DEATH AND *LA CHICA ALMODÓVAR*

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Abstract

The work of director Pedro Almodóvar has often been commented on in terms of passion and identity politics. This article foregrounds two distinct, yet related themes: death and community. Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler, this contribution to the ever growing literature on Almodóvar extends the theorising community in his oeuvre, suggesting that it is an essential space for the exploration of identity and passion. Moreover, through an analysis of the representation of death in a number of the director's works —*Hable con ella*, *Volver*, and *Matador*— this article reveals how this theme threads together a range of the key concerns of Almodóvar's films, most significantly that of community.

Keywords: cinema, Pedro Almodóvar, *Hable con ella*, *Todo sobre mi madre, Volver*, *Matador*, representation of death, community.

Resumen

«La muerte y *La chica Almodóvar*». Si en la obra del director Pedro Almodóvar se comenta a menudo la manera en la cual destaca la pasión y la política de identidades, este artículo subraya otros dos temas: la muerte y la comunidad. Con referencia a las teorías de Jean-Luc Nancy y de Judith Butler, esta contribución a la literatura ya extensa sobre el director extiende la teorización de la comunidad en su obra, sugiriendo que la comunidad es esencial para la exploración de la identidad. Además, el análisis de la representación de la muerte en algunas de las películas del director —*Hable con ella*, *Volver*, y *Matador*— muestra como este tema sirve como hilo unificador para otro tema clave de su obra: la comunidad.

Palabras clave: cine, Pedro Almodóvar, *Hable con ella*, *Todo sobre mi madre, Volver*, *Matador*, la representación de la muerte, la comunidad.

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INTRODUCTION

Whilst his use of bold colours and the foregrounding of passions and identity politics might imply otherwise, death has long been a key trope of Pedro Almodóvar's cinema. Although generalisations about the work of a director whose catalogue is so varied—in terms of both style and content—are difficult, a close review of his films makes it clear that in various guises death casts a long shadow across his films. This article argues that, whilst perhaps never centre frame, death in Almodóvar's films is a fulcrum for interpersonal connections, self-understanding and, ultimately, community. From the demise of Yolanda's boyfriend in *Entre tinieblas*—propelling her to seek shelter with the nuns—to the deathbed reconciliation of mother and daughter in *Tacones lejanos*, Almodóvar movies never shield the viewer from the constant reality of death, nor its relationship to life and community. Such examples are complemented by the numerous murders: Antonio (by means of a hambone) in ¿Qué *he hecho yo!*, both Rebeca's step-father and her husband in *Tacones lejanos*, Ramón's mother in *Kika*, Robert Ledgard in *La piel que habito*, Ignacio in *La mala educación*. This is not to mention the various deaths we consider in more detail below. It may sometimes be taken for granted that the director's films will focus on solidarity between women,[1] but I want to suggest that death is needed to materialise such meaningful and communicative connections. This article emerges from a larger project that explores the relationship between identity and community in Almodóvar's filmography, highlighting the interdependency of these concepts. As a recurring motif in Almodóvar's work, death offers a way of understanding this connection, for it is in no sense an ominous one. As Carla Marcantonio observes, death never appears "without an accompanying image of birth or rebirth",[2] nor—as we will argue in this film—without an accompanying image of community.

Focusing our attention on the way death figures in Almodóvar's films allows the constructive possibilities of his communities to emerge more fully. We draw here on the work of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who claims that "it is through death that the community reveals itself".[3] This article will hence trace the figure of death through a number of key movies to explore the ways in which community offers comfort and sense-making possibilities to Almodóvar's characters. In particular, we will see how death figures in three key works: *Hable con ella*, *Volver* and *Matador*, with passing reference to other examples. These have not been selected as exemplars of the directors' highly varied catalogue, but because they indicate the range of ways in which death and community are linked. In different ways, the films

[1] Allinson, Mark (2001): *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, London and New York, IB Taurus Publishers, pp. 68-71 and pp. 87-88.

[2] Marcantonio, Carla (2007): «Undoing Performance: The Mute Female Body and Narrative Dispossession in Pedro Almodóvar's *Hable con ella*», *Women & Performance*, vol. 17, núm. 1, pp. 19-36: p. 28.

[3] Nancy, Jean-Luc (1991): *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 14.

we will consider suggest that death opens up spaces which call on community to manifest. Although the analysis offered here is not comprehensive—in respect of neither these particular films, nor the portrayal of death across Almodóvar's work—it will hopefully shed new light on the importance of death in this filmography, which consistently provides space for community. Whilst numerous articles have considered the role of death in specific Almodóvar films—for instance, Dean Allbritton on *Volver*, or Hiber Conteris on *Hable con ella*—it is only Joshua Chambers-Letson's article on *Todo sobre mi madre* that seems to consider the way that death and community are interconnected in the sense discussed here. This article provides a fuller account of the role of death across a number of Almodóvar films, highlighting the almost unfailing connection between death and community.

