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The Shortcomings of Simulacra: Fragments of the Past in Pedro Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces*

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RESUMEN:

La obra de Pedro Almodóvar abarca una colección de temas y referencias a sus propias películas, al mismo tiempo que hace referencias a varios otros directores conocidos. *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) reproduce varias escenas de *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. No obstante, las referencias a ésta en *Los abrazos rotos* nos dejan con una sensación de desencanto. Las referencias crean una fragmentación del pasado y en última instancia no cumplen con su meta original. La relación entre estas dos películas demuestra las debilidades inherentes en la reconstrucción de filmes dentro de otros filmes, lo cual se conecta con la idea de Baudrillard que el cine está constantemente cometiendo plagio a la hora de rehacerse.

Palabras clave: Almodóvar, nostalgia, Baudrillard, flashback, *Los abrazos rotos*

ABSTRACT:

Pedro Almodóvar's oeuvre encompasses a collection of themes and references to his own back catalogue, all the while referencing many other well-known directors. *Broken Embraces* (2009) refers to and re-enacts scenes from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). Yet the references to the latter in *Broken Embraces* fail to enchant, instead creating a fragmentation of the past and ultimately shifting from a breakdown to being simply broken. The relationship between these films demonstrates the foibles inherent in reconstructing films within films, which relates to Baudrillard's recognition that cinema is constantly plagiarizing, recopying and remaking itself.

Keywords: Almodóvar, nostalgia, Baudrillard, flashback, *Los abrazos rotos*

Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar's oeuvre encompasses a web of interlaced themes and references to his own films and those of the many directors he admires. Well-versed spectators observe, and even delight in, these numerous connections that multiply with each highly anticipated release. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (Almodóvar, 2009). The latter overtly refers to and re-enacts scenes from Almodóvar's 1988 international commercial breakthrough and viewer favorite, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The film reappears under the auspices of a new title, *Chicas y maletas*, which becomes a film within the film. Additionally, a short film entitled *La consejala antropófaga/The Cannibalistic Councillor* included in the special feature section on the DVD clearly references *Mujeres*.

For Almodóvar, this technique is nothing new, for many of his latest films return to past work. Specifically, *Volver* (2006) revisits *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984) and *La mala educación* (2004) references *Ley de deseo* (1987). This nostalgia for his back catalog relates to the notion that "[...] cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent" (Baudrillard, 2006: 47). *Los abrazos rotos* reveals a fascination with *Mujeres* as a kind of lost, nostalgic object, harking back to one of his most successful films but also to a lost time: Almodóvar's younger days. *Mujeres* thus becomes the lost object within the remakes of *Chicas y maletas* and *La consejala antropófaga*. Nostalgia and flashbacks to the past therefore serve as an essential framework for the film *Los abrazos rotos*.

Ernesto Acevedo Muñoz has indicated that many of Almodóvar's recent works make "[...] the outrageous believable while reaching the point where art imitates, corrects and indeed improves on reality" (Acevedo Muñoz, 2008: 289). To be sure, there are some compelling allusions to Almodóvar's past work in *Chicas y maletas* and *La consejala antropófaga*. Unfortunately, the references to *Mujeres* in *Los abrazos rotos* mostly fail to enchant, instead creating an unsatisfactory simulacrum, a fragmentation of the past that ultimately shifts from a breakdown to being simply broken. I contend that this failure stems from a number of aspects, including a lack of plot complexity and even poorly executed technical aspects in the film within the film. Employing Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* and the work of some of the leading scholars

of Almodóvar's work (Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz, Marvin D'Lugo, Marsha Kinder, and Paul Julian Smith) will demonstrate how this occurs.

