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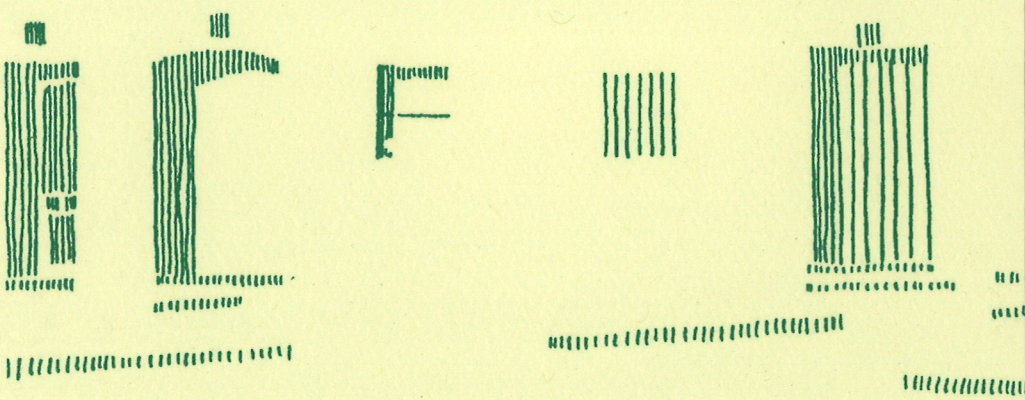
Buñuel y/o Almodóvar. El laberinto del deseo



Mad Love and Melodrama in the Films of Buñuel and Almodóvar

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Part I: An Overview: Comparing the Incomparable

If you ask anyone in the world to name a Spanish filmmaker, the two names you are most likely to hear are Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar, for they have had both the greatest critical success and the greatest notoriety worldwide. I am thinking, for example, of the famous image from Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1928), where a woman's eyeball appears to be sliced open by a straight-edge razor wielded by the filmmaker himself (an image that has become an icon for surrealism though it was based on one of his own dreams), and the scandalous sex scene between Victoria Abril and Antonio Banderas in Almodóvar's *¡Atame!* (*Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, 1987), which helped spawn the NC17 rating system in the USA. In both cases, these scandalous images were embedded within the familiar trappings of melodrama.[1]

In this essay, I will argue that this rare combination of subversion and accessibility is rooted in these filmmakers's reliance on *l'amour fou* (mad love), a scandalous erotic passion oblivious to social restraints and thereby threatening to the bourgeois order, and on their placement of this dangerous passion at the heart of melodrama—the most ubiquitous popular genre that cuts across most cultures, periods and media and is capable of being hybridized with other genres in a wide array of tones. Though both filmmakers create a provocative dialogue with popular Hollywood melodramas (embracing, stealing, transforming, parodying their story elements and conventions), they both develop the distinctive Spanish inflection of the genre that enables their work to be so challenging and accessible at the same time. As I argued in *Blood Cinema*:

> Melodrama can work, on the one hand, as a reactionary escapist genre that naturalizes the dominant ideology by displacing political issues onto the personal plane of the family, as in the case of most popular Hollywood genres and of the popular cinema made under Fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and Spain. On the other hand, it can function subversively—either through excess and contradictions that are part of the genre itself or

> through radical innovations by a wide-ranging group of practitioners... [including] Luis Buñuel [and] Pedro Almodóvar.... As Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset observed of Wagner (whose *Tristan and Isolde* frequently provided the subversive *melos* for the deeply ironic melodramas of Buñuel), 'In Wagner, melodrama reaches its highest exaltation. And as always happens, when a form attains its maximum its conversion into the opposite at once begins."[2]

No matter what other genres their films are combined with (comedy, satire, documentary, horror, avant-garde or porn), the sheer excesses of *l'amour fou* at their center help push their narratives into the familiar terrain of melodrama.

Because of space limitations, I will focus my comparison on two pairs of films—Buñuel's *Viridiana (*1961) and Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*, 2002), two masterworks whose similarities are not so immediately apparent, and *Belle de jour* (1966) and *¡Atame!* (*Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, 1989), whose emphasis on female sexuality provides a clear basis for comparison. Yet, this combination of mad love and melodrama can be found in many of their works over the full arc of their respective careers: from their scandalous debut provocations— Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, 1928, and *L'age d'or, 1930,* and Almodóvar's *Pepe, Luci Bom y otra chicas del montón*, 1980, and *Laberinto de pasiones, (Labyrinth of Passions,* 1982)—where *l'amour fou* is most outrageous and the melodramatic conventions most blatantly parodied; to many of their best films over several decades— *El (1952), Tristana (1970),* and *Cet obscur objet du désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*, 1977) in the case of Buñuel; and *Entre tinieblas* (*Dark Habits*, 1983), *Matador* (1986), *La ley del deseo ([Law of Desire*, 1987), *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988), *Tacones lejanos (High Heels*, 1991), *La flor de mi secreto (The Flower of My Secret*, 1995), and *La mala educación* (*Bad Education*, 2004) in the case of Almodóvar.

Before turning to a discussion of their films, I want to briefly compare their lives in order to suggest some basis for a few key similarities and differences. A few glaring distinctions immediately come to mind—differences in class (Buñuel's roots in the bourgeoisie, and Almodóvar's in the working class); in sexuality (Buñuel's aggressive heterosexuality despite his closeness to Lorca and his astute observation that "all the surrealists were handsome,"[3] and Almodóvar's open homosexuality despite his commitment to sexual mobility); and in life experience (Buñuel's as a nomadic filmmaker working in exile, where he had to deal with commercial pressures; and Almodóvar's commitment to working in Spain where he enjoys

total artistic freedom).