1. DEATH AND NARRATING THE INCOMMUNICABLE

Of all Almodóvar's films, *Hable con ella* —in which the presence of two comatose women casts the possibility of death across the narrative—perhaps most clearly foregrounds the close relationship between life and death. A dance teacher who makes a brief appearance at her student's hospital bedside describes a piece she is choreographing, which will symbolise: "De la muerte emerge la vida. De lo masculino emerge lo femenino. De lo terreno emerge... lo etérea [sic]..." As well as relating death to gender, this account connects death to the creative enterprise of dance. It is notable that in a narrative that occurs primarily in a hospital—the battleground between life and death—the theme of communication (and community) is central; not only in the title, but also in the friendships that structure the narrative. Intertitles break the film into three acts, each named for a pair of characters: "Lydia y Marco", "Alicia y Benigno", "Marco y Alicia". The narrative focuses most, however, on the connection between Marco and Benigno, who meet in a hospital where each is caring for the woman he loves: one, a nurse tending to his patient, the other, a man watching over his lover, a bullfighter wounded during a *corrida*. Through a plot that takes the audience back and forth through time, divulging the backstories of the characters' relationships as well as their day-to-day life in the hospital, *Hable con ella* depicts the struggle to communicate in meaningful ways, whether through words, touch, or dance. It thereby reveals "a utopian desire for a sense of community that is political and emotional."[4] The fundamental need for communication points to Nancy's account of community as "given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires and undertakings."[5]

[4] Kakoudaki, Despina (2009): «Intimate Strangers», Epps, B. and Kakoudaki, D., *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 193-238: p. 196.

[5] Nancy, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

In this movie, the need to communicate is embodied by dance, which offers a means of expressing the inexpressible through the body in motion. For Isolina Ballesteros, "[t]he conviction, or at least the desire, that women and men can—even should—perform their personal dramas before each other resides at the core of *Talk to Her*... gesturing to the potential of performativity in general."[6] Performativity here has literal form via the dance scenes which bookend the film. In the opening sequence, Benigno and Marco—as yet strangers—sit side by side at a performance of "Café Müller". The dance piece evokes the limits of communication. Two women stand on the stage, the face of the woman in the foreground charged with emotion as she drags her palm across her heart. She turns—eyes shut—and moves across a stage covered in tables and chairs, the furniture "preventing the dancers from developing the expansive movements which could lead into group formations."[7] A man rushes to move the objects out of her way, highlighting—despite the absence of traditional partnered choreography—the importance of the other to our embodied existence in the world. This echoes the relational view of the self put forward by Butler in *Undoing Gender*, in which she suggests that "we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to an other".[8] The female dancers appear closed off from the world behind their closed eyes, yet their arms reach out to it, searching for connection perhaps, but never making contact with the man who works earnestly to ensure their safe passage across the stage. This desire for connection brings together the two men, at first through their shared reaction to the dance piece, but later through their shared experiences with the women they love.

Both Marco and Benigno are visibly moved by the performance, with Marco's tears in particular suggesting the (im)possibility of communication. In Almodóvar's films, as in Nancy's work, community provides a space to which we bring those parts of our experience that are beyond expression, and hence beyond intellectual comprehension. This evokes Judith Butler's concern with the type of community "composed of those who are beside themselves."[9] Mario later divulges that he cries when he sees beautiful things that he cannot share with his former lover. He grieves the failure of that relationship, the on-going absence of communication with this particular other. Whilst not a death, the end of a relationship represents a significant loss, one which brings to mind Butler's assertion that we are "undone" by each other—whether through desire, or through grief.[10] Marco's revelation indicates

[6] Ballesteros, Isolina (2009): «Performing Identities in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar», Epps, B. and Kakoudaki, D., *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 83-84.

[7] Gutiérrez-Albilla, Julián Daniel (2005): «Body, silence and movement: Pina Bausch's Café Müller in Almodóvar's Hable con ella», *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, vol. 2, núm. 1, pp. 47-58: p. 51.

[8] Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[9] Butler, Judith (2004): *Undoing Gender*, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Routledge, p. 20.

