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Fotografías rotas y función paterna: análisis textual de *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002) y *Dolor y Gloria* (2019) *de Pedro Almodóvar*

Broken Photographs and the Paternal Function: Textual Analysis of *All about my mother* (1999), *Talk to her* (2002), and *Pain and Glory* (2019) by Pedro Almodóvar

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Abstract:
This article analyzes the motif of the torn photograph in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography, with particular attention to *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), and *Pain and Glory* (2019). Drawing on textual analysis, it examines how family photographs—especially when split or fragmented—function as narrative devices that register the presence or absence of the paternal figure. The hypothesis holds that the torn photograph is a structural core of the Almodovarian universe: the images reinforce the centrality of the *maternal imago* and reveal a permanent fragility—an almost disappearance—of the father. The comparative survey of the three *films* shows three positions of the father and their effects on the children's subjectivity: absence in *All about my mother* (psychosis), disavowal in *Talk to Her* (perversion), and an —imperfect— inscription in *Pain and Glory* (neurosis).

Resumen:
Este artículo analiza el motivo de la fotografía recortada en la filmografía de Pedro Almodóvar, con especial atención a *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002) y *Dolor y Gloria* (2019). A partir de un análisis textual, se estudia cómo las fotografías familiares —especialmente cuando aparecen partidas o fragmentadas— funcionan como dispositivos narrativos que revelan la presencia o la ausencia de la figura paterna. La hipótesis sostiene que la fotografía rota constituye un núcleo estructural del universo almodovariano: las imágenes refuerzan la centralidad de la *imago materna* y evidencian la fragilidad —casi desaparición— del padre. El recorrido comparativo entre los tres filmes muestra tres posiciones del padre y sus efectos en la subjetividad de los hijos: la ausencia en *Todo sobre mi madre* (psicosis), la renegación en *Hable con ella* (perversión) y la inscripción —imperfecta— en *Dolor y Gloria* (neurosis).

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; torn photograph; filiation; psychoanalysis; maternal imago; paternal figure.

Palabras clave: Pedro Almodóvar; fotografía recortada; filiación; psicoanálisis; imago materna; figura paterna.

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1. Objectives and hypothesis

This article analyzes the motif of the torn photograph[1] in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography, with particular attention to three of his films in which especially representative examples appear in the plot: *All about my mother* (*All About My Mother*, 1999), *Talk to her* (2002) and *Pain and Glory* (2019). Photography, as a material trace and a support for memory, constitutes a privileged device from which to articulate the presence and absence of parental figures.

The hypothesis that guides this research holds that cut and reframed photographs function as mirrors of their creator's subjectivity in each of the films analyzed: they underscore the primacy of the maternal imago and the fraught, often obstructed, inscription of the paternal figure—both narratively and visually. Far from being an occasional or secondary resource, the use of photography points to a structural feature of Almodóvar's visual universe: mothers that overflow the frame, erased or weakened fathers, and children trapped in the maternal gaze, which leads them to sacrifice and tragic endings.

2. Methodology

The analysis is grounded in Jesús González Requena's Theory of the Text, which integrates tools drawn from psychoanalysis —such as painstaking letter-by-letter reading, the question for repetition, or floating attention— to unravel the internal logic that organizes the film. This approach allows not only for recording what appears in the image or the sound track, but also for recognizing the laws that structure its narrative, tracing motifs—such as that of the broken photograph— and examining their variations to determine the function they fulfill within the film. From this perspective, photographs are

[1] The term *broken photograph* is used as an umbrella term for any photographic image that has been materially altered within the diegesis (cut with scissors, torn by hand, or fragmented into pieces). By contrast, *reframed photograph* refers to variations in framing produced by the filmic apparatus (zoom, masking, insert shot, digital cropping), rather than by any physical intervention on the photographic surface.

understood as traces whose materiality (cutting, tearing, or reframing) intervenes directly in the meaning of what is represented.

A textual-analytic approach allows us to trace how the film's central structural conflict crystallises around the torn photograph. The analysis will clarify the meaning of its imperfect edge: it is not merely a metaphor for a broken bond, as various authors have claimed, but a formal inscription of a subjective structure that runs throughout the director's filmography. This structure is marked by the centrality of the maternal figure, the difficulty of inscribing the paternal function, and the problematic position of the child in relation to both.