There are also striking parallels. Both were born in a provincial village within Spain: Buñuel in 1900 in Calanda, in the Aragonese province of Teruel; Almodóvar in mid-century (1949 or 1951) in Calzada de Calatrava, near Ciudad Real in Old Castille. Both of their families moved to a larger city when they were very young: Buñuel's to Zaragoza, the capital of Aragon, when he was three months old, though they continued visiting Calanda; Almodóvar's to Extremadura, a deprived region bordering Portugal, when he was eight years old.[4] Both attended Catholic school: Buñuel with the Jesuits, and Almodóvar with the Salesian and Franciscan fathers. Although they both rebelled against this training, they each retained a Catholic infrastructure in their works, which intensified their subversive edge and their representation of sexuality, for both claim religious repression makes sex more exciting. As young men, both left their families and moved to Madrid at a key moment in cultural and political history: Buñuel at age 17 in 1917 (at the end of WW1) to attend the Residencia de Estudiantes, where his two closest friends were Dali and Lorca, and where he became part of the legendary generation of '27; Almodóvar at age 16 in 1969 (a time of student uprisings worldwide and a political state of emergency in Madrid), where he got a job at the telephone company and became an important figure in *la movida*. Even within Spain, both saw themselves as provincial outsiders who came from the margins and whose distance gave them a clearer vision of how to subvert the center, and they both chose the sexuality at the heart of *l'amour fou* as the pressure point for leveraging the transformative power of their marginal position.

Buñuel and Almodóvar both emerged with an outrageous film debut—each with a pair of notorious works that were deliberately designed to deviate from other filmmaking conventions and immediately attracted attention: *Un chien Andalou* (1928) and *L'age d'or* (1930) for Buñuel (and his Spanish collaborator Salvador Dali) that immediately became notorious for their scandalous images, non-linear narratives and politicized sacrilege and thereby eased their entry into the surrealist movement; and *Pepi, Luci Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980) and *Labyrinth of Passions* (1982) for Almodóvar, two films from *la movida* in the early 1980s, which brought his transsexual literary avatar Patty Diphusa and a comic array of dopers and sexual predators to the screen and soon became midnight cult movies in Madrid. Despite their flagrant violations of narrative conventions, at their emotional core all four films played off the erotic excesses of melodrama with a pair of lovers consumed by unrestrained passion. And all four invited their viewers to read these scandalous films politically—as a challenge to the prevailing bourgeois order. As Buñuel put it in *My Last Sigh*:

> Scandal was a potent agent of revelation, capable of exposing such social crimes as the exploitation of one man by another, colonialist imperialism, religious tyranny—in sum, all the secret and odious underpinnings of a system that had to be destroyed. The real purpose of surrealism was not to create a new literary, artistic, or even philosophical movement, but to explode the social order.... It was an aggressive morality based on the complete rejection of all existing values. We had other criteria: we exalted passion, mystification, black humor, the insult, and the call of the abyss. (p. 107)

Both debuts occurred during a pivotal historical moment outside of the Francoist period (1939-1975). For Buñuel the pre-Francoist context was European modernism whose center was Paris in the 1920s where artists were coming from all over the world. As he writes in his autobiography:

> Surrealism was a kind of call heard by certain people everywhere—in the United States, in Germany, Spain, Yugoslavia—who, unknown to one another, were already practicing instinctive forms of irrational expression. Even the poems I'd published in Spain before I'd heard of the surrealist movement were responses to that call which eventually brought all of us together in Paris.... There was indeed something in the air, and my connection with the surrealists in many ways determined the course of my life (p. 105).

Buñuel entered this scene at the tail end of the French avant-garde, when sound was just being introduced to cinema, a force that would soon undermine the French avant garde and lead France to create a studio system modeled on Hollywood.[5] He managed to make only two films in Paris at the end of this period before returning to Spain for *Las hurdes* (*Land Without Bread*, 1932) and (with the coming of the Spanish Civil War) being forced into exile. During his nomadic career, he visited Hollywood to see how the industry worked, directed Spanish versions of new sound films in France and Spain, re-edited films at MOMA in New York, ghost-directed early sound films at Filmófono in Madrid, and then emigrated to Mexico City where he could work in the commercial film industry, and finally returned to work in Paris in the European art cinema—always as an outsider, even on those few occasions when he managed to work in Spain.

For Almodóvar, the historical context was *la movida* in the late 1970s

and early 1980s—a cultural movement that arose after the death of Franco, who had ruled over Spain from 1939 to 1975, keeping it hermetically sealed in cultural isolation. Now Spain was emerging from those repressive decades and making the relatively peaceful transition to socialism. *La movida* set out to demonstrate how everything had changed in Spain and how Madrid could now become the postmodernist pop capital of the world–a strategy for disavowing the Francoist era, as if he had never ruled. Here is what Almodóvar told me when I interviewed him in 1987:.

> I think my films...represent...this kind of new mentality that appears in Spain after Franco dies... Everybody has heard that now everything is different in Spain...but it is not so easy to find this change in the Spanish cinema. I think in my films they see how Spain has changed, above all, because now it is possible to do this kind of film here...a film like *Law of Desire*.[6]

For their respective outrageous debuts, both filmmakers sought an association with a city outside of Spain (as if Spain were too provincial to launch them) and with a non-Spanish artist known for his provocative innovations who helped them establish their international reputation but from whom they always felt some distance. For Buñuel, as we have seen, the city was Paris, the capital of international modernism at the time, and the artist Andre Breton, the poet/leader of the surrealist movement (1923-1930). For Almodóvar the city was New York, which was the headquarters of Andy Warhol and his notorious factory, and though Pedro remained in Madrid and became associated with *la movida*, he and his friends tried to transform Madrid into a city of desire like New York, and he himself became known, as he reports in his own writings, as the Spanish Warhol.