[10] Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

both his need to communicate with others, as well as his failure to do so. It is of course in response to Marco's struggle to connect with his comatose lover, Lydia, that Benigno mandates that he "hable con ella", vocalising the film's title. Lydia dies off-screen, after Marco has ceded any claim to be by her bedside to her former lover, and no moment is given to Marco's grief at this loss as it is revealed at the same moment as Benigno's crime. If Benigno seems much more at ease expressing himself than Marco does—after the performance, he recounts to his patient in detail the movement of the dancers across the stage, as well as the response of the man (Marco) beside next to him—the fact that his love object is in a coma reveals the limitations of his communicative abilities. As Marco emphatically puts it when Benigno declares his desire to marry Alicia: "Lo tuyo con Alicia es un monólogo y una locura." For Marcantonio, the opening scenes of this film offer "a compressed statement of Almodóvar's ideas about narrative and its role in constructing meaning".[11] She too draws on Butler's assertion that even as we may be "undone" by each other, yet "[i]n our very ability to persist, we are dependent on what is outside of us, on a broader sociality",[12] achieved in part through narrative. Tensions around the limitations of narrative and communication—verbal or otherwise—permeate this film, exemplified by the mute, black and white filmic interstice that interrupts the narrative at the moment of Benigno's rape of Alicia.

The decision to not simply avoid showing the sexual assault, but to replace it with a silent film *"Amante menguante"*, highlights yet again the power of narrative. This is reinforced by the fact that Benigno describes the short film to the dormant Alicia. As Marvin D'Lugo suggests, "[b]oth the story and the act of storytelling reflect Benigno's effort to transform himself from a predatory rapist into a sympathetic figure."[13] Narrative, D'Lugo suggests, provides coherence to Almodóvar's characters, as well as the opportunity to construct the self through engagement with the other. *Hable con ella* could be fairly criticised for failing to directly address the issue of sexual violence—and indeed, it is possible to read the film as an apologia for Benigno's assault, given that it seems to lead to Alicia's "salvation". Indeed, when visiting Benigno's grave towards the end of the film, Marco tells him that Alicia is alive, and that "tú la despertaste". Although it might appear a pointless exercise for Benigno to share his viewing experiences with the comatose woman, the power of the voice has been established earlier in Almodóvar's filmography. In *La flor de mi secreto*, Leo's life is saved by her mother's voice after she takes an overdose of sleeping pills. If, in the case of Alicia, Benigno's voice does not bring her out of her coma, the logic of substituting the story of the shrinking lover for the assault implies a causal relationship between narrative and rescue. As Epps observes, it is Benigno "el que

[11] Marcantonio, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
[12] Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
[13] D'Lugo, Marvin (2006): *Pedro Almodóvar*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, p. 11.

potencia, mediante sus palabras y sus actos... el despertar de Alicia, su retorno a la vida consciente, su regeneración, su renacimiento."[14]

At another level, the decision to avert our gaze from the crime reflects Butler's suggestion that in certain circumstances violence "against those who are already not quite lives, who are living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark."[15] Whilst Butler is referring to the dehumanisation of minorities, her description is an apt account of Alicia's liminal state—in a coma, she cannot be considered wholly alive, yet nor is she dead. The failure to depict the rape and instead show a surrealist short film about a man so devoted to his lover that he wishes to literally lose himself in her body appears to be a refusal to conceptualise the sexual assault as violence. If it is Alicia's death-like status that makes this possible, her subsequent rebirth seems to demand the sacrifice of Benigno's life. Even though he does not know of her recovery when he commits suicide (such knowledge arguably could have "saved" him), Benigno's death seems necessary to allow the final couple of the film to unite: Alicia and Marco. In the final sequence, they are reunited in the theatre. A woman—again, her eyes closed—is moved around by a group of men, her body manipulated. She is lifted up and falls into the arms of men below her, her trust in her fellow dancers absolute. At the interval, Alicia and Marco share a few words and when they return to the theatre, they are seated only a few rows from each other. The performance resumes and a line of men and women dance across the stage—the dance performances finally including partnered choreography. Marco turns and smiles at Alicia, who will soon, it appears, take Benigno's place in his life, their relationship prophesied by the final intertitles: "Marco y Alicia", with the final dance scene reinforcing the themes of embodiment and communication.

In *Hable con ella*, the importance of the other in our understanding of self is revealed through both the shadowy presence of death and the foregrounding of performance. Yet death here happens off-screen, somewhat tangential to the narrative, unlike its role in *Todo sobre mi madre*, in which the death of Esteban—son of the protagonist, Manuela—propels the narrative. Whereas death is a more diffuse presence in *Hable con ella*, Esteban's death is the central organising principle. It is due to his death that Manuela returns to Barcelona, to locate his father and inform him of Esteban's existence, and passing. Nancy's work depends on a notion of being in which "Being 'itself' comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will... *as community*".[16] Death is the experience that reveals this relationality to us: "Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of

[14] Epps, Brad (2009): «Entre la efusividad multicolor y la desaparición monocromática: melodrama, pornografía y abstracción en *Hable con ella*», Zurian, F. and Vázquez Varela, C., *Almodóvar: El cine como pasión*, Cuenca, Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, pp. 269-286: p. 275.

