

Spectatorship, Trauma, and Performance in Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*

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Abstract: This article examines the interplay of the concepts of trauma, spectatorship, and performance in the film *Hable con ella / Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002). By exploring the relationship among these concepts, I argue that the film challenges the role of the film spectator as well as the assumed roles of victims and narrators in a traumatic event. Moreover, through the juxtaposition of spoken and cinematographic language with performative art, *Talk to Her* questions the traditional perception of gender as well as notions of memory, reality, and fantasy.

Keywords: Almodóvar – Performance – Spectatorship – Trauma – *Talk to Her*

Introduction



Once considered *l'enfant terrible* of Spanish cinema in the 1980s (with a particular love–hate relationship with both critics and audiences), Pedro Almodóvar is now recognized as one of the most important symbols of the post-Francoist culture in Spain, the so-called *Movida*.¹ He is also one of the few filmmakers that survived the crisis of the Spanish cinema industry during that decade and the beginning of the 1990s (a perpetual economic crisis that still continues) with prolific independent cinematic production (Rolph). *Hable con ella / Talk to Her* (2002) is considered one of his most personal and innovative films, confirming his status as a highly acclaimed contemporary director² while also exposing him to criticism for his portrayal of rape within the story.³ In a conversation with Frédéric Strauss, the

¹ The term *Movida* denotes a countercultural movement during the Spanish transition. This movement took place mainly in the early 1980s. As Luis García-Torvisco highlights, there was a process of idealized reconstruction and glorification of the *Movida* during the late 1990s that helped to establish its *official* canon of artists. That process ensured Almodóvar's central role in the historiography of the movement.

² Among other distinctions, the film won more than 40 international awards, including one Oscar, one Golden Globe, and two BAFTA awards.

³ For a detailed comparative analysis of the nuances of the representations of rape in Almodóvar's films, see Poe (27–45) and Lev (203–224).

Spanish director underlined some key aspects of his films at that time – *Talk to Her* (2002) and *Bad Education* (2004) – by pointing out that, in contrast to his previous work, both titles shifted the attention towards the male characters rather than the female characters. However, despite the two main female characters not speaking or moving throughout most of *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar also pointed out the importance of the reactions they provoke in other characters, and the challenges of innovating within his own style of storytelling.⁴

Talk to Her tells the story of two “couples”: Benigno Martín (a nurse) and Alicia Roncero (an amateur ballet dancer); and Marco Zuloaga (a journalist who writes travel guides) and Lydia González (a bullfighter).⁵ After suffering life-threatening accidents, both Alicia and Lydia slip into comas. We find the two characters in a private clinic, “El bosque,” where they receive treatment during their comas. The two male characters, Marco and Benigno, officially meet in the hospital while tending to Alicia and Lydia. They had previously sat next to each other while attending a ballet representation called *Café Müller*. During the four years of Alicia’s coma, Benigno is the nurse that takes care of her, continuing to talk to Alicia as if she were conscious and participating in a two-way conversation. At a pivotal point in the film, Benigno, who falls in love with Alicia, rapes her while she is in her coma, a secret he keeps to himself for several months. The rape is discovered in the hospital when the unconscious Alicia becomes pregnant. As a result, Benigno is accused of sexual abuse and is sent to jail, while Alicia awakens from her coma. Meanwhile, Lydia dies in the clinic. In the end, Benigno commits suicide in jail, and Marco and Alicia meet in the audience of a ballet called *Masurca Fogo*.

While Almodóvar has been praised for his deep appreciation of the feminine in his films, it is no surprise that critics understood *Talk to Her* as a concession to a male-dominant gaze. Thus, critics such as Arlette Perrin point out that *Talk to Her* reinforces male-dominant archetypes presenting the male as the donor of life. In a similar sense, Judith A. Yanof states that Almodóvar’s film is founded on rigid binary gender stereotypes. However, other film scholars such as Paul Julian Smith (*Desire Unlimited*), Carla Marcantonio, and Emily Hughes argue that *Talk to Her* continues, rather than breaks, with Almodóvar’s cinematic exploration of sexuality. I argue that, while there are conflicting readings of *Talk to Her*, a close examination of the film through the lens of trauma studies and its relationship with spectatorship and performance can provide us with a better understanding of the film’s complexities. Exploring sexuality using men as the apparent main voice represents a shift in Almodóvar’s filmography, and the narrative structure and the way in which bodies are portrayed suggest a different

⁴ For more information, see Strauss (211–230).