These transnational associations helped lead both Buñuel and Almodóvar to reject the distinction between high art and so-called lower forms of popular culture. The surrealists distinguished themselves from other modernist movements with high art pretensions (like expressionism and futurism) and instead celebrated Buster Keaton and the Keystone Cops—anything that undermined the pretentious tastes of the bourgeoisie, which helps explain why Buñuel always hated "beautiful shots." As a pioneer of postmodernism, Warhol popularized not only transvestites and movie queens like Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor, but also soup cans and other forms of commercial art, and Almodóvar followed suit, including parodic TV commercials in his first two films. As he put it in *The Patty Diphusa Stories*:

> *Pepi, Luci, Bom*...could have taken place in any big city but the details belong to Madrid, the beginnings of the golden age of Madrid pop, punk, comics and general frivolity.... *Pepi*'s point of reference is late seventies New York trash culture, and *Labyrinth* has more to do with the frivolous London pop of the mid-sixties.... In *Labyrinth of Passion* I continued immersed in the typically urban pop aesthetic, this time with a deliberately rosy tone (p. 125).

Both Spanish filmmakers increasingly saw themselves as world-class auteurs who exerted artistic control over their work, despite the changing contexts in which they were working. Though auteurism is usually associated with the European art film, they both realigned it with a provocative preference for so-called lower forms of popular culture, a position shared by their respective movements (of surrealism and *la movida*). They also realized that auteurist achievements are always affected by the broader social political context in which an artist's works are produced, consumed and evaluated. As Buñuel put it most powerfully in *My Last Sigh*:

> Steinbeck would be nothing without American weapons. I think the same is true of Dos Passos and Hemingway. If they had been born in Paraguay or in Turkey, who would read them now? A country's power determines who the great writers are. As a novelist Galdós is often on a par with Dostoevski, but who has heard of him outside of Spain. (p. 222)

In other words, they realized that auteurism itself must be contextualized historically. As a critical discourse introduced into cinema in Paris during the mid-1950s, it emerged after Buñuel's reputation as a surrealist had already been well established, yet it helped him regain the world stage in the 1950s and 60s when he was working in Mexico. By the time Almodóvar emerged in the early 1980s, auteurist discourse was under attack from many fronts–including Marxism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies. Yet it continued to be useful to so-called marginalized groups (feminists, gays, blacks, Latinos, exiles) and also to less powerful nations (like Spain and Turkey) to introduce works into the global market, particularly through international film festivals that might otherwise remain obscure.

Both filmmakers realized that an "auteur" could leverage an international film movement (even from outside one's own nation) to gain access to a broader global audience. Despite their own doubts about Italian neorealism and its political effectiveness, they both used a satiric or parodic Hispanic version of this aesthetic to reach a new level of international

spectatorship at a key movement in their respective careers.[8] Buñuel used it in *Los olvidados* (1950), his first Mexican film to win a major prize at an international festival (the Official Jury Prize for best direction at Cannes) and to mark his re-emergence on the global stage. Almodóvar used it in *?Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, 1984), his first film to receive recognition by international critics.[9] In both of these films, the "neorealist" dimension is overpowered by sheer melodrama, which (as Buñuel and Almodóvar both knew—despite the denials by Cesare Zavattini) was always largely responsible for the success of the neorealist movement.

These dynamics of auteurist discourse are crucial to understanding how Buñuel, as an exile and outsider, became more well known (in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s) than the entire Mexican film industry that employed him and than any other filmmaker then working in Spain, and how Almodóvar's popularity in the international gay and lesbian film circuit of the 1980s and 90s, enabled him to perform a sex change on Spain's national stereotype as he became the Spanish filmmaker with the greatest box office success worldwide.[10] These dynamics and their respective connections to melodrama also help explain how both filmmakers, despite their complex relationships with Hollywood, eventually succeeded in winning an Oscar for best foreign-language film: for Buñuel's *Le Charme discret de bourgeoisie* (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, 1972) and for Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999). Even more important, they helped both filmmakers challenge the very concept of marginality and thereby succeed in transforming Spain's national image in the global sphere—an amazing feat for any individual auteur. For Buñuel it was achieved through an assault on the senses of his viewers and on their basic moral assumptions and conceptual boundaries. For Almodóvar, it was performed through a transformative experience, which instantly converted both his marginal characters and local spectators into urbanites and Madrid's underworld into the global center of modern life.

> Three and a half years ago I made a film whose premise was that "Madrid is the center of the universe and everybody comes here to have fun" (*Labyrinth of Passion*). A lot of people believed it and now there are tons of magazines that talk of nothing else.... For someone who wants to triumph in Los Angeles and Tokyo, life in the small town is simply a waste of time. The first goal therefore is to get out of there as soon as possible.... You'll bounce from one job to the other; you'll get to know a lot of people, sleep with about half of them. Then someone will take you to

> see *Pepi, Luci, Bom* and *Labyrinth of Passion* and you'll become modern overnight (*The Patty Diphusa Stories*, pp. 132-34, 140).

Although both filmmakers helped change Spain's national stereotype, their respective approaches to cinema and culture were quite different in paradoxical ways. Buñuel's power as a filmmaker was primarily conceptual rather than visual, which led him to avoid "beautiful shots." He exerted control by subverting the melodramatic story and genre from within–especially when working within a commercial system like the Mexican film industry. While this might lead one to conclude that it was his scripts that were most important, he claimed that he hated writing.

> With time, I finally discovered that nothing about movie making is more important than the scenario. But, unfortunately, I've never been a writer, and except for four films I've needed a collaborator to help me put the words on the paper. My writers have been far more than mere secretaries, however; they've had the right–in fact, the obligation–to discuss and criticize my ideas and offer some of their own, even if the final decision remained mine... The writer closest to me...is undoubtedly Carriére, with whom I've written six screenplays (*My Last Sigh*, pp. 243-244).