[15] Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[16] Nancy, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

death is inscribed and acknowledged as 'community'."[17] In Almodóvar's films, death serves to bring characters together, even as the impossibility of adequately articulating the experience of death is at times foregrounded. As Chambers-Letson argues in relation to *Todo sobre mi madre*, "The sharing of Esteban's life/death becomes the condition through which Manuela's community appears".[18] In contrast, in *Hable con ella* the deaths of Lydia and Benigno are not directly shown in the narrative, but are implicit in Marco's eventual adoption of Benigno's directive to "talk to her" (the "her" being initially Lydia, but ultimately Alicia). Drawing on Nancy's work on the inoperative community, Chambers-Letson argues that the Esteban's death early in the plot is the catalyst for the female community that later emerges. It is significant, Chambers-Letson suggests, that Manuela "repeatedly refuses to communicate the nature of her son's loss", a failure that seems to highlight the process that Nancy refers to as establishing the grounds for community.[19] This reading ultimately suggests that community—in both Nancy's philosophy and Almodóvar's films—offers a space to explore those experiences that are beyond expression. These include, most importantly, our encounters with death.

Communication facilitates the search for sense, all the while presupposing community. Manuela's need to have her grief recognised and Marco's ultimate reaching out to Alicia confirm the need for this community. As Butler suggests, the "very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition", a desire which "places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have."[20] Hence, as Nancy argues, human beings—characterised by our search for meaning—are necessarily embedded within community. If Almodóvar set out in *Hable con ella* to suggest that words can be a weapon against death,[21] this cannot be understood in a literal sense. Rather, the film indicates the ways in which narrative is a form of sense-making. The weapon is therefore not against death as such, but against the grief and loss that accompanies it. *Hable con ella* might suggest that narration "has the ability to touch and to become a vehicle for care and cure",[22] but it also highlights its limitations. In particular, movement must at times substitute for verbal narrative. For Marcantonio, containing the film within two dance pieces positions Almodóvar alongside the viewer and reflects "the ways in which we are all dispossessed by virtue of our ties to each other... and through the words we find—and don't—to narrate our experience and offer ourselves up to

[17] Nancy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[18] Chambers-Letson, Joshua, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[19] Chambers-Letson, Joshua (2014): «Compensatory Hypertrophy, or All About My Mother», *Social Text*, vol. 32, pp. 13-24: p. 21.

[20] Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[21] As cited in the synopsis from the film's website (no longer available online) cited in Kakoudaki, *op. cit.*, p. 235, footnote 14.

[22] Marcantonio, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

another."[23] These performances in the film provide a space for the sharing out of the incommensurable, both within the diegesis and beyond it. Through including these dance sequences, Almodóvar acknowledges the limits of language. Narrative and recognition, performance and spectatorship offer spaces of solidarity and bonding, in which the otherwise incommunicable can be shared out, and in which we can make sense of death—our own and that of others.

2. DEATH AND THE PATRIARCH

If, in Almodóvar's films, death can operate as a means of bringing characters together through a shared experience of loss—and its inexpressibility—death can also bring together characters by removing narrative obstacles to community. In such cases, the death is often that of the patriarch. Even as this trope signals the dissolution of the conventional family unit, it often leads to its reconstruction or rehabilitation. In ¿Qué *he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, for instance, the death of patriarch Antonio—hit over the head with a hambone by his fed-up wife—seems necessary in order for Gloria to recover her relationship with at least her younger son, Miguel—though in the process she seems to lose older son Toni to his paternal grandmother and the lure of a rural life. For Sánchez Alarcón, such plot points come to symbolise that the traditional family structure has been "*agotada*".[24] The trope of the death of the father figure also features in *Volver*. This film focuses on the reconciliation of Raimunda with both her mother, Irene—thought to have died years ago with her husband in a house fire—and, to a lesser extent, her daughter, Paula. This "rebirth" occurs after the death of Raimunda's partner, Paco, who is killed by Paula after he attempts to rape her, mirroring Raimunda's own sexual assault at the hands of her father. It is later revealed that Irene killed her husband and his lover by fire, after she discovered them together in bed.

Volver unpacks consequential links between sex and death, as Paco's death is precipitated by his sexual misconduct. We do not see Paula kill her stepfather. Rather, there is a brief montage of Raimunda at work before a cut to red. This is quickly revealed to be the side of a bus, driving off to reveal Paula, her long hair wet from the rain, clearly anxious as she bounces up and down and looks around her. The medium shot reflects her emotional isolation at that moment, although she is shortly joined by her mother and for the first time the two display physical affection. Paula and Raimunda walk side-by-side back to the flat, the younger woman responding only vaguely to her mother's questions about where she has been. This scene is the inverse of the scene in which Manuela loses her son in *Todo sobre mi*

[23] Marcantonio, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[24] Sánchez Alarcón, María Inmaculada (2008): «El color del deseo que todo lo transforma: claves cinematográficas y matrices culturales en el cine de Pedro Almodóvar», *Palabra clave*, vol. 11, núm. 2, pp. 327-342: p. 339.