Los abrazos rotos narrates the story of a blind film director Harry Caine, played by Lluís Homar. This name is a pseudonym, as he was formerly known as Mateo Blanco. He chose to leave this name in the past as it was tied to the tragic accident that left him blind. We slowly learn the story of his former life, which includes a number of Almodovarean twists. In the present, Harry's agent Judit (Blanca Portillo) and her son Diego (Tamar Novas) serve as his main caretakers, but their relationship to him turns out to be more complicated than it seems. When Harry learns of the death of a wealthy man named Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez), he is thrust into his past, which he begins to recount to Diego. The film flashes back to the early 1990s when Ernesto was in his prime, making a fortune. Aware of his wealth and in need of money to finance her father's medical expenses, his secretary, Magdalena ("Lena"), played by Penélope Cruz, becomes his mistress. Ernesto is abusive towards her psychologically and physically, and Lena is trapped in the cycle of abuse until she meets Mateo Blanco.

Thanks to Mateo, Lena is able to realize her dream of being an actress when she is given a starring role in his film, *Chicas y maletas*. Mateo is Lena's savior of sorts, and they become romantically involved. In order to break up their union, Ernesto sends his eccentric son Ernesto, Jr. (Rubén Ochandiano) to spy on the couple and film their encounters under the pretense that he is creating a "making of" for Mateo's film. The senior Ernesto has a lip-reader (Lola Dueñas) interpret what they say, and realizes that Lena is in love with Mateo. As is typical of a jealous lover, Ernesto tries to manipulate Lena through other channels. While Mateo and Lena are away on vacation, Ernesto purposefully ruins *Chicas y maletas* and releases the film in an act of revenge. Shortly after that, Lena and Mateo are in a terrible car crash that leaves her dead and him blind. It is not until 2008 that Mateo (now Harry) begins to piece together the film and also recover his past. The process of recreation leads Harry, and also Almodóvar, to explore the past.

Chicas y maletas (and subsequently *La consejala antropófaga*), two layers of the Russian doll within *Los abrazos rotos*, exemplify the implications of the simulacra that occur in the 2009 film. Explaining the idea of simulacra, Baudrillard posits:

"it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (Baudrillard, 2006: 2). If *Mujeres* can be taken as "the real," then *Los abrazos rotos* is a reductive collection of signs of the real, a substitution that malfunctions in the end since it short-circuits the richness of the original film. With *Los abrazos rotos*, Almodóvar moves beyond imitation, duplication and parody to an ill-conceived potpourri of his previous work.

Thus, in continuing with the idea that *Mujeres* represents the real, "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (Baudrillard, 2006: 6). It is useful to think about the definition of nostalgia here in order to understand its full impact in the *Los abrazos rotos*. Svetlana Boym interprets it as follows: "nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym, 2001: xiii). The characters in most of Almodóvar's films evince feelings of nostalgia, especially in his melodramas that rely on songs such as Bola de Nieve's "Déjame recorder." His films are heavily tinged with memories and routinely make use of flashbacks to denote changes in time and returns to the past. It is relevant to note that, according to Susan Hayward, flashbacks (which occur repeatedly throughout *Los abrazos rotos*) often occur in film noir and psychological melodrama, and both of these genres "[...] start from a similar positioning in relation to the representation of the past. The past is seen as an object of nostalgia, therefore of desire or as an object of despair" (Hayward, 2006: 157). *Los abrazos rotos* adheres to this as it also combines aspects of film noir and psychological melodrama, specifically with the love triangles it develops around Penélope Cruz's character Lena. Her tragic love affairs and her subsequent death render her an object of nostalgia for her former lover Harry.

There is another, deeper layer of nostalgia present in the film. For Almodóvar, the 1988 film *Mujeres* becomes the object of nostalgia in *Los abrazos rotos*. Marvin D'Lugo asserts that nostalgia is a recurring theme in Almodóvar's work, stating that "*Bad Education* might be appropriately

described as the dramatization of the snare of nostalgia, a theme that Almodóvar has insinuated into nearly all of his films since *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990)" (D'Lugo, 2009: 366). It is compelling that D'Lugo uses the term "snare" to describe the role of nostalgia in *Bad Education*, because it seems that Almodóvar becomes trapped and even confined by the nostalgia of the past by weaving the storyline of *Chicas y maletas* into *Los abrazos rotos*. D'Lugo concludes that *Bad Education* exemplifies postnostalgia, a concept developed by Fredric Jameson that "[...] suggests a movement beyond readers' and spectators' sentimental ensnarement in memories" (D'Lugo, 2009: 357). Interestingly, if Almodóvar triumphs or moves beyond nostalgia in *Bad Education*, he relies heavily on it in *Los abrazos rotos*, which is part of the reason the film breaks down, and its fragmentation leaves the audience something to be desired.

