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«ALMODÓVAR STUDIES»:
EMBRACING BROKENNESS IN *LOS ABRAZOS ROTOS* (2009), *LA PIEL QUE HABITO* (2011), AND *LOS AMANTES PASAJEROS* (2013)

ABSTRACT:

After situating the «Global Almodóvar» thesis, this investigation examines Pedro Almodóvar's three most recent films as of 2013. *Los abrazos rotos* presents a displacement of the Franco regime's reverberating post-1975 impact via the complex of secrets that surround Almodóvar's fictional creation, Ernesto Martel. *La piel que habito* revolves around another stunted rightwing figure, the vengeance-driven Robert. Decoding the film summons class critique, psychoanalysis—and examination of Robert's status as emissary of the global as an immigrant. While *Los amantes pasajeros* signals Almodóvar's return to comedy, the film's gentle politics suggest a measure of misjudgment about Spain's most severe post-Transition crisis.

KEYWORDS: «Global Almodóvar», Spanish film, Genre, Social class.

RESUMEN:

Después de un examen de la tesis de «Almodóvar global», esta investigación en 2013 explora las últimas tres películas de Pedro Almodóvar. *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) presenta un desplazamiento del impacto del régimen de Franco. En la película, el desplazamiento toma la forma de Ernesto Martel, la creación ficticia de Almodóvar. En el centro de *La piel que habito* (2011), hay otro personaje de la derecha política, Robert, movido por sus obsesiones con la venganza. Un análisis de la película implica las críticas a una clase social, al psicoanálisis—y al estatus del extranjero Robert como un signo de lo global. Mientras *Los amantes pasajeros* (2013) presenta el retorno de Almodóvar al género de comedia, la

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suavidad de la postura política de la película con respecto de la crisis más grave después de la Transición parece un juicio erróneo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: «Almodóvar mundial», cine español, género, clase social.

To supplement my father's wages, my mother set up a business reading and writing letters [...]. Often, as I listened to what my mother was reading, I would notice to my amazement that it didn't correspond to what was written on paper: she would invent some of it. The neighbors didn't know because what she invented was always an enhancement of their lives and they came away from the reading delighted.

—Pedro Almodóvar (quoted in Sotinel 74)

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing about Pedro Almodóvar is an intimidating endeavor in the light of the immense and sophisticated literature on the director. While Mark Allinson has coined the term «Almodóvar studies» (154), proximal to both film and gender studies and in deference to the Spanish director's impact, Marvin D'Lugo elaborates a similar if more specific concept. D'Lugo ventures a «Global Almodóvar» thesis as he excavates a «double movement» in Almodóvar's films between deeply Spanish reference points and the director as a channel of an «international style» (2). For D'Lugo, Almodóvar summons «native and international influences» into a sophisticated cultural *paella* that poaches ingredients from an array of national cinemas (5). Indeed, in testimony to Almodóvar's impact beyond his home nation of Spain, the bookshelf heaves with book-length, English-language attention to his films (*e.g.*, Acevedo-Muñoz; D'Lugo; Smith; Sotinel).

In specifying an intersection between the Global Almodóvar thesis and Anglophone interest in his body of work, the director's long-established popularity among English-speaking academics may be in part due to the post-modern/post-structuralist posture toward identity that continues to inform his films. In this view, identity in Almodóvar's worlds on screen (*e.g.*, as a man or a woman) is less a matter of a biologically-grounded essence than an ongoing *bricolage*, an achievement tempered by contingency; the series of characters with multiple identities to whom I will later refer (*e.g.*, Mateo/Harry, Vicente/Vera) evidences the claim. And why might the stress on «PoMo» identities matter to scholarly reception of Almodóvar? Faced with the long running regimes of Reagan-Bush and

Thatcher-Major, English-speaking academics in the 1980s and 1990s often elided class and economic politics (construed as «reductionist») for the hotly contested sphere of culture and identity. The superstructure of culture presented an arena in which liberal ideas seemingly could (and have) gain(ed) more traction («minority» advancement, gay rights). The strong, if strongly implicit, postmodern posture of Almodóvar's films fit with the cultural realm of identity that was taken as «up for grabs» in the 1980-90s, while Anglo societies were being materially transformed by the «invisible hand» of neoliberal economics (*cf.*, Harvey).