madre. In both, the colour red dominates and mother and child are shown in the street, either in the rain or with the cityscape still wet from a recent downpour. Here, though, the death is not that of a child, but of Paco, and it functions as a catalyst for a closer and stronger relationship between mother and daughter, which up to this point has been largely defined by Raimunda's frustration at Paula's teenage manias, such as her overuse of her mobile telephone. Paco's dead body is not at first shown to the audience, with the focus on the women's reactions to his death, and Paula's account of the attempted rape, during which he asserted that his conduct "no era malo" because he was not her biological father. It is later disclosed that Raimunda fell pregnant to her abusive father, a revelation that explains both the estrangement between Raimunda and her mother, as well as her compassionate response to her daughter at this moment. Butler reveals how "grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain..."[25] Death therefore calls forth community, offering us the possibility of understanding ourselves in deeper ways. In both *Volver* and ¿Qué *he hecho yo!*, the death of the father figure follows their sexual misconduct, perhaps offering another Almodovarian "critique of patriarchy's instinctive violence".[26] Whether it is attempted rape or the blatant disregard for their partner's sexual satisfaction, these men are punished for their sense of sexual entitlement. This is not to suggest that the representation of sexual violence in Almodóvar's films is unproblematic, but it is significant that these two films suggest a causal connection between sexual selfishness and death. Similar examples, although in certain ways more complicated, are Benigno's suicide, and Vera's shooting of Robert Ledgard in *La piel que habito*, after he has set up a scenario in which her only possible escape is through a sexual relationship with him.

Even if we might understand such deaths in terms of a punishment, equally significant is the fact they allow for the deepening of ties between other members of the family. *Volver* is a film in which men "are the origin of most of the problems between women",[27] which not only suggests that their absence (or death) may be required for the resolution of these problems, but also that interpersonal connections *between* women are the solution. As Dean Allbritton writes, Paco's death is required to enable the reconstitution of the family beyond "normative patriarchy".[28] In Almodóvar's films, the death of the patriarch is a trope that consistently reflects the dissolution of traditional family structures, providing the space for alternative forms of community. In *Volver*, however, this occurs in a markedly different way to tales such as *Hable con ella*. Paco's death in this case "emphasizes sorority"[29] through the connections between the protagonist and her all-female community, which more

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[25] Butler *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[26] Allinson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

[27] Goss, Brian (2009): *Global Auteurs: Politics in the Films of Almodóvar, von Trier and Winterbottom*, New York, Peter Lang, p. 110.

[28] Allbritton, Dean (2015): «Timing Out: The Politics of Death and Gender in Almodóvar's *Volver*», *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 16, núm. 1, pp. 49-64: p. 57.

[29] Allbritton (2015): *op. cit.*, p. 57.

closely mirrors Manuela's formation of feminine friendship in *Todo sobre mi madre*. If Paco's death is virtually necessary to protect young Paula from his advances, it also seems crucial to the possibility of a rapprochement between her and Raimunda.

The "death" of Irene, mother of Raimunda appears equally significant for the prospect of mother-daughter reunion. Through this older character, the narrative opens up an almost fantastical landscape. In the film's pressbook, Almodóvar states: "Volver es un homenaje a los ritos sociales que viven las gentes de mi pueblo en relación con la muerte y con los muertos. Los muertos no mueren nunca." This is confirmed by the appearance of Irene's "ghost". If her return initially requires a significant leap of faith in an otherwise realist film—before we realise that Irene in fact never died—Paul Julian Smith reminds that it is common to introduce elements of fantasy into a melodrama,[30] with the genre's conventions facilitating the audience's belief in such wondrous occurrences. Through the initial characterisation of Irene's re-appearance, the film associates the feminine with the supernatural, suggesting perhaps that women are best able to accommodate the close connection between life and death. In the women's *pueblo*, for instance—dominated by female inhabitants because they outlive the men—there is a superstition that the wind "saca a la gente de quicio". The opening scene of the film depicts the widows of the village cleaning their family tombs against the lashing wind, foregrounding the way this film apposes life and death and proposes a coexistence that also underpins the experience of community. The opening sequence also seems to emphasise that with the experience of loss, we may be "returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another".[31] The most emphatic example of this is the villagers' tradition of buying their own tomb whilst alive, and caring for it "as though it were a chalet".