As in *Bad Education*, *Los abrazos rotos* addresses the process of filmmaking in a number of ways. Paul Julian Smith points out that the film "turns around every filmmaker's nightmare: the disastrous premiere of a film that has been stolen from its creator and re-cut by the producer" (Smith, 2009: np). The fact that the diegesis in *Los abrazos rotos* centers on a film that was stolen from its creator and re-cut by the producer is a compelling subtext. Almodóvar effectively borrowed his own film, *Mujeres*, and re-cut it with a different name, *Chicas y maletas*. We are drawn into the craft of filmmaking as the director Harry Caine within *Los abrazos rotos* finally gets to piece the film back together, fourteen years after it was first filmed.

The connection between the story line within the film and the outside links to other films adds a provocative layer to the idea of authorship. If the director Harry Caine in *Los abrazos rotos* may be equated with Almodóvar, it is intriguing that his agent, Judit, reminds him how he promised would never make "remakes, secuelas, ni biopics." While *Los abrazos rotos* is not technically any of these things, it repeatedly invokes a resemblance to *Mujeres* through the remake of the latter in *Chicas y maletas*. This process of neofiguration, which Baudrillard defines as "an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: [the] *hyperreal*" demonstrates that *Los abrazos rotos* invokes a resemblance to *Mujeres* (Baudrillard, 2006: 45). Yet, this very resemblance also proves that *Mujeres* effectively disappears by reappearing, thus becoming hyperreal.

Almodóvar is unceasing in his invocations of resemblance.

The Spanish director often pays homage to the art of filmmaking, both by including many references from other films and directors but also to his own creative process. This may be referred to as a "self-reflexive focus on film-making" (Acevedo Muñoz, 2008: 100). This self-reflexive focus within his films is something that Almodóvar returns to time and again. Many examples serve to illustrate this element of his films. Pepa and Iván dub films in *Mujeres* and organ donor films are created in *All About My Mother*. A visiting film crew saves the day in *Volver* by providing Penélope Cruz's character with a group of hungry mouths to feed, and a young filmmaker becomes part of the story in *Bad Education* with his Super-8 camera (arguably a reference to the director himself).

Almodóvar's work is also often self-referential. He remakes his own films and returns to his muses like Carmen Maura, Rossy de Palma, Marisa Paredes, Penélope Cruz, Chus Lampreave and Antonio Banderas, each time in different costumes, but always familiar. Marsha Kinder appropriately notes that every time a new Almodóvar film appears, viewers must undergo a "rereading [of] his entire body of work through each new remix" a process that she calls "retro-seriality" (Kinder, 2009: 33). Indeed, one has to view his films multiple times since the references build upon one another with each new release. This re-reading and re-viewing enriches the understanding and depth of each film. For example, the story line of the film *Volver*, released in 2006, is casually mentioned as a possible theme for a novel in *The Flower of my Secret*, which was released in 1995. Almodóvar's returns give us a window into the progression of the thought process he undertakes in making films.

The Manchegan director is also known for his many references to other film genres and filmmakers. As Ernesto Acevedo Muñoz has noted, "the *mélange* of genre conventions [...] and the pastiche quality of Almodóvar's aesthetics, *mise en scène* and narratives help to define the director's sense of narrative structure and visual style" (Acevedo Muñoz, 2008: 1). *Los abrazos rotos* is no exception as it oscillates between film noir, thriller and melodrama, along with multiple allusions to other filmmakers.