⁵ I use the word “couple” in a broad sense. Marco and Lydia establish a relationship, but there is neither a love affair nor an actual emotional association between Alicia and Benigno. Benigno sees Alicia through his window, dancing at a ballet studio, and projects his fantasies onto her. While she is in a coma at the clinic, he creates a world around her. Later on, when confronted by Marco, he claims that they are indeed a couple.

approach to understanding spectatorship in *Talk to Her*. As a result, despite the fact that Alicia barely speaks during the film, what the spectator sees in *Talk to Her* could be interpreted as an actual representation of Alicia's mental process during her coma, including a number of reiterative images and a distortion of space and time.

From this point of departure, this article examines the interplay of the concepts of trauma, spectatorship, and performance in *Talk to Her*. I analyze the bond established between the voice and the body using the Freudian concepts of displacement, condensation, and repetition as a way to describe the dream-thought process. With a close look at the dream-thought process, I propose that this film challenges the standard model for understanding spectatorship by questioning the division between reality and fantasy, through its use of complex interactions between spoken and cinematographic language and performative art. In doing so, the film calls into question the perception of traditional gender categories, as well as the strategies through which a traumatic memory is processed and represented.

Spectatorship, Trauma, Performance

Spectatorship, trauma, and performance are intrinsically related if we consider that, as stated by trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, trauma is often unveiled by means of a reenacting/narration of a disruptive experience that needs a spectator/listener for its validation. The act of reenacting/narration (related to the Freudian concept of talking cure) is a performative process in which the traumatized person transforms herself or himself in order to let her/his inner voice speak. In this reenacting process, as well as in cinema, the position of the spectator/listener of a traumatic narrative is crucial.

The concept of spectatorship has been a key critical lens for film studies over the last several decades.⁶ Spectatorship can be broadly defined as the way in which audiences decode films and what determines these individual and collective reactions. As Michele Aaron notes, spectatorship “represents a site of conflict between methodologies: the battle between, say, the unconscious processes of psychoanalysis, or the social processes of cultural studies” (1). It is within this tension between psychoanalysis and cultural studies that Aaron locates the two main concepts in the study of spectatorship: the “viewer” and the “spectator.” The term “viewer” comes from a tradition of cultural studies, focusing mostly on the “socio-historical context,” while the “spectator” is related to the intrinsic processes that occur when someone decodes a text. Both perspectives could be reconciled since the psychological processes related to the above-mentioned changes, transformations or reactions to a text are also motivated by the impositions of the social sphere.

⁶ André Bazin, Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, David Bordwell, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Mayne are a selection of the most prominent scholars and critics who have addressed the subject of spectatorship from diverse perspectives.

It is Almodóvar's work with spectatorship, exploring the boundaries of the cinematic experience first in Spain and then globally, that has won him acclaim. While approaching spectatorship in Almodóvar's movies, critics have pointed out aspects such as the importance of film intertextualities (Acevedo-Muñoz) as well as the significance of self-reflexive cinematic mechanisms as one of the main narrative procedures in his works. In the latter sense, Alejandro Yarza writes about the way Almodóvar uses film technique to counterbalance a unified and submissive type of spectator produced by all the codes and procedures designed to create a relationship between the audience and the film – labeled by film theorists as the concept of suture: “as opposed to the (homo)genicity of the subject positions offered by mainstream cinema, Almodóvar's cinema attempts to open up a multiplicity of subject positions and, therefore, negate the subordination of this subject to the naturalized discourse of the camera” (my trans. 32). This interplay is essential to understanding the plethora of heterogeneous responses to Almodóvarian films. In particular, in *Talk to Her*, the spectator is consistently challenged as her/his position is manipulated by the way in which information is conveyed and by the intertwining of different levels of narration. At the first level, the story seems to be told by Benigno. However, revealing him to be a rapist unveiled another finding: he might not be the actual narrator of the film. This strategy of disorienting the spectator needs to be understood within the context of Almodóvar's work.