It is in this cemetery that we first get a glimpse of Raimunda's childhood neighbour, Agustina, there to tend to her own grave; a grave she is very close to by the end of the film due to her losing battle with cancer. Throughout *Volver*, the spectre of death remains present. Irene—one of the returns of the title, of course—appears to us first as a ghost, and the film ends with her "returned" to this ghostly status. We learn during the film that Irene did not just kill her daughters' father, but also his lover, Agustina's mother. The same wind that blows over the cemetery in the film's opening continues to affect the women as they come and go from the *pueblo*, culminating in a rather eerie scene of large green trashcans rolling down the streets just before Irene darts across the street to Agustina's house, to which the latter has returned to live out her final days. Whilst not articulated in such terms, Irene is perhaps seeking atonement for her crime of passion by caring for Agustina in the late stages of her illness. The final image of Agustina is in the bed in which, she remarks to Irene, she was born, in which her mother slept and in which the village kept vigil

[30] Smith, Paul Julian (1992): *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 170.

[31] Butler: *op. cit.*, p. 23.

over Paula, Irene's sister: a symbol of the cycle of life and death. Allbritton—in his analysis of *Todo sobre mi madre*—remarks that any understanding life and death as fixed binaries, "refuses to take into account the vulnerability of the human body and how a capacity to be harmed can mark our social interactions with others and constitute, in part, a sense of self."[32] I would go further: just as Esteban's death propels Manuela's journey in *Todo sobre mi madre* and Irene's death in *Volver* offers the possibility for reconciliation between two generations of mothers and daughters, Almodóvar's refusal to conceptualise life and death in dichotomous terms reaffirms the role death play in shaping our lives. By metaphorically giving up her life for Raimunda (and subsequently for Agustina, her *de facto* adopted daughter), Irene ultimately regains the trust and love of the daughter she had failed so miserably during her lifetime. Death in these films is interwoven not only with life, but also with community. Ultimately, *Volver* offers a vision of community in which death and life offer alternate, but not opposing, points of encounter for its members.

3. DEATH AND THE LOVERS

If, in both *Volver* and *Hable con ella*, death opens out onto the possibility of meaningful community, there are counter-examples in Almodóvar's work where death seems to instead close in on any prospect of communication. A film "in which passion and death are given a contemporary meaning",[33] *Matador* focuses on a game of cat-and-mouse played between two murderous protagonists. Diego, a retired bullfighter with a fetish for his girlfriend acting like a corpse during sexual intercourse—without mentioning the bodies buried in his garden—meets his match in María, a lawyer who seeks out anonymous sexual encounters in which she kills her lover. Once their paths cross, they are compulsively drawn to one another. As Diego says: "Tú y yo nos parecemos. A los dos nos obsesiona la muerte." In this respect, the characters appear to "[reject] gender binaries as they recognise one another as members of the same species".[34] Whilst *Hable con ella* speaks to the audience of the impossibility of communicating certain experiences, *Matador* provides a glimpse into the simply inexplicable. Diego and María appear to be laid bare on the screen, yet the film offers no explanation for their actions, no reasoning apart from the suggestion that they are purely "other" in their shared obsession with death. Their crimes are ultimately uncovered, but they embrace death before they are apprehended—dying in each other's arms in the fulfilment of their respective

[32] Allbritton, Dean (2013): «Paternity and Pathogens: Mourning Men and the Crises of Masculinity in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*», D'Lugo, M. and Vernon, Kathleen M., *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, Chicester, Wiley, pp. 287-310: p. 230.

[33] D'Lugo, Marvin (1991): «Almodóvar's City of Desire», *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 13, núm. 4, pp. 47-65: p. 57.

[34] Jordan, Barry and Ricky Morgan-Tamounas (2008): *Contemporary Spanish Cinema,* Manchester, Manchester University Press, p. 152.

death drives. For all their shared passion and interests, María and Diego are fated to enjoy only a brief moment together.

Matador opens with 1970s-style footage of a woman being drowned. The title appears over the woman's dead face submerged in water, viewed from beneath. The panting of a man soon becomes audible, and the film cuts to a close up of a man—we later learn that he is Diego—whose face is contorted in what we assume is desire as he masturbates to images of women being beaten and killed in this film within the film. A medium profile shot of Diego, his legs straddling the television, confirms what he is doing. From the first scene, then, the audience is aware of the correspondence between sexual arousal and death in this film. As Hiber Conteris remarks, from Almodóvar's earliest films, he "percibió y expuso temáticamente y mediante el más directo recurso de las imágenes el profundo nexo ontológico existente entre sexo, amor y muerte."[35] The next scene shows Diego in front of a blackboard, giving what we soon realise is a bullfighting lesson. He announces: "Y esta tarde vamos a hablar del arte de matar." As he goes on to describe the correct way to kill a bull, the film crosscuts between the bullfighting lesson—in particular a close-up of student, Ángel—and a woman (María) seducing a man in a plaza. María's copulation with the stranger continues to be crosscut with the bullfighting lessons, as the students move into the yard to practise the *corrida*; the sound from one scene flowing into the other. Finally, María takes a hairpin from her hair and thrusts it into the nape of her lover's neck, right where she had previously kissed him. She orgasms after he dies, and the film cuts back to a panning shot of Diego walking amongst his students, a melancholic piano theme evoking his sense of morbid preoccupation.