Even his wonderful autobiography, *My Last Sigh*, was co-written with Jean-Claude Carrière (with whom he had been collaborating on scripts since 1963). In Buñuel's cinema it's the rigor of the underlying ideas that is most crucial, rather than the way they are made manifest in specific images or specific lines of dialogue.

In contrast, Almodóvar loves beautiful shots and exerts great control over every visual detail (especially once he launched his own production company, El Deseo). Yet he started out as a writer and still sees writing as absolutely central to his films, and spends at least a year writing each of his scripts. For him it is the specific choices of images, dialogue, music and movement that shape the conceptualization and make the melodrama subversive.

To put the contrast most boldly, whatever ideas, genres, or plots Buñuel began with, he was committed to surrealism, sacrilege and satire and his tone remained corrosive: all of his characters are guilty, even victims, children and underdogs. In contrast, Almodóvar specializes in sexual mobility, desire, and humor, and his prevailing tone is comic: all of his characters are sympathetic, even kidnappers, rapists and killers.

Part 2, Leveraging L'Amour Fou: *Viridiana* and *Talk To Her*

To demonstrate how these different dynamics work, let us compare two of Buñuel and Almodóvar's greatest films, *Viridiana (1961)* and *Talk to Her (2002)*, which both succeeded in winning major awards while simultaneously being reviled for their scandalous immorality. As is well known, after winning two major prizes at the Cannes Film Festival as Spain's official entry, *Virdiana* was condemned by the Catholic Church for being sacrilegious and subsequently banned in Spain; as a consequence, the film's nationality changed from Spanish to Mexican, the way its director's had earlier in 1949. *Talk to Her* won an Oscar for best original screenplay, a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, and a César for Best European Union Film, but was still attacked by many feminists and other moralists for justifying rape. The basic premise for each film presented a daunting challenge to its filmmaker that was part of the project's appeal. For Buñuel, the challenge was: how do you make a film in Francoist Spain that presents a deeply subversive view of the two Spains—Catholicism and the opposing drive toward modernization. For Almodóvar, how do you portray the rape of a comatose woman as a sympathetic act of love. Despite their radical differences, both moral challenges threaten "to explode" or at least destabilize the dominant social order and the moral assumptions of viewers.

At first glance, these two melodramas do not seem to present a strong basis for comparison , for they differ radically in subject, tone and visual style—especially the restrained black and white cinematography of José Aguayo versus the flamboyant camera moves and lush color cinematography of Javier Aguirresarobe. Yet, at their emotional core they surprisingly feature the same basic story. A male character obsessed with *l'amour fou*—the uncle Don Jaime (Fernando Rey) in *Viridiana*, and the male nurse Benigno (Javier Cámara) in *Talk to Her*— rape (or attempt to rape) a beautiful young comatose woman—Don Jaime's niece Virdiana (Silvia Pinal), whom he first drugs; and Benigno's patient Alicia (Leonor Watling), who is in a coma. In both cases, the young woman substitutes for an earlier familial love: for Don Jaime's bride who died mysteriously on their wedding night, and for Benigno's deceased mother whom he had nursed for several decades. In both cases, partly as a consequence of the rape, the mad male lover chooses to commit suicide. This pair of subversive actions (involving love and death) dramatically transforms the life of the beloved female object —causing Viridiana to leave the nunnery and eventually become disillusioned with Christianity, and impregnating Alicia and awakening her from a coma and bringing her back to a fully active life. As if staking claim to the fruits of these miraculous resurrections, both suicidal lovers make the reborn woman part of their legacy, leaving her to the man desig-

nated as their respective heir—to Don Jaime's bastard son Jorge (Francisco Rabal), and Benigno's Latin American friend Marco (Dario Grandinetti). In both cases these dynamics threaten the bourgeois order by destabilizing moral assumptions on crucial issues involving love, death and property. In both stories, the chain of substitutions, exchanges and moral reckonings make fetishism (and its three interwoven contexts of eroticism, religion, and capitalism) central to the plot.

Viridiana

In *Viridiana,* Buñuel deliberately leaves many turns in the story open-ended, not only as a means of possibly sneaking a sacrilegious tale past Francoist censors, but also making room for us spectators to take an active role in exploring this subversive terrain. Like the maid Ramona and her wild little daughter Rita who spy on Viridiana and Don Jaime, we are not entirely certain whether he actually succeeds in raping her, or whether he was in any way responsible for the death of the woman whose fetishized bridal dress she is now wearing in this ritualistic reenactment he directs. But we do know that he has intentionally cast his pious niece in this role, persuaded her to don bridal drag, and deliberately drugged her, as if to satisfy his own necrophiliac desire. This desire is dramatized more explicitly in *Abismos de passion* (*Abyss of Passion*, 1953), Buñuel's Mexican film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, the literary work the surrealists admired for its subversive use of *l'amour fou*, and also later in *Belle de jour*, 1966, in the sequence where the incestuous Duke casts Belle in the role of his dead daughter.

In *Viridiana*, what Buñuel chooses to make very clear is the moment when Don Jaime decides to commit suicide and the great pleasure he takes in reaching this sacrilegious decision. The choice is made not out of guilt, despair or regret but with an almost providential glee. Again, we are left to speculate about his motives, but we have Viridiana's actions and the rest of the story's consequences as guidelines. We could easily read Don Jaime as a substitute for Buñuel himself (particularly given that Fernando Rey is playing the role), the brilliant, conceptually subversive screenwriter who (without dictating specific dialogue or details) is plotting to expose the susceptibility of both Viridiana and her Mother Superior to venal concerns of material inheritance. No longer needing the nunnery to empower her holy acts, Viridiana can now use her Uncle's material resources to capitalize her fantasies of Christian charity, which (he is certain) will ultimately prove futile. We don't have to wait long to see how this inheritance unleashes her pride and provokes her to take her first rebellious steps away from the Church. Soon, she will also have to deal with Don Jaime's bastard son Jorge, whom she had urged her uncle to recognize—an encounter that evokes the proverbial

warning, "Beware of what you wish for!" Though Don Jaime has apparently never met his son, he can rest assured that Jorge (along with his niece's debauched beggars) will complete the deflowering and disillusionment of the pious Viridiana –transforming her into a sexual woman pursuing her own desire. This liberation of female sexuality from the false promises of salvation may prove to be Don Jaime's (and Buñuel's) most scandalous legacy. Although this reading of *Viridiana* is hardly new, its deep structural connections to *Talk to Her* may help extend its reach and sharpen the distinction between the subversive strategies of Buñuel and Almodóvar.