While English-language scholars oriented enthusiastically to Almodóvar in the 1980s and 1990s, post-Franco Spain's anxieties about projecting itself as aligned with the rest of Western Europe did not easily square with the filmmaker's shock-laden kitchfests that were, little-by-little if incongruously, morphing into art cinema. Núria Triana-Toribio posits that Almodóvar was taken as disruptive to Spanish officialdom's cinematic vision in the 1980s for his orientation toward comedy, and even for flaunting Andalusian accents via some of his fictional creations (132-142). Triana-Toribio posits that Almodóvar was finally ratified by Spain's cultural arbiters as a national patrimony in 2000, shortly after his Academy Award for *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) welded international approval into place. It was only at this moment that Almodóvar's debut film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), made its debut on prime time Spanish television, garnished by in-studio discussion with Almodóvar and Carmen Maura.

Alongside the boost that international circulation and approval has furnished, a significant share of English-language theorization of identity in Almodóvar's films has elided or muffled «their Hispanic contextual specificity and placed [them] in a grid of intellectual reference points that are overwhelmingly Anglo-American» (Medhurst 126). In other words, the global export of Almodóvar hazards striking omissions since his films are steeped in Spain and Spanishness as the home nation and culture in which he has exclusively worked. While I do not thumb my nose at the Global Almodóvar thesis, in the account that follows, I argue that the most recent films mainly underscore Almodóvar's deep engagement with Spain (particularly *Los abrazos rotos* [2009] and *Los amantes pasajeros* [2013]). At the same time, the partial exception to the pattern of deeply inscribed Spanishness among the three most recent films, *La piel que habito* (2011), channels Spain's palpable anxieties about the globalization regime through its narrative trajectory.

2. *LOS ABRAZOS ROTOS*: AFTER THE DICTATOR/EMPRESARIO

Almodóvar's narratives have long been layered with the materials of melodrama via guilt-laden secrets as well as barely repressed desires and resentments. So

it is in the opening five minutes of *Los abrazos rotos*: Mateo Blanco/Harry Caine has impromptu sex on a couch with a woman who had shortly before helped the blind scriptwriter cross a street. His production manager Judit enters in the aftermath of the tryst and is obviously cross with Mateo/Harry for the stated reason that he should not be so trusting in bringing home people he cannot see; fair enough as advice to a blind man. However, seen backward from the rest of the film, the exchange reanimates Judit's long-standing libidinal resentments at Harry/Mateo for having absconded with Lena 14 years earlier while she was starring in the film he was directing. Moreover, Mateo/Harry pursued Lena even though he is father to Judit's son Diego (age 20 by the opening scene of *Los abrazos rotos*). In a further cache of melodrama, neither Mateo/Harry nor Diego knows their true relation to each other at the start of the film, although a notably nonchalant Diego learns the secret in the closing sequence.

Everyday Almodovarian encounters are so weighted with back story (secrets, complicity, guilt, resentments) and super-charged with emotion that it seems a wonder that anything within the films' worlds can move forward. In the case of *Los abrazos rotos*, roughly half of the film's runtime is devoted to a series of extended flashbacks to the 1990s that sketch the back story and sort out the strange milieu of the film's opening. Thus, by the closing sequence, one also comprehends Judit's chilly reaction to Mateo/Harry's desire to adapt a film script from Arthur Miller's life story. In the script over which Mateo/Harry enthuses, the otherwise crusading liberal voice of Miller is gobsmacked when confronted by the disabled son whom he had disavowed. Close-ups of Judit's troubled, guilt-laden reactions to Mateo/Harry are cut with long shots of the three characters whose relations are in fact similar in the world of *Los abrazos rotos* (a situation of which only Judit harbors knowledge). With the materials of melodrama ladled on so thickly, Umberto Eco's witticism about *Casablanca* bears repeating: «Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us» (3).

The death of impresario Ernesto Martel, revealed via newspaper in the film's opening minutes, sets in motion the circumstances in which the inhabitants of the film begin to confront their achingly painful and intertwined back stories. A series of flashbacks construct Martel as a pimp-like figure, endowed with alpha male status through his wealth. When Lena's father falls gravely ill in 1992, Martel seizes the opportunity to furnish high quality care for him in a private clinic. That is, Martel instrumentalizes the crisis in exchange for possession of Lena, his secretary who also performs as a high-end escort. By 1994, in another flashback, Lena lives with Martel and he grudgingly accommodates her desire to be an actress—he prefers that she pass time decorating his palatial home—by acting as financier of the

film.² Suspicious of the time she devotes to filming, Martel dispatches his awkward son Ernesto, Jr. to perform video camera surveillance on set and then hires a lip reader to decode what is said between takes. Martel discovers that Lena is indeed carrying on an affair with her director, Mateo. In other words, Martel is a techno-fascist employing the gadgetry of the time period to snoop, assisted by surrogates who report to him. After a misogynistic series of attacks against Lena—pushing her down stairs (on-screen), hurling her from a moving vehicle (off-screen)—Lena and Mateo/Harry alight from Madrid for the island of Lanzarote.