Whether death in this film gestures towards community is less evident than in the examples above. I will argue that within the relationship between Diego and María, death binds the couple together in a way that excludes the external world and thereby forecloses the possibility of genuine community. This is confirmed in the film's closing sequence, which brings the lovers together in what will be their final moments. Asked whether he would like to see her dead, Diego responds: "Sí. Y que tú me vieras muerto a mi." This moment recalls Butler's assertion that "our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition".[36] Although María and Diego offer a highly individualistic take on death, this dialogue nevertheless suggests that they understand death as the ultimate sense-making moment of life, and the significance of the other witnessing that moment. Diego and María's fascination with death, including their "suicide" pact (which involves them killing each other), recalls Nancy's assertion that "the joint suicide or death of lovers is one of the mythico-literary figures of [a] logic of communion in immanence."[37] Such

[35] Conteris, Hiber (2004): «Ritual de sexo, amor y muerte en *Hable con ella* de Pedro Almodóvar», *Letras Hispanas: Revista de Literatura y Cultura*, vol. 1, núm. 1, pp. 1-9: p. 5.

[36] Butler: *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[37] Nancy: *op. cit.*, p. 12.

immanence—a conceptualisation of the individual as the origin and outcome of community—is opposed to Nancy's "inoperative community", because it involves the reduction of the singularity to the individual, a denial of Nancy's view that the singularity (a term he uses to describe the human being) exists at its limits. The lovers who suicide close themselves off to others, attempting to create a closed circuit in which they, and only they, constitute the start and end points of their union. In their desire to die together—and each witness each other's death—María and Diego seem to offer a perfect figure of immanence: "the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty."[38] Yet the lovers do not entirely fulfil their suicide pact: María stabs Diego first, leaving him too weak to follow through and so she shoots herself in the mouth. If this scene was intended to show "a unique moment of reciprocity for the characters who have till then 'made love alone',"[39] it also demonstrates the limits of that reciprocity. María is left the sole agent; the communion between her and Diego is incomplete.

The twin deaths of María and Diego foreshadow the deaths of Clara and Sancho in *Carne trémula*—a film that includes Almodóvar's first explicit reference to Spain's political history. In the later film, Clara and Sancho are a married couple in which (her) infidelity and (his) drunken abuse culminate in their mutual murder. Just as María sets the terms of her relationship with Diego, Clara determines the resolution of her standoff with Sancho. Their final encounter occurs at the abode of her latest lover, Víctor. Clara is there to bid her love goodbye, whilst Sancho is there to get revenge—having been informed of Clara and Víctor's affair. In her farewell note to Víctor, Clara writes that when Víctor reads it, she will be either dead or fleeing Madrid. Ultimately, she chooses the former, although it is not clear whether Clara dies by suicide or by Sancho's hand. The couple confront each other, each with gun drawn, but the camera cuts to an exterior shot of Víctor just as the gunshots are fired. When Víctor enters his house, they are both on the floor, Clara dead, Sancho wounded. Sancho appears to threaten Víctor momentarily, but ultimately ends his own life, embracing his wife's dead body. The death of this couple suggests the death of rigid and unreflexive gendered behaviour, opening up to the possibility of new forms of masculinity, in particular.[40] The final scene of this film is Víctor and his partner rushing to the hospital, with her in labour—not only bringing the film full circle to the opening scene of Víctor's birth on a bus in downtown Madrid, but also bolstering Marcantonio's observation that death in Almodóvar's films generally finds a corresponding image of birth.[41]

[38] Nancy: *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[39] Smith, Paul Julian (2000): *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, 2nd ed, London and New York, Verso, p. 76.

[40] Cano, Rosana Blanco (2006): «Masculinidades en atribulación, ansiedad y transición en *Carne trémula* (1997) de Pedro Almodóvar», *Journal of Iberian & Latin American Research*, vol. 12, núm. 2, pp. 55-75: p. 70.

[41] Marcantonio: *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Whilst in *Carne trémula* death and birth are explicitly paired, in *Matador* the deaths of María and Diego give rise to no literal "birth", but to the potential of community. Even as their deaths suggest that the romantic couple may ultimately lead to the impossibility of the romantic couple, an alternative community is gestured towards in the final scene. As a motley group including a policeman, Inspector del Valle, one of Diego's students, Ángel, and others arrive at the country house, moments too late to apprehend the couple, their individual (and collective) responses to the only recently lifeless bodies resonate with an understanding of the community as a space for the sharing out of the incommensurate. In the blood-red light of a solar eclipse, this motley group miss out on viewing the climax of Diego and María's suicide pact. As María's gunshot rings out, however, they are pulled away from the otherworldly sight of the red sun. Witness to the lovers' final embrace, Ángel is initially regretful that he couldn't save his mentor—although it is only through his psychic visions that the group have managed to find the lovers at all. Inspector del Valle suggests, however: "Mejor que haya sido así. Nunca había visto a nadie tan feliz." Whilst it is only a brief moment, the witnesses in this scene share an inability to make sense of it. If the Inspector is the only one able to understand the lovers' joy, his articulation of this seems to assist the others in establishing a narrative of Diego and María's deaths (and homicidal lives). As with *Hable con ella*, the shared experience of spectatorship seems to bring the characters together.