Talk to Her

In *Talk to Her*, the passivity of the female is far more serious than in *Viridiana*—for the lovely young dancer Alicia lies in a coma, apparently brain dead. The obsessed lover Benigno didn't cause the coma or drug her; it resulted from an automobile accident that occurred in the rain, an event determined by Providence or Chance. Thus, the mad male lover seems much less powerful than Buñuel's Don Jaime (the name Benigno actually means "harmless" or "benign"), and we never think of him as a stand-in for the providential filmmaker. Yet, Alicia's coma enables him to take full control over her body, to lavish his loving care onto her flesh (as if it were the "washable rubber virgin" mentioned in Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*) and use it to arouse his own romantic fantasies. Still, Benigno emerges as a man of faith, for he is the only one who believes the coma is only temporary and that his own miraculous intervention can bring about her resurrection. And, like Don Jaime, he is proven to be right.

This fusion of body and spirit greatly amplifies the transformative power of the rape itself , which, in *Viridiana*, despite the recurrent threats, was never consummated with certainty and consequently was never as generative as the suicide. Like Alicia's coma, Viridiana's commitment to Jesus at first also appeared to be eternal until it was proven temporary by Don Jaime's clever suicide, which succeeds in awakening her from her religious trance. Yet, Don Jaime holds firm as a non-believer; the only change he experiences is his death.

In contrast, the transformative power of the rape in *Talk to Her* not only affects Alicia (by first impregnating her and thereby awakening her from her coma like Sleeping Beauty), but also transforms Benigno from a closeted, harmless virgin obsessed with mother love or a social "deviant" assumed by Alicia's psychoanalyst father to be homosexual, into a nurturing lover who boldly impregnates his beloved and thereby gives her new life. The story makes us believe, not in Christianity, but in fairy tales, melodrama and romance: Sleeping Beauty CAN be awakened by the powers of love, and the frog CAN turn into a prince!

As in *Viridiana*, the means of awakening the sleeping beauty is material: not through property, wealth and masquerade, but through sperm, hormones and physical gestures. The politics here are primarily sexual and rooted in the body: the lover cannot be defined by one specific act but is capable of a wide range of erotic feelings and extraordinary actions and moves—like those demonstrated in dance. Thus, men can be nurturing, can weep, and can love each other; and women can be brave matadors and can awaken from comas. The physical power of bodily gestures is terribly important—not just to make sexual substitutions or to mock the religious imagery of the Last Supper (as in *Viridiana*) but to represent a range of human possibilities. And these unlikely developments demonstrate what is wrong with psychoanalysis and its system of diagnosis and with the prison and medical systems with their clear-cut binary oppositions. This critique is consistent with Foucault in exposing the power dynamics of official discourse, which can be challenged by scandalous deviations that are potentially liberating and truly transformative—like those celebrated by *la movida*.

In *Viridiana* (and in most Buñuel films), sexuality is controlled by the mind rather than the body. Its power spreads temporally across Spain's history: both forward to the next generation—to the Don's bastard son Jorge who believes in modernization—and backward to the Last Supper and other Christian myths of origin and regeneration. In contrast, the sex in Almodóvar's film is firmly positioned within the body and inspires great transformative leaps of identification. Despite his remaining firmly rooted in Spain rather than being a nomadic exile like Buñuel, sexual power in Almodóvar's films is transnational and transmedial, spreading from one body to another, beyond the borders of Spain. It moves to a roving Latin American journalist like Marco, who has lived in Africa and who writes travel books that foster transcultural and transgender identification—and beyond the borders of cinema to the on-screen live performances of German dancer/choreographer Pina Bausch and Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso.

Despite this emphasis on the performative body, in *Talk to Her* (as in *Viridiana*) we don't actually see the rape. Instead, we see the sensuous movements of Benigno's loving gestures as he grooms Alicia's flesh and the beauty of her supple young body, which together evoke the brilliant dance number (Café Müller) performed in the opening sequence by Pina Bausch. The sensuality of these "beautiful shots" and the lushness of the film's color cinematography also make Alicia's miraculous resurrection more believable, both on the bodily and spiritual planes. Another visual substitution for the rape is the inset black-and-white film that allegedly inspires Benigno –a parodic silent version of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. In a stunning sequence that teeters on the border of eroticism and ridicule, we

see the tiny lover (who is no bigger than a fetus or tampon) boldly climb into the huge rubbery vagina of his gigantic love so that he can be united with her forever. We are not sure whether to laugh or cry.

While mad love in Buñuel's films is generated within the hot-house rituals of the Church, in Almodóvar movies it is spawned primarily in movie theaters where we experience a transformative cinema spectatorship. These origin myths are dramatized most explicitly in the opening sequences of Buñuel's earlier 1952 Mexican melodrama *El*, where Don Francisco's mad love for his future bride Gloria is inspired in the church by the fetishistic foot-washing rituals of Holy Week; and of Almodóvar's *Law of Desire,* where Antonio's mad passion for Pablo and his instantaneous conversion from being a rightwing heterosexual to a flaming homosexual capable of murder is sparked by watching a gay porn sequence from one of Pablo's movies. This emphasis on the transformative power of the movie-house makes the matter of endings all the more crucial and the choice of suicide potentially more resonant.