Complementarily, the notion of visual topology is incorporated, understood as the study of the formal organization of elements within the frame—or within the photographs appearing in the film. Beyond describing compositions (lines, volumes, light, color), analyzing the topology of the characters and its variations makes it possible to observe how the distribution of bodies in space produces relations of presence and absence, proximity and distance, centrality and marginality that correspond to the film's symbolic structure. The image is thereby conceived as a structured space in which each position assigned to characters or objects reflects the subjective structure that traverses the narrative.

3. State of the Question

3.1. Photography: Absence and Presence

Before the invention of the cinematograph, photography was considered "the dominant metaphor of human memory" (Luna & Martín, 2022, p. 83), insofar as it made it possible to preserve fragments of time and to retain experience in the form of an image. It has often been argued that photography and memory share a common logic: both attempt to conserve the past and fix the ephemeral as a lasting trace (Luna & Martín, 2022, p. 84).

Beyond this function of preservation, photography also activates modes of relation that circulate unconsciously across generations. Family albums—spaces where family history is reconstructed (Parras, 2022)— not only

commemorate happy moments of unity, as Bourdieu (2003) noted in his study on the social uses of photography, but function as narratives of filiation and belonging (Alonso, 2016, p. 50).

Yet not everything in photography is presence. As Alonso Riveiro (2016) observes, the insistent reappearance of certain images, even when they lack a clear narrative role, responds to the need to cover gaps in family history or memory. The inability to narrate or to represent through photographs can be read as a sign of trauma—or, at the very least, of a failure of symbolization. Wherever the narrative collapses and the real erupts without mediation, images cease to appear.

The photographic image is structurally ambivalent: it anchors memory even as it gestures toward silence, it affirms presence while signaling absence. Such ambivalence gives the still image the capacity either to sustain narrative continuity or to expose the points at which narrative fails. Hence the affective intensity of the analogue album—an object now largely relegated to the past—where photographs do not simply document but also unsettle: they stir emotion, reopen mourning, and make visible the voids of family history, particularly when the images themselves are worn, torn, or perforated.

3.2. Photography in Cinema

Within cinema, photographs frequently appear at moments of narrative tension. Once inserted into the diegesis, the photograph acquires a distinct status, comparable to the rest of the images that constitute the film. As González Requena (2017) notes, the photograph seizes an instant and "wrenches it from the flow of time, rendering it permanent". When an image is woven into a filmic narrative, this effect is heightened: it disrupts the temporal continuity of the story. It thus generally functions as a return of the repressed —a persistent trace that unsettles the linear progression of the plot, "always there, like a submerged fragment of reality ready to resurface at any moment" (González Requena, 2017).

Photography also carries the weight of the real: it presents itself upon both characters and spectators, exceeding the logic of fiction (González Requena,

2017). This is why contemporary and postmodern cinema so often mobilizes photographs as evidence, aligning them with the archive, the document, or even the forensic image.

At the same time, when photography enters the cinematic frame, it inevitably thematizes the act of looking (González Requena, 2009): who looks, how one looks, and —just as importantly— what remains outside the frame. In this way, the photograph concentrates the viewer's attention and becomes a privileged device for thinking about filmic enunciation, since every image presupposes a vantage point and the corresponding field of omission.

3.3. The broken Photograph

Not all photographs that appear in films are intact or neatly ordered. In cinema, a recurrent motif is the damaged or disordered photograph, whose material deterioration condenses a traumatic dimension that directly affects what it depicts. When images accumulate in disorder —piled up, removed from the organising logic of the family album— the narrative begins to reveal its fractures. If the photograph is torn, stained, burnt, or lost, the irruption of the real becomes even more apparent: the image ceases to function as an assimilable memory and turns instead into a *remainder*, a residue of trauma that resists integration into the story or the family archive.

Although the damage may touch only the surface of the image, its effects exceed the material support. The violent gesture is projected onto what the photograph represents: deterioration affects not only the paper or emulsion but also the symbolic integrity of the person portrayed. In this sense, the photograph in cinema operates almost as a surrogate object —akin to a fetish or ritual effigy— such that the material aggression enacted upon it is experienced as directed at its referent, exposing the very rupture the image once sought to preserve.

Portraits fix a face and lend it a mirror-like quality, reinforcing the imaginary dimension of the image, the fascination of the gaze. Group portraits or couple photographs, by contrast, more explicitly allude to the symbolic register: they speak of belonging, map genealogies, and render family bonds visible. Within

these types, maternal photographs occupy a privileged place: if the *primordial imago* — a term employed by González Requena to designate the first face of the mother, which is simultaneously that of the infant— functioned as the subject's initial mirror, its deterioration or erasure can be read metaphorically as a sign of psychic degradation or disintegration of the subject. Likewise, the absence of the father in family photographs —especially when the figure has been physically cut out— suggests a symbolic erasure of the law he represents, the narrative structuring instance that should organise filiation.