Rather than seeking a standard spectator, Almodóvar has systematically used strategies and elements that confront the classical model of spectatorship that emerged in the 1970s, while also challenging the responses to the standards of gendered spectatorship. In her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” written in 1973 and originally published in 1975 in *Screen*, Laura Mulvey argues that the cinematic gaze was historically constructed as a male gaze, establishing gender and the question of difference and otherness as the key point in the subsequent debates about spectatorship:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

Both the analyses of cinematic gaze and Mulvey's ideas have been revised in recent decades. She later recognized that her initial argument was somewhat simplified. However, even movies that do not follow that pattern still refer to subverting it.⁷ In this

⁷ In Mulvey's own words, her argument “provided the basic grounds from which I could imagine a new cinema, which would be built negatively and in opposition to the codes and conventions of Hollywood” (“Afterword” 258).

regard, Almodóvar interrupts the male gaze by systematically introducing gender-fluid characters and “recycling” a wide range of materials and references through a cinematic collage that forces the spectator into a constant reinterpretation of any given assumption in which the gendered relationship of the spectator to film is thereby reconfigured. The heterogeneous mix of elements used in his films, as well as a combination of so-called pop culture with tragedy and comedy, gave birth to a new genre entitled “Almodrama.”⁸ In turn, this new genre would demand the establishment of a new type of relationship with the spectator. In *Talk to Her*, the relationship between spectator and film is pushed to another limit because of the complexity of the characters and the way a traumatic event such as rape is represented.

While spectatorship has been defined along gender lines, trauma is often described as a violent event that provokes a strong physical and emotional response able to affect both an individual and a community. This response is also gendered. It is shaped by societies creating different expectations of how to react and process any given situation. Trauma is a crucial element in Almodóvar's movies, in which mostly female and transsexual characters face physically and emotionally traumatic events. Marsha Kinder coined the term “brain-dead trilogy” to refer to three movies: *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999), and *Talk to Her* (2002), underlining a specific set of similarities: “I am arguing that the ‘brain-dead’ trope demands an active mode of spectatorship that makes us highly attentive to the fascinating interplay between the expressive powers of words and bodies” (11). Along with his film *Live Flesh* (1997), these three films represent a shift in Almodóvar's work, usually cited by critics as beginning in the mid-1990s.⁹

The traumatic event exposed in *Talk to Her* – a rape – is an element that appears in virtually every film in his career, including movies such as *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) and *Matador* (1986). As Leora Lev states: “Nearly all of Pedro Almodóvar's films deal with rape either as a principal action propelling the plot or an insistent trope” (205). While some of Almodóvar's films show rape explicitly – such as *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), and especially *Kika* (1993), in which the rape scene lasts almost thirty minutes – in *Talk to Her* it is implied and concealed. This choice also engages with one of the main questions in trauma studies: What form of representation should be used to talk about a traumatic event? This question is related to the debate regarding the adequacy of literal versus figurative language in trauma narratives, which subsequently raises crucial questions about the objectivity and distance needed to depict a traumatic event as accurately as possible.

The controversy about the adequacy of the form as well the debates about distance, witnessing, and recognition are linked to the concepts of spectatorship and

⁸ The term “Almodrama” was coined by Cuban writer and film critic Guillermo Cabrera Infante.

⁹ Paul Julian Smith uses the term “blue” period to contrast these Almodóvar films (somehow more mature and formally complex) to the so-called “rose” period of the 1980s (*Contemporary Spanish Culture*, 150–152).

trauma with the theorizations of performance studies which, by definition, is a discipline that forces the audience to rethink their role in a given social or artistic intervention. Following Richard Schechner's characterization of performance as "the *is* and the *as*," as pretending and constructing, performance studies have mostly focused on two streams: analysis of events and practices recognized as performance, and analysis of events and practices studied as if they were a performance (Trezise and Wake 13-14). Among other usages, performativity has been a central concept in gender theory, especially following Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* originally published in 1990. Butler characterizes gender as socially constructed, underlining the effect of reiterated acting in the process of shaping gender performativity.

Both of these conceptual dimensions of the term 'performance' are key to understanding Almodóvar's filmography. In many of his films, he has included musical interludes, such as the famous one of the prison in *High Heels* (1991), and also questioned the limits of performance and gender. In particular, in *Talk to Her*, performance and questions of performative acts are present in the variety of forms of representation: theater, ballet, bullfighting, movies, photography, and writing, among others.