In most of his films, it is obvious that he is constantly borrowing visual and verbal

quotations from other films, whether by other directors or his own, thus creating a great web of references to be deciphered by avid Almodóvar devotees. The Spanish director cites Alfred Hitchcock's work repeatedly in his films. Acevedo-Muñoz has completed a detailed study of the multiple references to Hitchcock in Almodóvar's films, and these are related to intertextuality in *Los abrazos rotos*. He notes: "From *Blackmail* (1929) to *The Lady Vanishes*, from *Notorious* (1946) to *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Birds* and *Marnie* (1964), what Hitchcock does to women is often taken as exemplary of the classical cinema's fixation with controlling, repressing and occasionally even destroying troubled women" (Acevedo Muñoz, 2008: 99). In *Los abrazos rotos*, Lena exemplifies this fixation as she is trapped in an abusive, controlling relationship with a man she does not love, Ernesto Martel. Ernesto is emotionally and physically violent towards Lena and will stop at nothing to manipulate her. Like many of Hitchcock's female roles, after being beaten and psychologically worn down, in the long run, Lena is destroyed in a car accident.

This control and repression is directly played out in a compelling twist when Almodóvar refers to Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) in chapter 15 of *Los abrazos rotos*. In the 1954 film, professional photographer L. B. "Jeff" Jeffries (James Stewart), the wheelchair-bound voyeur, peers into the windows of his neighbors and sometimes records their suspicious actions. In *Los abrazos rotos*, Jeff is replaced with Ernesto Jr., whose possessive father hired him to film evidence of Lena and Mateo's affair. As in Hitchcock's film, the act of filming is also clearly referred to as we see Ernesto Jr. wielding his heavy camera as he waits on the street to film the silhouettes of Lena and Mateo. Interestingly, this Hitchcock film is also cited in *Mujeres*, but in a much more complex and elaborate manner. In chapter five of the film, as Pepa (Carmen Maura) waits on a park bench, she sees a woman dancing in her underwear in the window, which is a reference to Jeff's scantily clad neighbor who he observes dancing in *Rear Window* and subsequently nicknames "Miss Torso." In the next window, Pepa sees a young man who is upset and seems lonely. She appears to empathize with him as she nods, looking concerned. Almodóvar thus replaces Hitchcock's lonely woman (whom Jeff refers to as "Miss Lonelyheart") with a lonely man. Therefore, Pepa's position reflects a reversal of the gaze in Hitchcock's film, for she is initially a woman looking at another woman, and then she observes a lonely man instead of a woman. Pepa is

not the only voyeur present that evening. Marisa (Rosy de Palma) sits in a car and views her boyfriend Carlos (Antonio Banderas) and his mother Lucía (Julieta Serrano) arguing in the apartment above, reminiscent of the different couples that Jeff observes in *Rear Window*. Pepa later runs into Marisa and Carlos after a suitcase falls on top of the phone booth where she is trying to make a phone call and discovers a photograph of her lover Iván (Fernando Guillén), who turns out to be Carlos's father. It is from this photograph that Pepa realizes Iván has a son. The revelations gathered from these scenes are profound and relate to the relationships of the characters in the film. In contrast, in *Los abrazos rotos*, the use of the Hitchcock film does not serve to demonstrate coincidences, but simply to show further evidence of Lena and Mateo's affair.

The latter examples indicate that *Los abrazos rotos* is constructed in part by rebuilding portions of *Mujeres*, and this lends to the more recent film's fragility. The piecing together of the segments from the 1988 film serve to create instability, an element that is part and parcel of all Almodóvar films. It is important to remember that, "in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, his most popular film of the 1980s and the definitive breakthrough into the international market, and later in *All About My Mother*, intertextuality itself signifies the process of building and rebuilding, inventing and reinventing an identity that is occasionally defined by its own instability" (Acevedo Muñoz, 2008: 6-7). The rebuilding of *Rear Window* in the two films as well as the way in which *Los abrazos rotos* references *Mujeres* exemplify the numerous levels of intertextuality present in Almodóvar's films. This is related to the fact that the process of revisiting past catalogues is not unique to the Spanish auteur. As Baudrillard has noted, "cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths [...]" (Baudrillard, 2006: 47). *Los abrazos rotos* touches upon all of these themes by plagiarizing, copying, remaking and retroactivating a classic, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The relationship between these films demonstrates both the allure and the foibles inherent in the act of self-plagiarizing. Similarly, in his discussion of the film *Bad Education*, Marvin D'Lugo declares: "The things one thought buried in the past return, or are made to return, but in different, even deceptive forms" (D'Lugo, 2009: 357). Yet for Almodóvar, the past is never really buried. It always returns or is made to return, taking on

slightly different forms that can often be deceptive, especially in the case of *Los abrazos rotos*.