For D'Lugo, this final tableau of *Matador* points to the "valorising glance of the law".[42] A similar scene is offered in *La ley del deseo*, as lovers Pablo and Antonio share a final moment of passion. As the lovers spend a final hour together in Pablo's apartment, a spectatorial crowd is gathered below, comprised of ex-lovers, psychologists and bystanders, and the police—there to arrest Antonio for the murder of Pablo's former lover, Juan. In a 1987 interview, Almodóvar noted that as the police witness this moment, "their faces are full of awe and envy. Even the police are softened and eroticized by the passion that they imagine is going on in the room. They become the quintessential Almodóvar spectators".[43] Exemplified by Inspector del Valle, who was able to witness María and Diego's last embrace and understand the beauty and power of the moment, Almodóvar's police no longer offer moralistic judgement, but through the tolerant gaze of its officers approves the "new" Spain, in which love may be gay or straight, and expressed through murder or suicide. This is especially the case given D'Lugo's view that the lovers' ultimate demise "suggests once again an intentional blurring of the traditional, rigid lines that defined male and female identities in the old Spain".[44] In a similar vein, Smith claims that this final scene infers that "the subject... is not determined by the past".[45] Whilst this film might offer new possibilities for modern Spain, as argued by D'Lugo and Smith,

[42] D'Lugo (1991): *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[43] Kinder, Marsha (1987): «Pleasure and the new Spanish Mentality: a Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar», *Film Quarterly*, vol. 2, pp. 33-44: p. 40.

[44] D'Lugo (1991): *op. cit.*, p. 57.

[45] Smith (2000): *op. cit.*, p. 77.

these must be looked for beyond the narrative of the protagonist couple. In this instance, the lovers are so consumed with each other that their passion can only lead to their respective deaths; they consume each other, leaving no trace. Yet—as we saw in *Hable con ella*—spectatorship evokes community, offering possibilities for self-understanding and realisation. Accordingly, the deaths in these films engender community through the shared cognisance of death.

4. CONCLUSION

If Almodóvar's films are generally discussed in terms of his focus on individual identity markers—in particular sexuality and gender—in this article we have shed light on two other key themes: death and community. In particular, this article has outlined various ways in which death casts its shadow across Almodóvar's films, not simply as a plot device, but as a fulcrum upon which community organises and reorganises itself. From the nexus between death, narrative, spectatorship and recognition established in *Hable con ella*, we turned to the motif of the death of the patriarch in *Volver*, embodied by Paco. In *Todo sobre mi madre* Esteban's death opens up a space for the creation of community, although the spaces left by these two male characters are qualitatively different. Whereas Esteban's absence is itself the inarticulable loss that compels the formation of community, Paco's death in the later film connects back to the death of Raimunda's abusive father and the incommunicable loss that grounds the community is less clearly identifiable. Through a comparison with *Todo sobre mi madre*, we saw how both of these films offer feminine solidarity as the antidote to the pain caused by men. In *Matador*, the death of the protagonists—completing, as it does, a closed circuit of passion and individualistic desire—resisted a similar analysis. Yet when we considered what was left in the wake of María and Diego's death, the community of spectatorship again materialised.

I have argued that death in Almodóvar's films allows the constructive possibilities of community to more fully emerge. This approach proposes that community in Almodóvar's films, as in Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and Butler's *Undoing Gender*, is a space to which we bring those parts of our experience that are beyond expression, and hence beyond intellectual comprehension. Whilst these two philosophers come from highly distinct intellectual traditions, they both emphatically state that the individual exists with and alongside community. Community provides shelter for those aspects of life that reveal to us the limits of ourselves—both physical and emotional—which are most clearly reflected in the encounter with death. In a number of ways, Almodóvar's work confirms the important role that death plays in our understanding of life, our selves and, above all, our embeddedness in community. His varied work never settles on a single narrative of death, nor of that which remains after death. The theme of death picks up various concerns as it runs through Almodóvar's filmography: gender, the limits of communication, patriarchy, the individualism of lovers and Spain's post-dictatorship modernisation. Yet Almodóvar consistently returns to the image of death as a shared experience, its power reflected on the faces of the on-screen spectators. Whether beside themselves with

awe or wonderment at the spectacle of death, these characters echo our own experience as viewers, reaching out to the audience and including us in the community that death has revealed.

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