Those performances are embedded into the structure of the film. Thus, there are two ballet pieces that frame the film: *Café Müller* and *Masurca Fogo*. They have different functions, with *Café Müller* foreshadowing the plot, while *Masurca Fogo* summarizes what the spectator has seen.¹⁰ Also, the made-up silent film, *The Shrinking Lover*, which mirrors the story of Benigno and Alicia, is crucial since its narration as a parallel editing conceals Alicia's rape scene in the clinic.¹¹ At the same time, gender roles are put into question by means of a collage of elements intertwined with different types of performance. Thus, the first bullfighting scene includes slow-motion images of Lydia and is accompanied by a song interpreted by Brazilian singer Elis Regina. Establishing a parallel with Alicia, who was a dancer before her accident, the scene resembles a ballet. Lydia is a female character working in the male-dominated environment of bullfighting, and Benigno is a man working in the traditionally female-dominated field of nursing. The complex layers in which performance, trauma, and spectatorship are intertwined in this film affect the structure in which the story is conveyed, distorting space and time, and making the spectator question what he or she really knows.

Distorting space and time

The dichotomy of knowing versus not knowing is, therefore, crucial to understanding *Talk to Her*. Throughout the film, Almodóvar plays with this knowing /

¹⁰ Many critics have analyzed the relevance of the ballet piece *Café Müller* in which Benigno and Marco met for the first time. See Gutiérrez Albilla, among others.

¹¹ *The Shrinking Lover* is a silent black-and-white film made up by Almodóvar to be part of *Talk to Her*. It echoes the film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957).

not knowing dichotomy by distorting the relationship between time and space, as well as by concealing select information mostly by means of ellipsis. The concealed information results throughout the film in several plot lines continuing behind the scenes that surface only after the traumatic events have already happened.

The position of the spectator usually shifts in the process of putting together all the pieces of the puzzle in this film. Thus, it is no surprise that flashbacks are commonly present in trauma narratives, and they are the main narrative procedure in *Talk to Her*. Disruption of time makes flashbacks a frequent mechanism when revisiting the past, and they are crucial when re-enacting a traumatic event since they trigger situations and images that caused physical or emotional harm. Compared to most of Almodóvar's previous work, the flashbacks in *Talk to Her* take on a more prominent function, and those are the moments in which the characters revisit mostly painful events that leave a permanent imprint on them. There are also flashbacks within the flashbacks, making the structure much like that of a Russian nesting doll in which each piece of the story is placed into another.¹² This structure functions as a way to disrupt the relationship of cause and effect, as well as to blur the boundaries between fantasy and so-called reality. It reproduces the mental process of the comatose Alicia by neglecting straightforward access to essential pieces of information that neither the spectators nor Alicia know in the first place.

But what is it that is hidden from the spectator? First, Alicia's rape is constructed as a secret action expressed through extreme close-ups of the two lava lamps in her clinic room and a parallel montage of a silent black-and-white film called *The Shrinking Lover*. The spectator is not given direct access to the rape scene since Benigno's narrative of the rape is hidden by his summary of his "conversation" about the film with Alicia, and the climax is symbolized through these close-ups that invade the screen for a few seconds, thus avoiding explicitly showing the violence involved in a rape. D'Lugo argues that: "By staging Alicia's rape through this process of cinematic 'masking', Almodóvar problematizes Benigno's identity by a sleight of hand that brings the spectator to occupy the point of view of the rapist, who is also the storyteller" (113). The position of the spectator is, therefore, put into question in the central sequence of the film in which she/he follows the narration of the perpetrator while the victim is abused. This manipulation of the spectator's point of view to make it somehow sympathetic to the abuser could make the act of watching the film an act of violence similar to the actual rape itself.

Both of these narrative and visual strategies contribute to representing the rape as if it were not a traumatic event for Alicia. In fact, the spectator learns later that, as a result of Benigno's actions, Alicia becomes pregnant. The resulting pregnancy suggests

¹² Later in Almodóvar's career, films like *Bad Education* (2004), *Broken Embraces* (2009), and *The Skin I Live in* (2011) also shared this type of complex narrative structure.

that through the act of Benigno raping her, Alicia is brought to life.¹³ Nonetheless, due to the reactions to the rape by fellow hospital workers, Benigno is sent to jail for sexual abuse. From this reading, Benigno is positioned as a victim, and he even claims to sacrifice himself for what he considers to be Alicia's future happiness. The film plays with this idea almost from the beginning, since the spectator is guided through the story mostly by Benigno's voice and actions, but she or he is suddenly confronted with unexpected revelations.