Yet, in *Talk to Her*, the off-screen suicide seems less important than the rape. It is not a witty instance of wickedness nor a brilliant moral strategy (as in *Viridiana*), but an act of emotional desperation that could easily have been prevented. It is an outcome deeply regretted by those like Marco who loved Benigno and by those of us spectators in the audience who find him sympathetic. As in the story of Romeo and Juliet, it is caused by bad timing—a tragic dimension that implies Benigno's story could have turned out otherwise. Yet, Almodóvar still gives this fairy tale a comic ending by allowing his sleeping beauty Alicia to awaken and to be romantically paired with Marco, who has lost two previous loves but is now ready to accept her as his third magical choice. In fact, she is one of three gifts Benigno leaves Marco as his legacy: the apartment he shared with his mother (conveniently located across the street from Alicia's dance studio), the treasured hair clip he stole from Alicia (a fetishistic *vagina dentata*, which Mario wisely deposits in Benigno's grave), and the newly awakened Alicia (whom Benigno has trained Marco how to nurture).

In contrast, the endings of Bunuel's films usually remain open-ended or at least ambiguous: the mad lover may be confined in a monastery (as in *El*), or buried up to his waist in the sand with his beloved (as in *Un chien andalou*), or sexually assaulting his dead love in her tomb (as in *Abyss of Passion*), or blown up in the mall by terrorists (as in *That Obscure Object of Desire*). Suicide, however, is not a final solution—not even in *Viridiana*, where Don Jaime's death is more a catalyst than a conclusion.

The situation is very different in Almodóvar's movies, where suicide is a recurring ending for his mad lovers, especially when they have committed serious crimes like kidnap, rape or murder—as in *Talk to*

Her, Law of Desire, and *Matador* (where a double suicide is inspired by the lust-in-the-dust climax of *Duel in the Sun*). In many ways, this narrative solution lets Almodóvar off the hook, for it enables him to make the criminal lovers sympathetic without having to impose any punishment for their crimes. In some instances, however (especially when the mad lover is female), the lover's mother intervenes like a Madonna to prevent the suicide—as in *High Heels* (where the mother on her death-bed falsely confesses to the daughter's crime of murder) and *The Flower of My Secret* (where the mother's voice rouses her love-obsessed daughter from a lethal overdose). Unfortunately for Benigno, his merciful mother is already dead.

Despite Almodóvar's subversive edge and explicit scandalous sex scenes, these morally nuanced suicides helped his comic melodramas succeed in the global market and, beginning with *Law of Desire,* to be held up (both by the right and the leftwing Spanish press) as a model of how Spanish cinema could achieve box office success worldwide. For, even if he let his characters get away with sexual transgression and murder, the suicidal endings (of *Law of Desire* and *Matador*) satisfied the moralists while still transforming the Spanish national stereotype and destabilizing our previous assumptions about Spain's marginal position in the global sphere. But what if he ever let any of these mad male lovers live happily ever after, without turning to suicide? Following his huge cross-over global success with *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, he tested the waters with *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, which received an X rating in the US and caused a huge scandal.

Part 3, Female Sexuality & Masochism: Belle de Jour & Atame

So far I have been focusing on the male lovers obsessed by *l'amour fou*; but what about the women in these films and their sexuality? Let us turn to two films that offer an obvious basis for comparison—Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1966), and Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1989).[11] Though these films also include the basic dynamics of l'amour fou I've described, they shift the focus to the sexuality of the female and to an exploration of masochism. Why would a beautiful, wealthy young woman with a handsome, successful husband have recurring fantasies about being raped, beaten and humiliated, and why would she spend her afternoons working in a Parisian brothel? And why would a B-movie actress decide to marry the young man who has kidnapped her and held her captive? Although the conventional answer would be masochism, these two films present the woman's sexuality with much greater subtlety.

Both films present a woman whose sexuality is in some way blocked or problematic—a frigid young bourgeois wife who was molested as a child

(Severine in *Belle de jour*, played by Catherine Deneuve), and a jaded, promiscuous porn star who is a recovering drug addict starring in her first horror film (Marina in *Tie Me Up*, played by Victoria Abril). In both cases, the woman is cast in a passive role—either by the institution of marriage, or by the film industry and commercial genres that consistently display her as victim. In both narratives there is a manipulative older man (a potential *deus ex machina*) who not only desires her sexually but also wants to control and transform her life: the mysterious Husson (Michel Piccoli), who first tells Severine about the Parisian bordello and ultimately tells her husband about her secret-life as a prostitute; and the crippled film director Máximo Espejo (Francisco Rabal), who keeps putting Marina in precarious positions. In both cases, the woman is awakened and transformed sexually by a dangerous young outlaw who becomes the obsessed mad lover: the French anarchistic thug Marcel (Pierre Clementi), and the orphaned juvenile delinquent Ricki (Antonio Banderas). Both of these mad lovers are aided by an elder parental figure: Marcel's Spanish accomplice Hyppolite (Francisco Rabal), who leaves Belle to Marcel (even though he desires her himself) and ultimately abandons him because of his erotic obsession; and the female director of Ricki's Orphanage, who taught him how to give sexual pleasure to women and who finally frees him so that he can pursue his own erotic desire. Both male mad lovers capture and bully the passive woman they love, but are convinced that they (like Benigno) can give her new life. Yet, after having threatened Severine and having shot and possibly crippled her husband Pierre, Marcel is gunned down in the street (a la Belmondo's death at the end of Godard's *Breathless*). Though these events, like Belle's daily experience in the brothel, can be read as sheer fantasy rather than reality, they have great power over her waking life.