Although Mateo/Harry and Lena evade him, Martel's authority is once again asserted. He bribes production manager Judit and the film's editor to eviscerate *Chicas y maletas* by splicing the film together from its worst takes. In this manner, Martel engineers a fiasco with Mateo assuming director's credit for Lena's sham-bolic star vehicle. Through bribed and compromised surrogates, Martel also contrives the seemingly veridical account of what the film «was», setting up a fiasco greeted with scorn from critics and the public.

Does it need to be spelled out further that, with temporal displacements and some differences in preferred methods, Martel stands in for Spain's dictatorship through vindictive abuse of authority, co-optation via allocation of privileges, misogyny, and command over the means of discursive production about what reality «is»? Moreover, Martel's death as an elderly and diminished figure provokes paradigm shifts in the characters' relations to each other; a reference to Spain's Transition that followed Franco's demise. Ernesto, Jr.'s bitter account of his life furnishes one version of these symptoms. A gay man, Ernesto, Jr. is vividly resentful of the compulsive heterosexual traditionalism that had been forced on him by the abusive patriarch and seeks liberation through the stated quest to erase Martel's existence following his death. Ernesto, Jr.'s project strongly echoes that of the young Almodóvar who famously proclaimed, «my revenge against Franco lay in not recognizing his existence» and «in making films as if he had never walked the earth» (quoted in D'Lugo 97).

Other confrontations with the collateral damage from Martel elicit more hopeful trajectories. In an abrupt birthday scene that inaugurates the closing sequence, and fueled by gin, Judit admits having been bribed into participating in the vandalism of *Chicas y maletas* (further motivated, in melodramatic manner, by

² Autobiographical reference is embedded here since Almodóvar struggled with producers imposing their visions on his early films—or even their wives as lead actresses in the case of 1983's *Entre tinieblas* (Sotinel 2010: 24-28). He achieved a greater measure of independence by founding his own production company, El Deseo, with his brother Agustín in 1986.

sexual jealousy toward Lena). The next day, she reveals to Diego that he is Mateo/Harry's son as stasis continues to explode upon Martel's passing away. For his part, Mateo's response to Martel's death is to cancel his long-standing stasis by ceasing the melancholic ego-incorporation (*cf.*, Williams) of the pseudonym «Harry Caine» that he was using when Lena died in the car-crash. Diego, on the other hand, is constructed as a wholly post-dictatorial subject, relatively unburdened by the past aside from being troubled by his elders' traumatized silences and secrets that revolve around Martel.

Finally, in redemptive if belatedly spoken defiance of the fascist who bribed her, Judit reveals that she never destroyed the better takes from *Chicas y maletas* as she was ordered to do by Martel. And so, *Los abrazos rotos* ends with a «re-constituted» family triad—Judit, Mateo, Diego—watching and listening rapturously to an unadulterated version of *Chicas y maletas* from 14 years earlier. The dictator is dead and the «real» film is prepared for viewing—a fitting myth for addressing the wounds Spain suffered under fascism, crafted by the nation's signature filmmaker. Spain's «embrace» with itself and with its past are no longer «broken», the fundamental social unit (Mateo, Judit, and Diego as family) has been restored, albeit to unconventional specifications, and the representation by Spain to Spain has been re-cut to its «real» specifications on-screen.

It is not, however, a pat world of untrammelled progressivism in the film for Martel's having expired. For instance, Lena never enjoys the fruits of liberation from the past's complicity with the regime that Judit realizes. Indeed, Lena functions as a gyno-totem or currency passed between men in the film as she defines the males' fortunes in relation to each other (*cf.*, Chaudhuri). To wit, «possession» of Lena is transferred from her dying father, to a form of prostitution with Martel in exchange for his catalogue of material comforts, and finally to Mateo for what may mainly be advancement of her acting career ambitions. In any event, the reference points in *Los abrazos rotos* stay rigorously within those of Spain, notwithstanding Judit's meeting with producers from the US as backdrop to one scene. Thus, while the Global Almodovar thesis is athwart of the action in *Los abrazos rotos*, it may operate in unexpected ways in the director's next project.