The rape sequence is conceived as a performative ritual. In this performance, Benigno does Alicia's makeup in order to prepare her for this "ceremony" that will be crucial to her waking from her coma. The interplay between the exposure of Alicia's body and the close-ups implies that she is not suffering, thus significantly downplaying Alicia's victimization in the rape.¹⁴ In this sense, Benigno would go to jail not as the perpetrator of a violent non-consensual sexual act but largely because of his colleagues' reaction to the news of Alicia's pregnancy. The attention is placed on a collective narrative proceeding from the authority of the clinic rather than on the rape itself. The scene in which, during a special administrative meeting to address the pregnancy, Benigno is informed of the findings represents a sort of popular trial: he has one last chance to express his point of view and defend himself in front of the clinic's staff who are sitting around a table. Benigno claims he does not realize he did any harm to Alicia. He acknowledges that he faked Alicia's medical record to conceal the pregnancy, but he never admits to committing sexual abuse.

That leads to the question of the veracity of Benigno's storytelling. Do we have to believe what Benigno says? Benigno is portrayed as someone who seems to be hallucinating, trapped in his own fantasy. His account of the story also seems to trap the spectator throughout most of the film, until he/she is provided with more insights about the story. Alicia is never able to access this imaginary world created by Benigno since she is in a coma, leading us to question if she is really waking up or, rather, if the time in a coma constitutes the "realness" of her life. That would reinforce our interpretation of the film echoing her inner self when in a coma.

The film's story includes another key traumatic event: Lydia's accident, in which she is gored in the arena. Throughout the film, the spectator is presented with two bullfighting scenes. The first one, as already mentioned, resembles a ballet. During the second bullfighting scene, the tone is completely different as a dramatic musical score is combined with a number of close-ups of Lydia. In both scenes, Marco is in the arena, as a passive spectator, just contemplating what Lydia is determined to do. Since we can

¹³ This is one of the most controversial points of discussion. Marr suggests that through the defamiliarization resulting from Alicia's recovery being rooted in a violent act such as rape, *Talk to Her* could be also understood as a critique of ableist narratives of disability.

¹⁴ In her analysis of the film, A.W. Eaton points out how this sequence "sanitizes" and represents rape as if it was not rape.

actually see Lydia's accident in detail, this latter scene is the opposite of Alicia's car accident, which is never shown in the film.

While using different visual and narrative strategies, the story focuses on these two main traumatic events of Alicia's rape and Lydia's accident, signifying their importance over other traumatic situations unveiled throughout the movie. The significance of these two events raises two questions: What defines a traumatic event? How is a traumatic event perceived and retold? In trauma narratives, as in this movie, there is a complex relationship between what is being told and what is not. This division underscores the impossibility of accurately defining a traumatic event due to the heightened subjectivity of the mechanisms activated by memory.

Thus, both the absence and the presence of certain elements are significant in *Talk to Her*, since trauma is a phenomenon located at the crossroads of the speakable and the unspeakable. At this crossroads, the traumatic stories of Marco and Benigno are treated as secondary elements in the film. Their actions and words serve the women they are taking care of, and as a result the spectator barely gets to know an already incomplete narration of the nature of their suffering. Thus, in the brief flashback in which Marco opens up to Lydia about his previous traumatic relationship, the screen is divided in two, with Marco's face in one half of the screen and the story involving his former girlfriend in the other. Also, in an extremely brief account, we learn about Benigno's solitude after the loss of his mother. There is an imbalance between the importance given to female bodies, which are a constant meaningful presence in the film, and their male counterparts. This is counterbalanced due to the male-dominated narrative during the film (by way of voice-overs as well as Benigno's dialogues with both Marco and the comatose Alicia). There is a split between voices and bodies and, as a result, the assumed bond between these two elements, which are key in trauma narratives, is challenged.

Voice(s) and Bodies

There are limitations inherent to trauma narratives since words are often unable to express the inner voice of the traumatized. Finding a voice is, therefore, a process involving diverse, yet intrinsically related, factors. Elaine Scarry writes in her seminal book *The Body in Pain*: "Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of these three subjects (physical pain, voice, and story), [and] their embeddedness in one another" (3). Trauma goes beyond physical pain by establishing a link between body and mind that results in different ways of expression. As Laura di Prete writes: "In a number of literary and visual texts, I detect a mode of telling that acknowledges an indissoluble bond between voice and body, trauma and corporeality" (2). In *Talk to Her*, this bond between voice and body becomes further complicated, since there is a split between the apparent "main" voice of the film (mostly Benigno and, at times, Marco) and both

women's bodies, suffering as a result of their accidents and their contact with the two narrators. Lydia and Alicia's traumatized bodies remain exposed for most of the movie. Both men can speak; they do not lose this ability at any point in the film. They have the power to interpret events to such an extent that everything we know about Alicia's rape and Benigno's incarceration comes from Benigno's account of the story. Once again, the spectator is somehow (mis)led throughout the events because of this strategy.