It should be pointed out that these returns to the past are not always completely detrimental. In fact, some of the appealing aspects of the director's 17th feature are these very references to the past. Paul Julian Smith notes "the truth is that although there is ammunition for Pedro's detractors in *Broken Embraces*, there remains much more for his faithful fans to enjoy and to recognize from previous films" (Smith, 2009: np). There is a sense in which Almodóvar makes films in part for his fan club, for in order to understand all the references one has to have seen all the films, to be an *enterado* of sorts. There are a number of re-copied, remade and retro activated objects, motifs, scenes and characters from *Mujeres* that appear in *Los abrazos rotos* for fans to recognize. The red telephone, the suitcase, the burnt bed and the gazpacho all reappear, yet even these items do not have as much bravado in the newer film.

In *Chicas y maletas*, Iván's suitcase, the red telephone and the burnt bed are all shown in one quick tilted insert shot. This shot shows close-ups of these details and also recalls the narrative of *Mujeres* where Iván's departure drove Pepa to yank the telephone cord out and torch her bed. However, in *Chicas y maletas*, the bed is already burned. When asked about what happened to it, Pina flatly remarks in chapter 27 "se cayó una cerilla y salió ardiendo y no quise apagarlo. El fuego purifica." As viewers, we do not see the bed being burned, which is a much more intense experience for the spectators than simply viewing a charred bed. Gone is the ardor of Pepa's frantic move to burn her conjugal bed in *Mujeres*, which evokes Robert Rauschenberg's abject 1955 piece *Bed*. Indeed, Pepa makes her own bed into a work of modern art.

Gazpacho is appropriately featured in *Chicas*, but even Penélope Cruz's interpretation of Carmen Maura's gazpacho scenes is watered-down. In *Chicas*, Pina is mournful as she cuts the tomatoes for the gazpacho, and a single tear falls elegantly on one of the tomatoes, while Pepa has a fiery look in her eyes as she furiously spikes the gazpacho with sleeping pills as a lure for Iván. The gazpacho in *Mujeres* also serves another purpose: to put the police and Marisa to sleep, therefore enabling other aspects of the plot to unfold. Simply put, while Penélope Cruz certainly merits attention for her performances

in Almodóvar's films, his replacements of Cruz with Maura's characters are not successful.

Despite their ultimate inadequacy, the recognizable elements from the past within *Los abrazos rotos* are deliberate. Marsha Kinder notes that *Los abrazos rotos* evokes a sense of familiarity and draws parallels between the film and Fellini's *8 1/2*, suggesting that it is Almodóvar's "celebration of cinema" that leads him to be self-referential (Kinder, 2010: 34). Admittedly, some of the references to *Mujeres* in *Los abrazos rotos* are very entertaining, such as cameos in *Chicas y maletas* by time-honored favorites like Chus Lampreave and Rossy de Palma. Instead of being a plain, dowdy Jehovah's Witness who is wary of Pepa and finds the shoe Candela lost when she attempted suicide, Chus is now a well-suited, drill-sergeant like woman. Rather than finding a shoe, she produces two small plastic replicas, one of the Eiffel Tower and the other of a Robert Indiana LOVE sculpture. She also casually says to herself when examining these objects: "Usted dice 'love,' yo digo 'sexo.'" This line is one of the few that actually captures something of the humor of Almodóvar's back catalogue, and it is delivered with Lampreave's characteristic delightfully dry, unassuming wit. This nod to Lampreave is actually more entertaining than her frumpy character in *Mujeres*, but she is a fundamentally changed character in the newer film. Characters like those played by Chus Lampreave are not the only thing that is altered in *Los abrazos rotos*. Almodóvar meshes characters from *Mujeres* into distinctive people, combining older elements with newer ones to create a kind of pastiche of personas.

