundaries of conventional reality.

In one of the houses that Tae-suk occupies, the protagonist finds the body of a deceased person whom he prepares for burial. This action finds a parallel with the scene in which Irene ensures that Agustina discovers Aunt Paula's lifeless body lying on the bed. In both cases, both Irene and Tae-suk, in an active role in the arrangement of the corpse, suggest a concern for the dignity and respect for the deceased.

Irene and Tae-suk act as positive and negative of the spaces they inhabit through their own bodies. They occupy a place and empty it of presence. This concept can be analyzed in light of the sculptural practices of contemporary artists who explore the relationships between spaces and memory. South Korean sculptor Do-Ho Suh (1962) works with ethereal installations that evoke the floatability of the corporeal (like Tae-suk). On the other hand, the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread (1963) addresses a denser and more earthy physicality, a greater corporeal presence (like Irene). The suggestion of dialogues between the materialization of the intangible and the concreteness of emptiness establish a model of inhabiting that is paralleled in the dynamics of occupation and absence embodied by Irene and Tae-suk.

The ghostly relationship established in *3-Iron* and in *Volver* focuses on the anonymous work of care. This idea is also addressed in the film *Staring at Strangers* (2022) by Félix Viscarret (1975), based on the novel *From the Shadows* (2016) by Juan José Millás (1946). In it, the protagonist becomes invisible by inhabiting a home from inside a wardrobe, in which he ends up by a series of coincidences, as real as improbable in equal measure, just as Irene did in Aunt Paula's house. This quality turns the film, at moments, into a metaphysical dimension. From the wardrobe, which belonged to the homeowner's grandfather, he spends his days hidden, with no one to care for him and no one missing him. From there, he fills the voids he feels in his own life regarding love, affection, and care by protecting the inhabitants of the house. Hidden, he falls in love with the lady of the house and even takes revenge on an unfaithful husband, inflicting a particular punishment that leads him to death. Murder as a solution to the problem, as Irene did.

Anonymous care and the atmosphere in which these stories between the beyond and the here are wrapped, take us to the town of Comala described by Juan Rulfo (1917–1986) in *Pedro Páramo* (1955), where the relationship between the living and the dead is completely naturalized in a magical realist narrative where the boundaries between the living and the non-living are permeable and diffuse. In the words of Juan José Millás when reading the script of *Volver*, he told Almodóvar himself, "as when reading Rulfo's novel,

the reader has a permanent dreamlike sensation. He is awake, of course, but trapped in a dream, which is the story he holds in his hands" (Millás, 2006, p. 9).

Maura builds a very expressive and complex character on an interpretive level, since she is at the border between the material and the immaterial. A borderline place for much of the film. Irene is a doubt, an uncertainty for the viewer and her own daughters in the fiction, drifting in a liminal space between life and death. As time passes, we perceive how Irene, through her role as a mother, personifies concepts like the archive. Her character represents the memory that, from the margins of a small village, is manifested and takes tangible form. Her presence suggests the materialization of a past that sustains and gives meaning to the family dynamic. As Judith Butler (1956) states in her book *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*:

When we lose certain people or are deprived of a place or community, we may simply feel that we are temporarily overlooking it, that mourning will end and we will regain some previous balance. But perhaps, as we go through it, something about who we are is revealed to us, something that sketches the ties that bind us to another, that teaches us that these ties constitute what we are (Butler, 2006, p. 48).

Butler, both in *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), emphasizes mourning as a privileged terrain for understanding that identity is not essential, individual, or unchangeable, but relational and in constant transformation. The philosopher points out how the death of someone close decisively affects our self-perception: suddenly it becomes evident that what we were was also built in daily dialogue and continuous interaction with the other. Loss, in that sense, reveals the relational nature of identity. Grief is not limited to intimate pain, but opens up the possibility of recognizing forms of interdependence that destabilize the paradigm of a self-sufficient self.

The figure of Irene as a ghost progressively crystallizes until she becomes corporeal. As Hirst foretold, Irene could not die, for in her living mind, she still had something to say. She returns from among the dead to redeem herself

before her daughter Raimunda, to ask forgiveness for an atrocious act she failed to see. In her characteristic intertextuality, she at moments reminds us of scenes from *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), when a young Carmen Maura kills her husband in the kitchen with a ham bone. Again, murder as the final solution.

All ghosts have a mission, a task to fulfill; their action serves as a link between the beyond and the world of the living. They reconcile what has not been resolved, act as collective memory, indicate, suggest, warn, accompany, guide, connect worlds, symbolize a guilt, a mistake, etc. "Metaphorically, the ghost is the absent person who, dead or distant, remains present in the memory and above all, in the unconscious of others" (Vela Bueno, 2022, p. 163).

Irene can be pointed to with the metaphorical expression of being 'the elephant in the room'. She is an obvious and uncomfortable truth that comes to be revealed in search of redemption. Her presence takes up everything.

5. Strange forms of symmetry

As in *Paris, Texas* (1984) by Wim Wenders (1945), *Volter* represents the return home through the maternal figure. Irene had come back to ask forgiveness from Raimunda for not having seen the suffering her husband—Irene's husband—had caused her daughter. That man had sexually abused his daughter, Raimunda, just as Paco, her current partner, had abused his. Therefore, as Irene reveals, Paula, played by Yohana Cobo (1985), is both daughter and sister to Raimunda.