Photography is also linked to distance: it marks a separation between the one who records and the recorded object, and may impose a "cold gaze" that, as González Requena (2007; 2018) argues, permeates the cinematic device in its mode of registering.

3.4. Photography in Almodovar's cinema

Within studies of Pedro Almodóvar's work, scholarship —particularly that of Nekane Parejo— has underscored the centrality of photography as a recurring motif. In her article "La fotografía en el cine de Pedro Almodóvar" (2020), Parejo demonstrates how inserted photographic images acquire narrative weight: they interrupt continuity, suspend filmic time, and reveal concealed dimensions of the characters. Later, in "Los fotógrafos y el acto fotográfico en la filmografía de Pedro Almodóvar" (2022), she shifts focus to the photographer figure and the multiplicity of photographic acts across the director's oeuvre, from professional portraiture to voyeurism, domestic photography, and stolen images. Across these studies, one conclusion is consistent: photographs in Almodóvar's films are never mere ornament; they serve as structural devices that articulate affective and, especially, parental relations.

A particularly striking gesture that recurs throughout his filmography is the tearing, cutting, or fragmenting of photographs. As Sánchez Noriega observes (2017, p. 219), Almodóvar has developed a "specialisation in the torn photograph: images ripped apart in anger to ritualise a breakup or, conversely, fragments that must be reassembled like a spell to retrieve a past of love and

passion." For Sánchez Noriega, the act of tearing, discarding, or cutting an image lays bare the desire to seal off a bond—and simultaneously the impossibility of erasing its traces.

In films where fragmented photographs appear, a complementary gesture of recomposition often emerges, as though reassembling the pieces might restore what has been lost (Sánchez Noriega, 2017). Sometimes it is the very characters who tore the images who attempt to piece them back together, as in *Julieta* (2016); other times it is the children who seek to reconstruct the puzzle, as Diego does in *Broken Embraces* (2009) or Esteban in *All about my mother* (1999). In the latter, the photograph of the parents torn in half reveals the impossibility of accessing the paternal figure, while in *Broken Embraces*, the table strewn with photographic fragments becomes a metaphor for a memory that resists ordering (Martín Garzo, 2009, p. 10). Similar scenes recur in *The Flower of my secret* (1995) and *Talk to her* (2002), where torn or cut photographs insist on the wound left by personal loss.

Ultimately, torn photographs seem to crystallise one of the most persistent subjective nuclei of the Almodovarian universe: the omnipresence of the mother and the absence or fragility of the father. Faced with fragmented images, the protagonists must reinvent —often through writing, including cinematic writing— a way to continue living. The bricolage operation through which fragments are recomposed echoes the logic of film editing and the artistic practice of directing itself.

Almodóvar has stated that he included an homage to the moviola in *Broken Embraces*, aware that it would be the last time he used it before moving to digital editing. Two years later, as Panorama Audiovisual (2011) notes, he confirmed the definitive transition with *The Skin I live in* (2011), his first entirely non-linear edit. This gesture resonates with González Requena's reflections (2007; 2018) on *Saraband* (Bergman, 2003), where a table covered with disordered photographs appears as an impossible moviola—a chaotic mass of images, "painful traces of a life [...] that will never find narrative linkage or possible montage." In *Broken Embraces*, this impossibility

materialises in the table overrun with torn photographs that the blind director attempts to recombine: an insurmountable task for someone who has lost his sight and, with it, the ability to edit—literally to give meaning—to images.

As Hernández-Martínez (2021, p. 25) notes, Mateo's attempt to join the fragments confronts the impossibility of fully restoring what has been lost: the dead lover, equated with the gaze. Only with the help of his unacknowledged son, Diego, can the blind director attempt to reassemble—at least symbolically—the shattered gaze that love and death left in ruins.

4. Analysis

4.1. *All about my mother* (1999)

Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* premiered on 16 April 1999. Just a few months later, on 10 September of the same year, Francisca Caballero—the director's mother—passed away. This biographical context casts light on the film's thematic core: the mother–son relationship and the difficulty of separating from the maternal figure.

4.1.1. Writing and the Mother's Desire

Esteban is a teenager who lives alone with his mother. As the title of the film announces, he knows everything about her but almost nothing about his father. On his seventeenth birthday, just after Manuela promises to tell him the truth about his origins, Esteban is hit by a car. As he lies brain-dead in the ICU, we hear in voice-over what he had written the night before:

> Esteban: Tomorrow I turn seventeen, but I look older. Boys who live alone with their mothers get a special look—more serious than normal, like an intellectual or a writer… in my case that's normal, because I am a writer.