For instance, there are a number of dizzying name changes and even character confluences in *Chicas*. Actress Rossy de Palma makes a cameo appearance in *Chicas*, but instead of being Marisa, she is a blend of two characters from *Mujeres*, Lucía and Paulina. In *Chicas*, she pushes Pina down the stairs, thus recreating the actions of Iván's insane ex-wife, Lucía. Yet, her demeanor and her costume, a structured plaid jacket, make a more specific reference to Paulina Morales (Kiti Manver), the feminist lawyer and Iván's third lover in *Mujeres* who dons a similar jacket in the 1988 film.

While these two references are amusing for Almodóvar fans, each time scenes that represent obvious references to *Mujeres* appear, they are diluted. Lucía's character is much more demented in *Mujeres*. She

is not on the verge but completely over the edge, and goes much further with her insanity than her character equivalent in *Chicas* by going to the airport and attempting to shoot Iván. In *Mujeres*, ironically, it is Pepa that ends up saving Iván from his crazed ex-wife. A complete role reversal occurs between the original and the remake because in *Chicas*, Pina is completely passive, and is instead the victim of Lucía, who pushes her down the stairs. In *Mujeres*, Pepa pushes a cart towards Lucía, thus putting her out of commission and taking on an active role.

In *Chicas*, most of the characters are rather apathetic and devoid of the passionate emotion of *Mujeres*. When the young couple arrives at Pina's apartment we do not see their faces, but only Pina's face, and their entry occurs without incident—they are simply let in the door. In contrast, in *Mujeres*, this scene is highly charged. Even before the door is opened, the mirroring effects made with the peephole are stunning, and Candela's (María Barranco) agitation is palpable, for she realizes she is trapped. In *Mujeres*, the arrival of the couple marks the beginning of a whole series of intense, comical and dramatic scenes. This is not evident at all in *Chicas*. Since these dramatic elements are removed, if one was watching *Los abrazos rotos* for the first time, this reference to *Mujeres* would probably be completely lost as it is completely insignificant in *Chicas*. For those who have seen *Mujeres*, it is actually much more entertaining to see the Rossy de Palma look-a-like, complete with a Picasso nose, in the take that was only added in the deleted scenes of *Chicas*.

Mujeres is replete with tension, excitement and odd coincidences on many levels. While some of these are referred to in *Chicas*, they are not nearly as well executed. In *Mujeres*, Carlos (played by a youthful Antonio Banderas), only figures out that his father, Iván is involved with Pepa because there is a photograph of the couple together in Pepa's penthouse. He notices the photograph during their chance meeting when he and his girlfriend stumble upon Pepa's apartment during their search for a new home. However, in an outtake from *Broken Embraces* (featured on the DVD), Iván's son simply states his name, Antonio, at the door, obviously referring to Antonio Banderas. There is nothing interesting about the revelation of his identity in this scene; it is simply a nod to Banderas.

Mujeres is a hilarious composition of random occurrences. It just so happens that Carlos

and Marisa come to Pepa's apartment, sent by a realtor, not knowing that Pepa is Iván's ex-lover and Carlos's would-be stepmother. All the characters in *Mujeres* keep seeing one another and form a web of random yet also intimate associations. For example, one always remembers the endearing "Mambo Taxi" and audiences experience visceral tension in seeing how frequently characters just miss each other. These surprises and coincidences are not prominently featured in *Chicas*, which is a fundamental aspect of *Mujeres*. As Despina Kakoudaki remarks:

In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* [...] with the characters constantly moving and the camera remaining stable in order to deliver the visual punch line of their missed meetings, other objects emerge to propel and motivate the narrative: Carlos's and Iván's suitcases, both thrown away at random only to hit their proverbial marks and bring the characters together, and the beloved "Mambo Taxi" that appears designed according to a logic of repetition and visual pleasure. (Kakoudaki, 2009: 199).