The appearance of Irene implies the doubling of the character. Her identity overflows to blur the boundaries of the rational. Now the irrational becomes a possibility. In his theory of doubling, Rosset states the following:

Dying would be a lesser evil if at least one could be sure they had lived; now, in the doubling of personality, the subject comes to doubt precisely this life, no matter how perishable it may seem to them. In the evil pair that unites the self with another spectral being, the real is not on the side of the self, but on

the side of the ghost: the other does not double me, I am the one who doubles the other. For him, the real, for me, the shadow (Rosset, 1993, p. 82).

Volver is full of duplicities and strange forms of symmetry. People who occupy two identities at once, like Irene. She exists at times, like the paradox of *Schrödinger's cat*, in a quantum superposition, an element that is both alive and dead at the same instant. Or Paula, who as is revealed at the end of the film, is both daughter and sister at the same time.

Also Raimunda, who in addition to being mother and sister to Paula, also doubles for Estrella Morente in the pre-recorded soundtrack of the movie's main song, which gives the film its name. Or the most grotesque case, when in a game of intuitions the viewer is prompted to speculate that Paco, hidden in a freezer chest after his murder, is served as pork meat to diners at a restaurant, where 'pork' would become an insulting synonym and Paco a menu option. In this game, one inevitably recalls Thomas de Quincey's manual (1785-1859), *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (1827), where with fine English humor and much sarcasm, the author explores the aesthetic beauty of crime. "[...] that joy produced by the spectacle of the extravagant. In such a case, not to sympathize is not to understand" (de Quincey, 2008, p. 97).

Unfolding, repeating, duplicating, etc., is a formal strategy that constitutes one of the most common forms in creation. In literature, theater, painting and even music, it has been a subject that appears with particular insistence (Rosset, 1993, pág. 79). Regarding the visual arts, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) discusses the idea of the loss of aura, the soul, in reproduced, serialized works. A concept that resonates in *Volver*, where the characters experience a dissolution of identity through their multiplication. The characters dissolve the idea of the uniqueness of their identity by multiplying; they become multi-employed identities. Their identities are the sum of many.

Irene's body is renamed. It becomes relevant because the substitution by the double acquires a social function or role. Real body and double cancel each other out; Irene's suffering body disappears, redeemed from the guilt of

blindness, of passionate love, or of absence. The body is disembodied and lives among the doubles (Villanueva Macías, 2010, p. 454).

Villanueva Macías's work on *Volver* focuses on the representation of Irene's body, the main character, and explores the relationship between real corporeality, her ghostly double, and memory. The very idea of the film is a duplicity, a repetition, a *return*, since the mother-daughter story maintains a perfect symmetrical narrative strategy. Two parallel and synchronous stories. Both, simultaneously, try to solve the problems that their spouses have caused their daughters. In both stories there is the figure of a father who perpetuates abuse against his daughter, and in both narratives, the resolution of the conflicts is proposed through the murder of the husbands.

Symmetries that can even be extended to more generic situations, where Aunt Paula, helpless, relies on her sister Irene, who is determined and strong, just as for Sole, more vulnerable and superstitious, the figure of her sister Raimunda, stronger, is important.

The film is built as a diptych where both stories, symmetrical and parallel, collide with each other forming a single unified work. This work by Almodóvar is perfectly symmetrical. It is inevitable, in this game of symmetries and ghostly presences, to approach *Petite maman* (2021) by Céline Sciamma (1978). This French film shares with *Volver* several of its fundamental connotations: the powerful mother-daughter relationship, the presence of the fantastic and the supernatural, the exploration of memory and the past in an intimate, rural environment, the depiction of complex female characters all wrapped in an atmosphere of loss and mourning. Both *Petite maman* and *Volver* maintain a beautiful symmetrical play where both stories create a feeling of a discourse that flows throughout the film like an interrupted *déjà vu*. In *Petite maman*, even the set, the main location, the home of both girls, is duplicated: both houses are the same.

6. Memory and the senses

Ghosts often represent tormented souls, punished, trapped between worlds due to unredeemed sins. Through its characters, especially Irene's, Almodóvar explores concepts about morality and redemption.

Irene's embodiment is carried out progressively in a journey through the senses. Elements like smells, sounds, and tastes—represented respectively by situations such as gases, laughter, and food—act as evocative stimuli. These senses not only shape the sensory experience of the characters, but also act as triggers for a series of memories, for both Raimunda and Sole, that serve to connect worlds. All it takes is for Raimunda to smell her mother's fart so that, as happens with phantom limb syndrome, she feels connected to her. These elements act as mediums, connectors between the world of the living and the world of the dead. As Sánchez Noriega would say:

Families who have migrated from a Manchego village to the city and who never quite manage to settle there [...] star in a story with an intrigue scheme and a certain Hitchcockian suspense flavor, in a tale with strong undertones of irony. Families where there may be strong disagreements, but who are so physically close that they even recognize each other by the smell of their farts... (Sanchez Noriega, 2017, p. 452).