Instead of having a speaking role, the female bodies in *Talk to Her* seem to be initially used as objects of contemplation in order to satisfy visual pleasures, following a classic storytelling tactic in mainstream cinema, as Laura Mulvey explores in her above-mentioned article ("Visual Pleasure"). At first glance, one might believe the film grants female characters almost no agency. However, due to the complex structure of the movie and the strategies used such as montage, collage, and questioning of the narrator, this representation of the female body puts the female characters in an empowered position rather than as passive objects for spectatorship and passive visual pleasure. This female empowerment of the body might not be immediately evident, but it is crucial in understanding the film. The male bodies do not appear relevant to the film, thus rendering their stories secondary. Despite Benigno's assumed role as the main narrator of the film, he is indeed telling Alicia's story, which takes precedence over his own. Benigno is indeed a vehicle for Alicia's story. The male characters, Benigno and Marco, are reduced to the role of "passive" spectators (merely viewers) because of the limits on their way of communicating (they can only use words), which is less powerful than the female characters' ability to communicate (with their bodies) in ways beyond the traps and limitations of words. In doing so, the male characters react to the female characters' form of expression. In this reaction, the males' stories are subordinated to the females' stories told corporally. However, all means of expression (words and bodies) will ultimately merge in the complex expression represented through performance in the plot.

Performance is, therefore, key to understanding the interplay between spectatorship and trauma established in this film. Rather than being rigidly established, the relationship between subject and object within the film, as well as with the audience watching the film, is blurred from the beginning. During the opening sequence, the spectators see Marco and Benigno attending a ballet performance as spectators. They are in the spectator role from the first scene. While Marco and Benigno watch from the audience, the movie's real narrator, Alicia, appears in this opening theater sequence. The theater curtain rises, signaling, without prior notice, the beginning of the movie itself with the *Café Müller* performance. The movement of the theater curtain revealing the narrator's gaze resembles that of an eyelid. The curtain acting like an eyelid establishes the parallel between an active spectator and Alicia, the character through whom we are truly seeing this movie. Although Benigno's voice dominates most of the film and Alicia's body appears to be inactive, there are several instances in which, by means of close-ups, it is suggested that she is somehow aware of what is happening around her.

At the same time, the jumps in the storyline suggest the narration of a dream, underlining that we are watching this movie through Alicia's lens but also through art as a performative process that can only be developed through interaction with an active audience.

Despite the fact that Alicia barely speaks during the film, the narrative structure and the way in which bodies are portrayed suggest that a different approach to understanding spectatorship in this film is possible. What the spectator sees in *Talk to Her* is a representation of Alicia's mental process during her coma. In this sense, the unspeakable traumatic event is represented with all the repetitions, projections, and flashbacks present in the movie. The narrative strategies, including repetition, projection, and flashback, parallel the structure of the Freudian dream-work by using mechanisms such as condensation and displacement. According to Freud, condensation is one of the forms of the return of the repressed, often amalgamating and combining several themes in diverse symbols. Seen in this way, Alicia's dream-thought narrating the film focuses on specific moments which, as we will see later on, will be significant in determining her waking from her coma. The mechanism that Freud defines as "displacement," where the elements of the trauma are re-played far from their original role in the dream-thought, is crucial to understanding *Talk to Her* (322-326). Accordingly, in *Talk to Her*, there are many objects loaded with metaphoric meanings, such as Alicia's hair clip (which Benigno treasures and fetishizes) or the lava lamps (two phallogocentric objects full of fluids in constant motion sitting on nightstands next to Alicia's naked body). The secondary meanings are emphasized through extreme close-ups demanding the spectator to pay attention to details that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

The spectator also sees the way in which the story in *Talk to Her* is conveyed with the intent of showing how the characters' projections work towards displacement. The projections of Benigno's fantasy onto Alicia are significant, as are Marco's projections onto Benigno. This is first suggested with the superposition of both images through the glass of the visiting room when Marco visits Benigno in jail for the first time. This scene takes place after Marco learns about Lydia's death and Benigno's actions. The spectator can see both characters metaphorically switching places as Benigno keeps telling Marco that he identified with a story included in one of Marco's travel guides:

BENIGNO: My favorite is the one in Havana. I identified so much with those people who had nothing and invent everything. When you describe that Cuban woman, leaning out a window by *El Malecón*, waiting in vain, looking how time goes by and nothing happens ... I thought I was that woman... (my trans. 187)

The scene could be interpreted as a confession in which the reader (Benigno) can

identify himself with the author (Marco) to the extent that he can totally relate his trauma to Marco's literary description. Also, by listening to Benigno (as somehow Alicia already did during her coma), Marco is becoming him. Marco substitutes Benigno, replacing him, renting and living in his former apartment, and doing what the latter used to do. This replacement can be observed when Marco begins seeing Alicia through Benigno's window (she cannot dance but she is visiting the dance studio). Later on, Marco even has the opportunity to meet and talk to Alicia. While this key scene happens during the last part of *Talk to Her*, there are other moments throughout the film that allow the audience to better understand the mechanisms of condensation and projection. One of those moments is expressed by a point-of-view shot in which Benigno shows Alicia an autographed photograph of *Café Müller* by Pina Bausch. The inscription reads: "Alicia, May you overcome your obstacles, and dance again very soon." Alicia is still in a coma, but the shot suggests that she can see herself in the photograph. As André Bazin states in his classical book *What is Cinema?*:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. (14)

This process of liberation of the object from the conditions of time and space is what happens to Alicia throughout the film. When in a coma, Alicia is perceived as an object to be looked at, as if she were a photograph, in which time and space have been suspended. In turn, *Café Müller* is an act of performance condensed into a photograph shown to the comatose Alicia, a former dancer before her accident. She projects herself as if reflected in a mirror to the extent that she *becomes* what is being represented in the photograph. In that picture, Alicia finds a model on which she can rely to recover, pointing out, again, the importance of performative art in her future awakening. It is also crucial to compare Alicia's point-of-view shot with another in which we see someone photographing Lydia's body as it is being carried out of the bullring after being gored. Alicia separates herself from the object represented (the picture), while Lydia is photographed but cannot see that representation. Since she cannot project herself as a way to escape, Lydia is, therefore, an object ready to be consumed by others who are projected onto her image. This adds to her internal trauma, leading to her death.¹⁵

Performance has, therefore, a major role in the movie, while also being the key to seeing the film beyond the male gaze. During the film, the characters use art as a way

¹⁵ The first time that both the spectators and Marco learn about Lydia, she is on a TV program, also exposed to the public.

to overcome their traumatic experiences, but, rather than working through their trauma, they are acting out their traumas. The complex structure of the movie suggests an “acting out” mechanism rather than a “working through.” Thus, at the end of the movie, when Marco and Alicia meet each other in the same theater we see at the beginning of the film, we are under the impression that the story will repeat itself. The empty seat between them underlines an absence (Benigno, Lydia) that represents the future relationship between Marco and Alicia. By going to the ballet and watching silent films, Benigno thinks he is moving forward, in his own way, in order to escape trauma, but he does not want to admit (or he does not realize) that by taking care of Alicia day and night he is repeating the traumatic work he performed for his mother for twenty years. Benigno is not the only one who repeats his trauma; Marco goes to the ballet and repeatedly cries. He writes travel guides as a way to escape from (but never overcoming) the trauma of his former relationship. He keeps writing and traveling, but instead of leaving his trauma behind, he always returns to the same traumatic point.

Performative art represents the moment in which words and bodies merge. It is significant that there are no words in ballet, nor are there in the silent film *The Shrinking Lover*. Rather than being erased, words have been transformed into a new, more powerful and complex form of communication. This merging of words and bodies helps the characters recognize themselves in these performances, and the plot of the movie itself is condensed and projected (again echoing Freudian mechanisms) in performances such as *Café Müller*, *The Shrinking Lover*, and *Masurca Fogo*. Even the ballet project named “Trenches,” whose plot is summarized by Katarina Bilova (Alicia’s former dance teacher), also foreshadows the upcoming awakening of Alicia.