The absence of the father is only hinted at, yet it constitutes the core of Esteban's confession. Without naming it directly —living alone with his mother— this lack inscribes itself in his manner, in his premature seriousness.

Writing appears as a way to work through the sadness and imbalance produced by the father's absence and by the excessive presence of a mother he adores.

On the night before the accident, Esteban tells his mother that he is writing a story about her, adding that if she were an actress he would write roles for her. His creative impulse thus aligns itself with the mother's desire: to give her back the place on stage that she renounced. But the appearance of the torn photograph reveals that Esteban's desire is not limited to serving hers. Another wish surfaces, one that does not pass through her: the desire to meet his father.

Through his notes, we understand what Esteban seeks: a filiation beyond the mother. His writing confirms what González Requena (2011) observes about his desire:

> [...] the son longs for the presence of a third who can mediate and thereby organise his relationship with the mother. So that she is not Everything. So that she is not Everything, with a capital letter, as this word appears in the title of the film.

Let us then pause on what the film repeatedly spells out: its title.

4.1.2. All about M(e)

The design of the film's title reinforces the central problem articulated in *All About My Mother*. It does not appear in the opening credits but more than three minutes into the film, over a shot of Manuela and Esteban having dinner in front of the television (F1.1). Its sudden appearance divides the screen into two halves and thereby visually separates mother and son. The title thus introduces the film's formal key: only language —writing— can produce a certain distance between them.

[F1] Stills from *All about my mother*

Its left alignment is equally significant: it occupies Esteban's side of the frame, where he is writing in his notebook. As González Requena notes, the identification between the son's gesture of writing and the on-screen title is immediate; from there, a second structural identification is projected: that of Esteban with the film's signer, Pedro Almodóvar.

The chromatic design reinforces this reading: "ALL ABOUT MY" (F1.1), in red, shares its colour with the director's name (F1.2), while "MOTHER" (F1.1), in white, appears as an autonomous block. This chromatic opposition translates the fracture between the two poles of the enunciation: on the one hand, the "I" of the author/son; on the other, the maternal figure. The title thus splits into two simultaneous statements: a film about "me"—Almodóvar/Esteban—and a film of (the) mother.

Table 1.

Translation for Table 1.

RED	ALL ABOUT MY (ME)	ALMODÓVAR
WHITE	A FILM BY (:)	(MY) MOTHER

This reading is confirmed in the closing dedication: "to all those who want to be mothers," and, more intimately, "to my mother." In this framework, to say everything about oneself (todo sobre mí) becomes equivalent to saying everything about the mother (*All about my mother*); hence the enunciation ALL ABOUT ME (in Spanish, *todo sobre mi*) functions as a symbolic equivalent of MOTHER (madre), such that the title suggests the equation ALMODÓVAR/ESTEBAN = MOTHER.

The title card inserts itself between Manuela and Esteban and, being left-aligned on Esteban's side, its uneven line lengths create an irregular edge that interrupts the frame—an edge reminiscent of the torn photograph Esteban receives on his birthday. Both in the title and in the photograph, the motif is the same: a representation of filiation marked by fracture, with the father occupying the off-screen space.

4.1.3. Broken Filiation

The film crystallises the problem of filiation primarily through photographic motifs. On the night of his birthday, Esteban receives two gifts from his mother: a book by Capote (*Music for Chameleons*) and a black-and-white photograph torn in half. It is not the only one: other images—never shown on screen, but mentioned in his notes—are also incomplete. The father's absence thus extends across the entire family archive, erasing any trace of paternal filiation. Esteban summarises it precisely in his notebook regarding the torn photograph: "my life is missing the same piece."

But this is not simply about meeting his father; it concerns something more fudamental: being recognised by him, accessing paternal filiation. After Esteban's death, the director makes sure the spectator understands that, at least up the moment of his death, Esteban had been only his mother's son. An extreme close-up of the organ donation form (F2.1) shows that he carries the same surnames as his mother: Coleman Echevarría. The moving camera reinforces the point: the word "mother" never appears in full, only its root *mad*––a truncation that acquires an added resonance in English (even if unintentional), since *mad* means "crazy" and the final syllable *–dre* is missing. The coincidence is intriguing, especially given the presence of the surname *Coleman*, whose ending *–man* introduces yet another suggestive echo. Thus, the image seems to suggest that Manuela has been compelled to occupy both maternal and paternal positions. Or, more starkly, as if her role as mother had ended with her son's death.