This kind of violent ending is not experienced by Ricki. After holding Marina captive for several days, he finally sets her free, and she responds by freely choosing to be reunited with him for a happy ending. By the end of the film, they are madly in love and, accompanied by her sister, are on their way home to Marina's village where they plan to marry and have children. And what is the agent of change—great sex and l'amour fou! It was this clear-cut happy ending, as much as the notorious bathtub sequence (where a rubber duck performs as a dildo) and the extremely hot sex scene, that provoked the controversial X-rating in the USA and ultimately gave birth to the NC-17 rating.

Yet, what may be even more radical in both films, is that the outer frame (what is supposedly normal reality) is as saturated with fantasy as the erotic fantasies of the mad lover. In *Tie Me Up*, that outer frame is characterized by exploitive sex with the female director in the orphanage, the generic trappings of pornography and horror on the movie set, and the punkish drug scene and trash culture in the mean streets. At the end of the

film, Marina and Ricki escape both the captivity narrative he's imposed and this three-tiered horror-show of their so-called "real life" to return to her home village where her mother (played by Almodovar's real-life mother) awaits them. As in *High Heels* and *The Flower of My Secret*, the mother promises to save them from any violent ending or any thoughts of suicide.

In *Belle de jour*, the outer frame is equally unreal but in a totally different way: it evokes the elegant fantasy perfection of the French haute bourgeosie. A drop-dead gorgeous young wife, dressed in expensive designer clothes, is married to a rich handsome, morally pure "boy scout" husband, who, despite his youth, happens to be a brilliant, successful doctor. Together they live in an elegantly furnished, extravagantly expensive apartment in a fancy Parisian neighborhood, with a servant to do all the work and with Sacha Vierny's lush color cinematography (so uncharacteristic of Buñuel, at this point in his career) to enhance "the discreet charms" of their material assets. By the time we are confronted with several different endings and the reality status of the narrative begins to unravel, we don't know how far back the fantasies extend—especially since the movie opens within one of Severine's erotic carriage fantasies where she, under Pierre's supervision, is beaten, humiliated and raped. We begin to wonder whether Severine's entire bourgeois life isn't also a fantasy, for it is no more realistic than her erotic daydreams in the carriage or her daily visits to the Parisian brothel. And we wonder whether the answer to this question is more political than aesthetic, especially since it anticipates Buñuel's later satiric representations of the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie (in his final trilogy), which are also depicted in lush color cinematography.

One possibility is that the entire narrative of *Belle de jour* is a network of interwoven fantasies. It was probably this kind of reading that intrigued Stanley Kubrick and thereby inspired his final film *Eyes Wide-Shut*, where the model married couple was played by Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman (at the tail end of their own "real-life" fantasy marriage).[12] But Kubrick's narrative pursued the husband's erotic fantasies rather than the wife's, as if paying homage to Buñuel, while omitting the most radical dimension of *Belle de jour*.

As in most Buñuel films, the sex in *Belle de jour* is controlled primarily by the imagination, but this time it's the subjectivity of a woman. We never really know what gives Severine pleasure, except choosing and shaping the narrative situation she's in, even if she is assigned a passive or subordinate role within the scene. In fact, at one point in the brothel, she refuses to adopt the role of maitresse in someone else's masochistic fantasy, preferring the role of masochist. The narrative leads us to collaborate with her and Buñuel in fleshing out her erotic fantasies no matter how far they extend: speculating about what is in the Asian man's black box that gives Belle such exquisite pleasure, imagining what real life events caused

the Duke to perform this necrophiliac ritual with Belle, puzzling over what really happens to her husband Pierre and their marriage at the end, and wondering why she has these erotic fantasies in the first place. The name of the Madame at the Parisian brothel evokes the at-one-time scandalous erotic writings of Anais Nin in the 1930s, after her encounter with Henry Miller and his American wife June in Paris. Nin's eroticism was as firmly rooted in the imagination as were those of the Marquis de Sade and Buñuel, though hers, like Severine's, was more compatible with a masochistic aesthetic (at least as defined by Gilles Deleuze).[13]

In contrast, the sexuality in *Tie Me Up* is rooted primarily in the body, for the film's transformative power depends on great physical sex. The kidnapping of Marina is framed by two transformative acts of sex—one we don't see on screen, the other we do. The first is the original off-screen event that generates the entire plot: a one night stand between Antonio and Marina that occurred when he had briefly escaped from captivity and when she was high (escaping her ordinary reality). While she forgets the encounter, for him it triggers an erotic obsession—his *l'amour fou*. Thus, as in *Talk to Me*, he becomes the prince disguised as the frog (hence his disguise with fright wig in their first encounter on the movie set), who must awaken his jaded, self-destructive Sleeping Beauty so that they can live happily ever after. Significantly, he never rapes her—even during the captivity. When they finally agree to have consensual sex, it happens on screen with great explicitness—becoming one of the most joyful sex scenes of mutual pleasure in the history of cinema. Not only does it awaken Marina sexually and enable her to remember their earlier sexual encounter, but it also transforms our spectatorial expectations for where this movie is going. Like the on-screen spectators at the end of *Law of Desire*, who look upstairs with envy at the piso where Antonio and Pablo enjoy their final happy hour of loving consensual sex, we realize that we are also being transported to a different erotic zone. But this time, the obsessive lover doesn't have to commit suicide and he and his love (whom we no longer see as jaded or masochistic) can ride off into the sunset for the ultimate comic ending, jauntily singing "I will survive." No wonder this sex act helped spawn the NC17 rating in a Puritanical culture like the USA.

What is so powerful about Almodóvar's deep comic optimism is the way it convinces us spectators that we are capable of this kind of emotional transformation. Just as Marina is tested as to whether she can discern Ricki's emotional sincerity as a lover beyond his erratic behavior, the craziness of the narrative situation, and the conventional implications of the captivity genre in which they find themselves imprisoned, we are tested to see whether we can still respond emotionally to the sensible nature of her choice and whether we can end up enjoying the film as a screwball comedy.