As explored by scholars such as Marcantonio and Yim, performance has another dimension in this movie in reference to Judith Butler’s classic conceptualization about the set of constructed rules and behaviors related to the representation of sex and/or sexuality in society. The characters in *Talk to Her* are, indeed, portrayed as continuously performing a gender role. Benigno’s case is one of the most significant performances of gender, illustrating the series of complex shifts that take place throughout the movie. Benigno performs his ambiguous sexuality; he is neither openly homosexual nor is he heterosexual. His behavior gives everybody at the clinic the chance to talk about his sexuality. In this sense, the clinic functions as a space of reaffirmation of traditional gender roles. That would also condemn Benigno, since his actions defy this power. However, we see a transformation when he is in jail. There’s no need to perform this duality or, at least, there is no chance for it to be recognized by others, so he grows a beard and the pitch of his voice drops, shifting towards a more traditionally defined “masculine” performance.

When imprisoned, Benigno appears to change into a different person; his current self has little to do with his former one. After watching a significant number of art performances during the film, the movie opens a parenthesis focusing mostly on Benigno in jail. We witness a different type of performance. The movie returns to the

art performances at the end, when *Masurca Fogo* is interpreted. The break with theater performances guides the spectator's attention through the processes of creation and projection that replace the function held by performance until that moment. The theatrical performances are part of the narration of the film's events, while at the same time they have a level of autonomy in the movie or are constructed in a way that gives these elements priority. Performative art is, therefore, a way of recognizing one another while also being a way of questioning the borders between reality and fantasy, since both are an intrinsic part of each other and any binary opposition between them is, indeed, a false assumption.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Talk to Her* plays with the concepts of trauma, spectatorship, and performance to show a complex portrait of sexuality, social relationships, and the mechanisms developed to retell a traumatic story. Almodóvar employs a selection of the "traditional" vehicles and strategies for depicting trauma (especially non-linear narratives such as flashbacks and also through his use of the body) while also appropriating and changing them to offer a personal expression of the elements that make up a social issue such as unsolicited, unconsented, and unlawful sexual intercourse.

There are constant shifts in both the plot and the structure of *Talk to Her* that multiply the processes of identification with different characters. The split of the main voice of the film (male, mostly Benigno) with the portrayals of the bodies (female) makes the spectator question her/his position while also rethinking the roles of victims and perpetrators. Although men seem to be in control of the narration, the nuanced parallel established between the eyelid of the spectator and the curtain at the beginning of the film suggests Alicia as the actual narrator, since the film seems to reflect what is happening in her mind while in a coma. This parallel between Alicia and the spectator is reinforced by means of the interplay between performance and spectatorship.

Rather than reinforcing a classical construction of the male gaze, the constant displacement of time and space also affects the portrayals of the main characters, who exist in a different place than the one usually marked by heteronormative social conventions. Thus, Lydia is a female character working in a male-dominant environment, bullfighting, and Benigno is a man working in the traditionally female-dominated field of nursing. The disappearance of both of these characters at the end of the movie serves as a way of erasing gender ambiguity from the equation. However, rather than a heterosexual couple, the final product of the transformations that results in this movie praises an active model of spectatorship, which transcends social conventions, genders, and even traumatic events.

Performance plays a major role in this movie. Rather than focusing on the result (essentially, a new couple: Alicia and Marco) of the transformations and the identification processes, the movie pays more attention to the construction process

itself, underlining the artificiality and the fictional element of an assumed “reality.” Through this interplay, instead of reinforcing the dichotomies between gender roles, Almodóvar subverts them and proposes a rethinking of categories themselves.

The interplay between trauma and spectatorship is expressed in many layers, given the intimate relationship between form and plot developed in the movie and the relevance of the psychoanalytical mechanisms such as condensation, displacement, and projection that also help challenge the division between reality and fantasy. The spectators are led in different directions and the ending of the movie leaves them in a state of confusion. Thus, the cinematic mechanisms (such as voice-overs and flashbacks) work to question the position of the spectator as well as the need to assume these diverse perspectives to convey the story rather than providing definitive answers.

Trauma narratives can be used as a therapeutic tool but also as a social weapon for denouncing the causes of these traumas. *Talk to Her* is, therefore, an active exercise of cinematic gaze in which nothing should be assumed, because things are generally not what they initially seem, thus leaving a permanent mark on the spectator's memory. While engaging with his previous work, in *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar confronts and challenges a classical model of gendered spectatorship, exploring different ways of approaching a story of love, violence, life, and death, and in turn creating a controversial and unique film.¹⁶

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