Tellingly, in the torn photograph, Manuela appears somewhat androgynous dressed in a man's shirt and hat. On one hand, this affirms what she herself

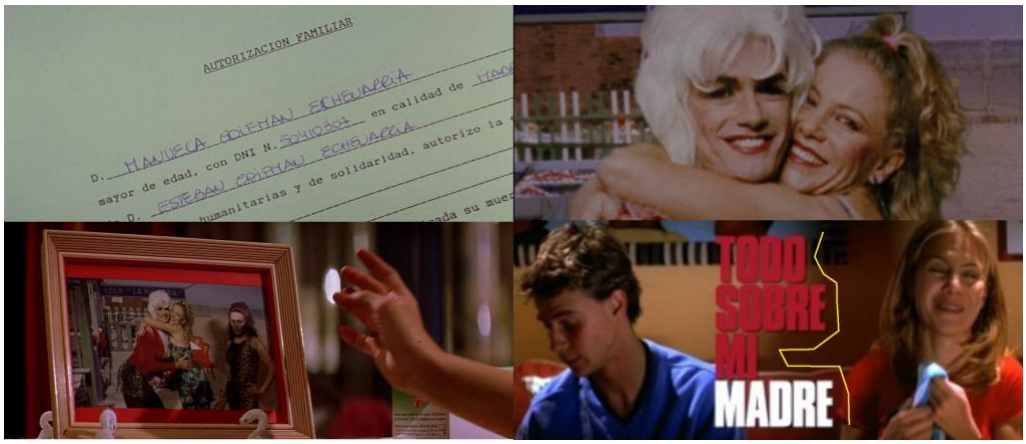
remarks, that there is "a dyke side in all women"; on the other, it characterises her as one of those mothers who, in the absence of the father, assumes a dual role. The *double bind* González Requena describes becomes evident here: Manuela burdens Esteban with the weight of her renunciation as an actress— "if I never became like Margo Channing in *All About Eve*, it's because I gave everything up for you"— a "crushing burden" which, as the scholar notes, prepares the "veiled suicide" that concludes the film's overture.

The torn photograph, then, not only signals the break in filiation but anticipates the impossible place in which Esteban becomes trapped: identified with his mother and carrying the guilt of having blocked her desire to be an actress. That desire, unconsciously inherited, leads him to sacrifice himself so that she may return to being a woman —and an actress— and not exclusively a mother.

The deadly trap for Esteban lies in the absence of a symbolic inscription in relation to the father. Without the possibility of recognising himself in that third figure —"whoever he was, however he was"— he falls under the weight of the mother's desire. Even his name condemns him to a destiny of death: Esteban the son (II) repeats the name of the absent father —presumed dead according to Manuela— Esteban (I), now transformed into Lola. By identifying with his mother, Esteban aligns himself with that part of her that must die in order for her to be reborn as an actress. Both the maternal and paternal figures are thus linked to the sign of death. Here the tragic core of the narrative emerges: the son's sacrifice as the consequence of the father's absence.

The only photograph in which the father appears is found in La Agrado's home: Lola and Manuela pose together in their former bar in Barceloneta (F2.2, F2.3), *fused* in an embrace. In the birthday photo —the black-and-white image (F5.1)— Manuela appears on the left side of the frame. By contrast, in the photograph with Lola (F2.2), the arrangement is inverted: Lola occupies the left, Manuela the right. The mere presence of the father reorganises the mother's position within the image. This inversion does not refer to an abstract diegetic axis but to the actual spatial configuration perceived by the spectator.

It is no coincidence that this image echoes the shot onto which the film's title is projected (F2.4): in both cases, the woman appears on the right, while father and son occupy the left side of the frame.



[F2] Stills from *All about my mother*.
(In F2.4, the yellow line has been added by us and marks the division between the characters.)

This allows us to establish a table of equivalences between the various family configurations staged through photographs in the film. It includes three images: the photograph of Manuela and Lola; the black-and-white photograph of Manuela alone —resulting from the cut that removes Lola/Esteban I; and the frame (F2.4) onto which the title is printed, which reproduces the same composition. Together, these three images constitute the series of family portraits.

Table 2.