An involuntary memory appears in Sole and Raimunda just as in the famous passage in *Swann's Way* (1913), by Marcel Proust (1871-1922), where the narrator is transported to a moment in the past when he tastes a madeleine. In this way, driven by the sensation produced by the taste of the sweet, he is able to reconstruct a whole event from his childhood. Here it is emphasized how a small detail of daily life—in this case a taste—can be a trigger that acts as a portal to a past experience. In Raimunda's case, something much more everyday, magical, and surreal like the smell of a fart leads her to reconstruct her mother's figure. In this film, Almodóvar uses sensory experiences as reconstructive agents of memory (Villanueva Macías, 2010, p. 453). Through the senses, an act of de-extinction is performed, a reverse journey to bring Irene back to life, like artificial intelligence programs that play at 'resurrecting' the dead, reconstructing them through visual and sound remnants (video

fragments, voice files, etc.). In the case of *Volver*, this translates into flavors, smells, and sounds that make a direct allusion to everyday sensory life, to emotions and sensory stimuli with which we interact daily.

Both sight and the rest of the senses take part in the embodiment of Irene. Her embodiment reminds us of the piece *Blind Light* (2007) created by Antony Gormley (1950) for the Hayward Gallery in London. An installation where visitors get lost in the middle of a room flooded with dense fog. To find their way, they need their other senses, since sight is canceled out at just a few centimeters. People wander inside the fog and become visible, like ghostly figures, when they approach the glass that confines them.

The interaction between senses and memory forms a central axis in the narrative of *Volver*. This relationship stands as a fundamental aspect in certain contemporary art discourses that seek to establish a direct connection with the viewer to link them, through the evocation of sensory experiences, to intimate and personal practices. A particularly moving moment occurs when Raimunda discovers her mother Irene's clothing in her sister Sole's closet. This scene establishes a parallel with the work *Personnes* (2010), by Christian Boltanski (1944-2021), where the artist uses strategically piled clothing in the *Grand Palais* in Paris to explore the fragility of memory and the persistence of absence. Boltanski's piece simulates the coldness of a concentration camp and invites us to walk among what remains of what once was, only the clothing, in the absence of bodies, a ghostly territory. This installation, although very cold and distant, explores just like *Volver*, how the materiality of the everyday becomes a carrier of memories. Objects, infused with emotional meaning, activate a sensory response that connects the tangible with the affective. We see this when Sole shows her mother's suitcase with some of the jewelry she had. This relationship underscores Almodóvar's—or Boltanski's—power to make visible layers of memory through physical and sensory experience. The Greek Vlassis Caniaris (1928-2011) also does so in his works about migration and diaspora, when he uses elements such as suitcases and clothing to evoke the memory of the absent, as in *Possible Background* (1974).

The film is full of these sensorial moments, one of which stands out when Sole, amazed, discovers a stationary bicycle in one of Aunt Paula's bedrooms. The bicycle generates a sense of strangeness in Sole; it is a Duchampian object that, by its functional impossibility for the old woman with whom it is associated, serves as a producer of fantasies. It provokes a questioning, a sense of oddness, and makes Sole ask herself questions. The bicycle offers an almost Dadaist vision; the gaze that Sole projects onto the object is astonished, surprised as if she had seen a mythological animal, an impossibility. A similar bewilderment to that provoked by the sculptures, *ready-mades*, of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968).

In a domestic vision shaped by Almodóvar's identifiable Manchego humor, the bicycle is presented as an impossibility, as an irrational and illogical element designed to produce surprise, a strange and even fearful gaze. From there, curiosity, and after overcoming fear, leads her to approach the object and smell it to remember her mother at that moment.

7. Conclusion

The act of confronting death is not assumed to be simple; it is not an easy task for anyone who dares to question it. Along those lines, perhaps Hirst introduces a force of untamable nature, like a shark, contained within a cold and minimalist structure, to allow us to look death directly in the eyes. A visual confrontation with the inevitable.

But the dead are not only absences; rather, they act and impose themselves through memories, narratives, mourning, material and symbolic legacies, or immaterial ones through the senses as we see in a very direct allusion in *Volver*—like smells, tastes, and sounds—and even through demands for justice that have not been properly resolved, as exemplified by Irene.

These perspectives are especially interesting for analyzing the work of Pedro Almodóvar, and in particular *Volver*, where the crisscrossing of care, the presence of absent or violent fathers, and the return of traumatic pasts function as nuclei for identity redefinition.

Such dynamics dialogue with other Almodovarian narratives—such as *Bad Education* or *Parallel Mothers*—where ghosts of the past emerge after being minimized, deliberately hidden, disguised or silenced. This idea comes close again to the suggestion of Vinciane Despret, who questions the psychologistic and positivist conception of mourning inherited from Freud—based on the progressive disengagement from the lost object—instead advocating for the possibility of establishing other models of relationships with the absent.

This notion of the bond with the dead and what is denied is suggestively linked to the issue of conflicting memory in Spain: a memory repressed after a festive and amnesiac Transition, which continues to return to demand new forms of recognition.

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