As Kakoudaki points out, the objects are steeped in meaning because of their repeated appearances in the quirkiest situations. The coincidences that are orchestrated in *Mujeres* contribute to the creation of a rich, intricate chain of events that is completely absent from *Chicas*.

Moreover, *Mujeres* is a more technically complex film. This is observed in a number of instances. Both *Mujeres* and *Los abrazos rotos* make use of similar elements. Asynchronous sound is used when Pepa is dubbing a film and hears the voice of Iván, and she repeatedly hears his voice in telephone messages. The appearances of Iván's voice contribute to Pepa's odyssey to actually connect with him in person. The asynchronous sound of Iván's voice makes quite an impact as he is hardly seen on screen at all, but he is the object of Pepa's hot pursuit throughout the film. In *Los abrazos rotos*, asynchronous sound is utilized less effectively. The jilted lover, Ernesto Martel, listens to the dead-pan dubbing that is repeated back to him by the lip reader (played by Lola Dueñas) he has hired to help him spy on his wife, who is cheating on him with film director Mateo. Employing asynchronous sound calls attention to itself so that "[...] the spectator is made aware that she or he is watching a film (so the illusion of identification is temporarily removed or deconstructed)"

and it also "[...] serves to disrupt time and space and thereby narrative continuity" (Hayward, 2006: 30). In both films, asynchronous sound creates a sense of dislocation and instability for spectators and for the characters in the films, all of whom suffer from the words that are revealed to them in a cold, expressionless manner.

In addition, the two-shots in *Mujeres* are generally more elaborate. When Pepa and Candela finally talk in *Mujeres*, the scene is very intimate. The two women are shot talking face to face in a medium shot shallow focus, and both Pepa and Candela are in sharp focus while Marisa and Carlos are blurred in the background. Placing the two spectators in the background intensifies Pepa and Candela's conversation. The use of shallow focus has the result of creating two levels of the plot and there is tension between the young lovers, since Carlos has just blown Marisa off when she asks him if he loves her. In *Chicas*, the interaction between the characters is much less complex, on a technical and emotional level. In the parallel shot in *Chicas*, nothing in the background setting reveals another level of action.

Furthermore, the conversation between Pepa and Candela intrigues Marisa and it is obvious she does not want to leave. The reaction shot of her hesitancy is memorable and emotive. Marisa is a virgin and overhears Pepa consoling Candela by saying that sex is very important at her age. While in *Mujeres*, Marisa then dreams up her sexual adventures after drinking the spiked gazpacho, in *La Concejala* it is Chun who tells Marisol of her own sexual experiences and fantasies, which is actually rather entertaining. Marisa's whole process, however, is a bit lost in *Chicas*, for there is not as much mystery in *La Concejala*. Chun's character is not nearly as edgy as Candela.

Even the colors that the two women wear in the respective films show their differences. Throughout *Mujeres*, Pepa and Candela wear 1980s striking shades of blue and red, both bold, primary colors. In *Chicas*, Pina and Chun wear brown and orange, much more nondescript colors that reflect their corresponding neutral personalities. The two female characters are rather polarizing in *Mujeres* as we see that the very nervous malagueña, Candela, is desperate to have someone listen to her. So desperate, in fact, that she tries to commit suicide and must be dramatically rescued. In *Chicas*, we see Chun, who seems exceedingly calm after discovering a suitcase full of 15

kilos of cocaine in her apartment, left not by Shi'ite terrorists but by a drug dealer with whom she has recently slept. She is content with the arrival of the cocaine, calling it "buenísima" and while she wants to rid herself of it, she also points out that she can distribute it among her colleagues: "entre los compañeros del partido y en el ayuntamiento podría repartir hasta dos kilos." Chun is politically conservative and a member of the P-A-P party, which is an obvious stab at the PP (Partido Popular) and a reflection of how Almodóvar has become increasingly outspoken politically. Despite her political beliefs, she is sexually liberal (sex is a "social interest" for her), and at one point she notes "yo creo que Franco era un buen gobernante, pero referente al sexo, no se enteraba". Her remarks are certainly amusing.