	MAN / FATHER	WOMAN / MOTHER	SON
	ESTEBAN I / LOLA	MANUELA	AGRADO

	MANUELA (ESTEBAN II)	-	-
	ESTEBAN (II)	MANUELA	-

Taken together, the three visual configurations—the photograph of Lola and Manuela with La Agrado (F2.3), the torn black-and-white photograph of Manuela alone (F5.1), and the image of Esteban and Manuela on the sofa (F2.4)— trace the fracture of filiation in *All About My Mother*. The torn photograph of Manuela, from which the husband has been cut out, ceases to be a "family photograph" and becomes a portrait; and, as such, it functions as a mirror: the reflection through which the mother offers herself for the son to look at. But this mirror is mutilated —it lacks a third term— and therefore cannot facilitate identification with anything outside the dual mother–son relation. Where the father fails to appear—especially when his absence is an effect of maternal erasure—the son risks occupying a place that does not belong to him: that of the father, or, in the extreme, that of the mother.

4.1.4. The sacrifice of the son

In the conversation Esteban has with Manuela after the theatre performance, his demand becomes explicit:

> — Esteban: One day you'll have to tell me everything about my father. It's not enough to tell me he died before I was born.
>
> — Manuela: It's not an easy story to tell.
>
> — Esteban: I can imagine. Otherwise you would have told me already. I almost asked for it as a birthday present.
>
> — Manuela: I'm not sure it would make a good present.
>
> — Esteban: You're wrong. There's no better gift for me.

— Manuela: Then I'll tell you everything when we get home.

But the promise to reveal the father's identity will never be fulfilled. Just moments later, Esteban is struck by a car and killed. As González Requena observes:

> [...] there is something of suicide in Manuela's son's frantic run toward Huma Rojo: he runs along the trajectory of his mother's desire and, in a sense, sacrifices himself to make it possible (2011).

His death thus appears as the price Manuela must pay to return to acting —no longer in a hospital, but on the stage.

4.1.5. Esteban III: The Possibility of Filiation

If Esteban (II) is condemned to the impossibility of accessing paternal filiation, the narrative introduces a twist with the birth of Esteban (III), the son of Lola and Rosa. Unlike his predecessors, this child survives the tragedy surrounding his conception: although he is born carrying the HIV virus inherited from his parents, he ultimately tests negative.

The chain of Estebans —Esteban I (Lola), Esteban II (Manuela's son), and Esteban III (Lola and Rosa's son)— constitutes a genealogy marked by death, in which only the last survives. If, with Esteban II, Manuela disappears without revealing her pregnancy, events unfold differently with Esteban III. Instead of hiding the truth, Manuela introduces Lola to her son, granting them both the possibility she had denied her first child.

4.2. *Talk to her* (2002)

Talk to her (Talk to Her) was the first film Almodóvar made after his mother's death, and that biographical fact resonates quietly throughout the narrative. At its centre is Benigno, a gay nurse who falls in love with his patient Alicia — a contemporary Sleeping Beauty who enters a coma after being hit by a car. The echoes of *All About My Mother* are immediate: where that film placed Manuela in the role of the caregiver, here the nurse is Benigno; where the victim of the accident was Esteban, it is now Alicia. Almodóvar revisits the same thematic constellation, shifting its gendered arrangement.

Much as the torn photograph in *All about my mother* marked the erasure of the father, *Talk to her* offers a parallel configuration—though with notable differences. Benigno's desire, unlike Esteban's, does not orient itself toward the search for a paternal figure; the father barely registers in his discourse, and any possible identification through Marco remains at best implicit. The mother, by contrast, saturates the film despite appearing only once in a brief flashback, calling out for Benigno to step away from the window. Her presence lingers everywhere, sustained by a wedding portrait that appears in almost every domestic scene in which Benigno secretly watches Alicia from his apartment window —as if he were a *princess* framed by a balcony. The photograph, significantly, is also torn. When Benigno later writes his farewell letter to Marco from prison, the image appears outside its frame once again (F4.1), making the rip along the right edge —and the father's partially amputated face— unmistakably visible.

[F3] Stills from *Talk to her*

A second flashback fills in the psychic logic of this configuration. Benigno recounts to Alicia's father—a psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrist—the peculiar relationship he had with his own parents:

> — Psychiatrist: You mean you used to put makeup on your mother, did her hair.
>
> — Benigno: Of course, yes, yes... I cut her hair, dyed it, did her nails... gave her a good scrub, front and back... My mother wasn't disabled, or crazy,

> exactly… just a bit… lazy, you know? She was a very beautiful woman, and I didn't like seeing her let herself go.
> — Psychiatrist: And your father? What did he say?
> — Benigno: Nothing. What was he going to say?
> — Psychiatrist: Is he dead?
> — Benigno: No, no, God no. He lives in Sweden, I suppose… I haven't heard from him in ages.
> — Psychiatrist: He doesn't visit you?
> — Benigno: No. He started another family when he left my mother… we don't have a relationship.