The transformative sex scene occurs under a contemporary pop religious painting of sacred hearts (which evokes a similar image at the opening of the film). This ironic juxtaposition of sex and religion is very different from the way it functions in Buñuel. For, like the May cross in *Law of Desire*, which combines images of the Madonna with pop portraits of Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe, the religious painting imbues their transgressive sexuality with spiritual overtones of conversion and resurrection. In contrast, the religious trappings in Buñuel's sex scenes demonstrate how the Church and its rituals pervert erotic desire. It was the description of Viridiana's strange rituals–with crucifix, ashes, and crown of thorns– that helped inflame Don Jaime's perverse desire; and the evocation of the Last Supper through music and carnivalesque gestures that helped make the beggars's sexual antics so obscene. Apparently, he had planned to use similar dynamics in *Belle de jour*:

> One other thing I do regret about this film are the cuts I had to make to please the censors, especially the scene between Georges Marchal and Catherine Deneuve, whom he addresses as his daughter while she lies in a coffin in a private chapel after a Mass celebrated under a splendid copy of one of Grünewald's Christs. The suppression of the Mass completely changes the character of this scene (*My Last Sigh*, p. 243).

While both filmmakers demand an active mode of spectatorship, Buñuel engages us in filling in the gaps in the narrative, a strategy that leads us to ask subversive questions about his conceptual terrain; whereas Almodóvar leads us to experience powerful emotional swings that destablize our prior moral assumptions, particularly on issues of sexuality and gender. Yet both use the scandalous excesses of *l'amour fou* to position these conceptual and emotional challenges within the familiar genre of melodrama, whose hybridity and tonal range make it capable of accommodating such extremes. It is this strategic combination that continues to make their works so transformative and thrilling.

Notes

[1] I am using the term melodrama in the broad sense pioneered in the *Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), where it functions both as a noun referring to the emergence of a specific genre in a particular cultural and historical context (in the wake of the French Revolution) and as an adjective designating a broader stylistic tendency that appears in diverse periods, cultures, and media. Equally significant, after Brooks' intervention, melodrama was no longer assumed to be pejorative in either sense of the term.

[2] Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of national Identity in Spain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 55.

[3] Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, trans. Abigail Israel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 108.

[4] There is some ambiguity about the dates (e.g., the year that Pedro was born, and the month or year that Buñuel and his family moved to Zaragoza)—partly because they both mythologize themselves and delight in mixing autobiography and fiction, which Buñuel admits in his autobiography *My Last Sigh* and Almodóvar in his memoirs of transsexual porn star, Patty Diphusa.

[5] According to film historian David Cook, "The coming of sound spelled the end for the French avant-garde cinema. The French mode of production during the twenties had been one in which a large number of small studios leased their facilities to independent companies formed to produce single films, and this method had lent itself readily to experimentation. But production costs soared with the introduction of sound because France, unlike the US and Germany, possessed no patents for the new process... But the success of American and German sound films in France...made financiers...eager to invest in the foreign patent rights... They were able to group most existing studios into two large combines around the old trade names Gaumont and Pathé, thereby replicating the monopolistic structure of the American film industry." David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 374.

[6] Marsha Kinder, "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1987): 33.

[7] Pedro Almodóvar, *The Patty Diphusa Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Kirk Anderson (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. x-xi.

[8] "I am ideologically opposed to the neorealist tendency. Neorealism introduced some enrichments to cinematographic expression, but nothing more. Neorealist reality is partial, official, above all reasonable; but poetry, mystery, are absolutely lacking in it." Luis Buñuel, as quoted by Francisco Aranda in *Luis Buñuel: A Critical Biography*, trans. David Robinson (New York: DaCapo Press, 1976): 165. Although Almodóvar has called *What Have I Done to Deserve This* "a neoralist portrait of his own family" and his "most social picture" that reveals

his own "most unmodern roots, the small town," he has linked this film to the *esperpento* found in the distinctively Spanish adaptations of Italian neorealism that helped launch Spain's "modern cinema" of the 1950s. As he puts it, "I tried to adopt a sort of revamped neorealism with a central character that's always interested me: the housewife...and victim of consumer society" (*Patty Diphusa*, p. 91).

[9] For a more extensive discussion of how neorealism functions in Buñuel, see Ch. 6 in my book, *Blood Cinema*; and in Almodóvar, see my essay "All About the Brothers: Retroseriality in Bad Education," in *All About Almodóvar*, ed. Epps and Kakoudaki, forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press.

[10] For a discussion of Almodóvar's strategic approach to auteurism in the age of globalism, see my essay "Re-inventing the Motherland: Almodóvar's Brain-dead Trilogy," *Film Quarterly* (Winter/Spring 2004/2005).

[11] In my judgment, the best essays written on these two films are both by Harmony Wu. See "Unraveling Entanglement of Sex, Narrative, Sound, and Gender: The Discreet Charm of *Belle de jour*," *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Cambridge University Press, 1999): 111-41; and "The Perverse Pleasures of Almodóvar's *¡Atame!*," *JSCS* 5, no. 3 (October 2004): 261-271.

[12] They split up shortly after the release of the film, and Cruise turned first to Spanish actress Penelope Cruz in the midst of her crossover to Hollywood and then to an *amour fou* centered on Katie Holmes, the excesses of which led him to be rejected by bourgeois Hollywood. Ironically, as in the case of Benigno, it at least switched the salacious gossip in his star discourse to questions of whether he was insane rather than merely gay.

[13] Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: George Braziller, 1971). For a more elaborate discussion of how this applies to Spanish cinema and Buñuel, see *Blood Cinema*, chapters 4, 5, and 6.

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