Interestingly, instead of representing Candela or even Pepa's counterpart, in many ways Chun most closely resembles Patty Diphusa, Pedro Almodóvar's alter ego whose stories are published in the text *Patty Diphusa* (1991) and partly represented by Fabio/Fanny McNamara in *Laberinto de pasiones*. Chun's entertaining role is very much in the spirit of his first two feature films, but was not included in the original film but rather as a special feature, perhaps because it might be considered altogether too scandalous for some. However, the film *La concejala antropófaga* is much more successful than the scenes from *Chicas y maletas* in capturing at least the humor of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*.

Yet, in the end, *Mujeres* is out of reach in *Chicas y maletas*. Indeed, as Marsha Kinder comments: "[...] in Almodóvar's personal myth, this strategic repetition threatens to draw his entire filmography into a spiraling *mise en abîme*, generating new versions while keeping the point of origin out of reach" (Kinder, 2009: 268). Here, the point of origin is not only *Mujeres*, but also the success that this film generated, and even a lost era. In *Chicas y maletas*, *Mujeres* is the point of origin that is just out of reach. What of Almodóvar's desire to constantly return to the past? Paul Julian Smith surmises that *Los abrazos rotos* "reveals Almodóvar's nostalgia for his own back catalogue" (Smith, 2009: np). Could it be that he is a product of the nostalgia surrounding the 1980s and the now famous *Movida madrileña*, the countercultural moment that he helped to engineer? Many other creative individuals from this period speak of this moment as a kind of golden age that will never occur again. It has now achieved a mythical

status and is ever more lost in the spirals of its own recreation, much like some of Almodóvar's recent films.

The meaning and effects of the dependence on nostalgia is addressed in a number of ways towards the end of *Los abrazos rotos*. At the close of the film, it seems that the past is lost on the film director and protagonist, Harry Caine. His final words and actions in *Los abrazos rotos* are especially telling. When he is finally able to reconstruct *Chicas y maletas*, only because Judit held onto the film, his final statement about the film is: "Lo importante es terminarla. Las películas hay que terminirlas, aunque sea a ciegas." One cannot help but wonder if these are the sentiments of Almodóvar at times.

Even when Diego tries to put the torn fragments of the photographs that were long relegated to a plastic bag in a locked desk back together, he cannot. The past eludes him and can never be neatly assembled again. When Harry obtains the footage of the accident that left him blind and Lena dead, he says to Diego, "Pónmelo cuadro a cuadro, para que dure más." This request is the culmination of Harry's nostalgia for his lost past. Harry clearly exhibits a sense of loss, in addition to a romance with his fantasy of his brief love affair with Lena. Even though he is unable to see the images projected on the screen, Harry strokes the screen in an effort to somehow touch Lena. One cannot help but wonder if Almodóvar is blindly reaching for something he can no longer see or touch, like when Harry feebly asked to touch and somehow grasp the forever silent image of his lover, Lena.

The question then becomes: is Almodóvar lost? Or, as Paul Julian Smith quietly begs the question "Whisper it softly: after three decades of feverish creativity has Almodóvar finally run out of new ideas?" (Smith, 2009: np). Is he aware that, as in an Andy Warhol print (like the ones made of Penélope Cruz's character's face for the release of the film), something is lost in all the repetition? In retrospect, perhaps at the point at which he developed the 2009 film, he was a bit starved for ideas. His latest film *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (2011) demonstrates his recycling of old themes but also takes things to extremes previously unseen in Almodóvar's work. However, in *Los abrazos rotos*, the adaptation of the 1988 hit into *Chicas y maletas* eventually becomes not only a lost object, but also shows either that the director is at a loss or that *Mujeres* is somehow forever lost. In the end, it becomes clear that *Los abrazos*

rotos speaks to the fact that, as Baudrillard reminds us; "today cinema can place all its talent, all its technology in the service of reanimating what it itself contributed to liquidating. It only resurrects ghosts, and it itself is lost therein" (Baudrillard, 2006: 48). It seems that Almodóvar tries to resuscitate *Mujeres*, but in so doing, only liquidates it: he breaks it down, but it ends up being broken, and seems impossible to fix.

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