Benigno thus grew up with an absent father and a mother he dressed, groomed, and cared for —almost certainly a woman suffering from severe psychological fragility. The psychiatrist practically assumes the father must be dead, as if such an arrangement between mother and son were imaginable only in his total absence. The film restages this equation with variations: where *All about my mother* offered a strong, self-sacrificing maternal figure (Manuela) and a father who returns as a woman (Lola), *Talk to her* presents a dependent, mentally unwell mother and a father who simply disappears into another family. The maternal —and paternal— photograph thus becomes the emblem of a double failure: affective and familial.

In the flashbacks where the mother is still alive, Benigno watches Alicia from his window but cannot bring himself to speak to her. The mother must die before he can cross the threshold and step into the world —an echo of the film's title:

> — Alicia: And what do you do when you go out?
> — Benigno: Nothing. I don't go out.
> — Alicia: You must go out sometimes.
> — Benigno: No. Until recently I was taking care of my mother… but she died two months ago.

Alicia thus comes to occupy the place left vacant by the mother. After the accident, Benigno reproduces the same meticulous attentions he once offered his mother to Alicia's unconscious body, and adds what could not be enacted with the mother: the sexual act.

If Esteban's death in *All About My Mother* could be read as a veiled suicide, here the act is neither masked nor mediated. Believing Alicia to have died, Benigno attempts to kill himself with an overdose of sleeping pills. While he writes his farewell note, the camera lingers on a series of objects he has arranged in his cell: the wedding portrait of his mother (F4.1), the photograph of Alicia in her hospital bed (F4.2), the Valium box (F4.3), and the letter addressed to Marco (F4.4). Once again, the images map the itinerary of Benigno's desire: from the mother, to Alicia, and finally to the love–death letter addressed to Marco. Writing reappears as the only possible route toward redemption for a son undone by a perverse desire —one produced by the repudiation of the father and of the symbolic law he embodies.

[F4] Stills from *Talk to her*

4.3. *Pain and Glory* (2019)

In *Pain and Glory (Pain and Glory)*, photographs acquire a more intricate symbolic articulation than in the previous films. Unlike *All about my mother* or *Talk to her*, the images in this film drift in and out of the mise-en-scène without being handled, contemplated, or explicitly thematised by the characters. Yet their presence is decisive: they operate metaphorically, signalling the mode of enunciation that governs the film.

In the earlier works, family photographs were structured around the systematic erasure of the father (F5.1, F5.2), producing closed mother–son dyads with no mediating figure (F5.3, F5.4). In *Pain and Glory*, however, the visual economy shifts. The father re-enters the image, both within the décor and within the narrative itself.

F5.1. MATHER (FATHER) F5.2. MATHER / F(~~ATHER~~)

F5.3. ~~SON~~ LOVER – MOTHER F5.4. ~~SON~~ LOVER-MOTHER-F

[F5] Fotogramas de *All about my mother* (1 y 3) y *Talk to her* (2 y 4)

The scenes depicting Jacinta's final days with Salvador (F6) provide a privileged site for examining how paternal inscription is reconfigured. Two images dominate the mother's bedroom: a youthful portrait of Jacinta (F7.2) and a reproduction of Murillo's *Virgin of the Rosary* (F6.1) —both emphasising the maternal axis of the story.

(F6) *Stills from Pain and Glory*, scenes 110, 112, 113, 114

The decisive shift occurs in scene 115 (F7.3), when a photograph of Salvador's parents —posed "beneath a string of freshly stuffed chorizos and morcillas" (Almodóvar, 2019)— appears on the bedside table. The spectator has already encountered this photograph twice (F7.2, F7.1), but never in scenes where Jacinta is physically present with her son (scenes 110, 112, 113–114, and 115). In other words, the father's image enters the frame only at the moment when

Jacinta asks Salvador to return to the village with her —precisely when she requests the same form of exclusive devotion that bound Esteban and Benigno to their respective mothers. At that point, the father's face (F7.3, F7.4) intervenes between mother and son, occupying a symbolic place that had been vacant until then.

(F7) *Stills from Pain and Glory*, scenes 60, 109, 115 (F7.4 detail)

Although it would be inaccurate to claim that the father is entirely absent from these sequences, his presence is discreet—almost miniature—yet symbolically significant. In the childhood flashbacks, for instance, a "little father" appears: a small prayer card of Saint Anthony of Padua[2] placed on Jacinta's nightstand (F8.1).

In this case, the parental photograph has not been torn, unlike the images in *All about my mother* and *Talk to her*. Nevertheless, the framing chosen by Almodóvar ensures that only the father's face remains visible (F7.3, F7.4). Where the mother's face should appear, the adult Jacinta's figure coincides with the image, visually completing the composition. The result is subtle but unmistakable: mother and son are separated by the irruption of the father—a

[2] It is worth recalling that Pedro Almodóvar's father was named Antonio—the same name as the saint depicted in the holy card on the bedside table.

small[3], almost recessive presence, yet one that reintroduces symbolic distance. He embodies the law that intervenes between them. A modest father—miniaturised, visually subordinated, yet illuminated by the bedside lamp. He recalls the figure of Saint Joseph: relegated to the background, rarely prominent, yet structurally indispensable.

[F8] *Stills from Pain and Glory*

Turning to the scene itself, Jacinta pleads with Salvador to abandon his life in the city and return with her to the village. Although he promises to do so and to care for her with the same devotion that Benigno offers his mother in *Talk to her*, the photographic presence of the father subtly disrupts the fulfilment of that promise. After the flashback, Salvador confesses to Mercedes the guilt he carries for failing to honour his mother's "last and only" wish.

A similar logic governs the childhood sequences—scenes we understand to belong to the film Salvador himself is making (F8.2). The father appears there as well: small, intermittently absent, at times leaving Salvador alone with the labourer, yet still situated within the symbolic horizon of the protagonist.

5. Conclusions: Three Configurations of the Father, Three Destinies of the Son

Taken together, the three films trace a coherent trajectory around the figure of the father and the different ways his presence —or absence— is inscribed in the

[3] This recalls the embedded story in *Hable con ella*: *El amante menguante*, a short film that Benigno watches at the cinema. In it, Alfredo—its protagonist—shrinks day by day until he becomes as tiny as the hero of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957), as a result of a potion given to him by his wife.

familial drama. In *All about my mother*, the father is erased by the mother: his absence is absolute. For Esteban, he is already dead before the story even begins, and when the father finally does appear, it is in the guise of a woman. No space remains for paternal law or for any mediating third term; the dyad of mother and son closes upon itself. Within such a configuration, the son's sacrifice becomes structurally inevitable. Esteban's death —sudden, unspoken, without even a farewell note— marks a disappearance from the scene that cannot be symbolically processed. The film frames his death through a form of pure exit: the son's gaze merges with the camera (Allison, 2005, p. 152), a gesture evocative of what González Requena theory of the text would describe as a psychotic register —a "zero degree" of enunciation.

Talk to her offers a different configuration. Here, the father is not radically absent but partially cut away, displaced into another life, another family. This is the father as reneged figure —acknowledged in principle, disavowed in practice. Such a structure accords with the logic of perversion, and the son's fate follows accordingly: Benigno's farewell letter precedes a suicide that does not take the form of a silent disappearance but rather an *acting out*, an appeal addressed to the Other. The act itself is less an exit from the scene than a message hurled into it.

In *Pain and Glory*, the father returns to the frame —diminished, eclipsed, and marked by distance, yet nevertheless present. He appears in the family photograph, and that appearance —however small— reintroduces the symbolic mediation lacking in the earlier films. The son's destiny, accordingly, shifts. No longer condemned to death, he enters the terrain of neurosis, where symptom becomes narrative and illness becomes work. Salvador, debilitated by physical symptoms that constrict his life, embarks on a process of remembering: he submits to memory, intoxicates himself to access it, reconnects with his first love, and begins to process a long-delayed grief. By relinquishing drugs and consenting to the operation that will allow him to swallow, he can finally return to filmmaking. Writing and cinema become the channels through which survival becomes possible —the symptom transformed into creation.

Through these three films, Almodóvar inadvertently sketches a map of the clinical structures as psychoanalysis defines them: psychosis, marked by the radical foreclosure of the father in the maternal discourse; perversion, structured around the disavowal of paternal law; and neurosis, sustained by the father's presence —frail, intermittent, but operative. Each structure gives rise to a distinct fate for the son: suicide as a *passage à l'acte* in psychosis; suicide accompanied by the farewell letter as an *acting out* in perversion; and writing as symptom in neurosis —capable of converting pain into creation and opening the possibility of a new beginning.

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