3. LA PIEL QUE HABITO: REPRESSION AND REVENGE

La piel que habito is not *Death Wish* (1974, Dir: Michael Winner), the right wing politics of which interpolate the viewer to participate in the protagonist's sadistic campaign of retribution (Ryan & Kellner 89-95). Almodóvar's depiction of vengeance and «vigilante justice» is constructed from a different, more varied palette. The film is also similar to *Los abrazos rotos* in its narrative structure; fo-

llowing a straight narrative trajectory in the opening sequences, *La piel que habito* detours into extended flashbacks that constitute most of its second half and reveal back story with strong melodramatic accents. *La piel que habito* also presents warrant for the Global Almodóvar thesis insofar as several pivotal characters are not Spaniards. However, these characters generate unwanted complications and may betray Spain's anxiety about the convulsions of the globalization regime.

Non-correspondence with the vengeance «classic» *Death Wish* notwithstanding, *Átame* (1990) is another film that *La piel que habito* evokes in multiple registers. Not only is *Átame* an Almodóvar-directed film that pivots on the crime of false imprisonment, but Antonio Banderas plays the part of the abductor in the two films separated by 21 years. Despite the continuity furnished by Banderas, *La piel que habito*'s bourgeoisie doctor Robert is notably distinct from *Atame*'s streetwise orphan Ricki. In *Atamé*, Ricki possesses nothing but a handful of *pe-setas* in contrast with Robert's considerable wealth in *La piel que habito*. Ricki is also resolutely heterosexual as he imposes a traditional family ideology on his captive Marina who, in turn, finally and zealously participates in his plans for her. By contrast, *La piel que habito*'s captive, Vicente/Vera, attempts escape repeatedly and finally succeeds. Moreover, as I will elaborate below, a repressed gay subtext unknown to *Átame* may be located in *La piel que habito*. Finally, Robert is coded as Brazilian and not a Spaniard, a narrative element that I will elaborate later.

Robert's wealth is underscored from the opening shots as it enables a significant degree of fortress-like removal in his dwelling. The film's opening montage emphasizes the gates, window bars, and imposing walls that regulate entry into this bourgeoisie space. Barriers are abetted by the techno-gaze outward via security cameras and monitors. With such a surveillance apparatus enveloping the home, anyone who appears uninvited at the gate (notably Zeca) is taken to be a threat. Enscorched within this fortress, the chilly and remote Robert appears to have no friends, only professional associates, former patients, his servant Marilia, and «lover» Vera whom he effectively created in his private in-house laboratory. In a (piled-on) melodramatic twist, Marilia is actually Robert's mother—and she is treated as domestic labor, down to the apron, albeit a valued and sentimentalized servant.

Robert is clearly in the Almodovarian lineage of *Los abrazos rotos*' Martel as a wealthy, techno-enabled fascist, albeit with genuine genius for bioscience technique. Whatever sympathy Robert may engender as a man who has lost his family is annulled by having taken Vicente as hostage and performed human experimentation to reverse-engineer him into a woman; a clear abuse of, among other things, the class privilege that enables him the material means and privacy to both incarcerate and experiment. Moreover, Robert's «solution» to Vicente's

acknowledged-to-be-egregious behavior toward women is arguably far worse than the original problem. As often occurs within the tides of rightwing ideology (Altemeyer), rightists' methods for upholding sanctified «law and order» in practice bulldozes over what they ostensibly valorize.

Robert may also be taken as instancing the melancholia that, in re-working Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler, Linda Williams (2009) excavates from Almodóvar's corpus. Specifically, Robert's bioengineering of Vicente into Vera—against Vicente's will—may be interpreted as putting a more socially «respectable» veneer on his disastrously repressed gayness. In this view, melancholia is the cost of retreat from homophilia and outward participation in obligatory heterosexuality³. A clue that gives force to the melancholic/repressed gay thesis is that, in painstakingly constructing Vera, Robert devotes meticulous attention to dilating the surgically constructed vagina. However, when one of their first trysts is halted by vaginal soreness, Robert is quick to suggest anal sex. On the psychoanalytic view that Williams develops, Robert's suggestion may be taken to demonstrate that «gender itself is acquired through a melancholic repudiation of homosexual attachments»—and that Robert's expressed desire for anal sex with Vera (actually Vicente) is now betraying the repudiation that lies at the base of his melancholia (171). In the event, Vera seizes the opportunity to exit the room and locate the gun with which she fatally shoots both Robert and Marilia—under the cover of looking for lubricating cream that would satisfy Robert's anal sex drive.

Vicente as Vera has been constructed to look like Robert's late wife Gal who was disfigured in a fiery car accident while cavorting with her husband's half-brother Zeca; a chain of events that provokes considerable doubt that the conjugal couple of Robert and Gal were happy together. Even in flashback, the audience only sees Gal with Robert briefly as a disfigured and immobilized convalescent. In this view, Robert's incorporation of Vicente as Gal's look-alike is both melancholic *and* a mask for renounced homophilia in a guise of heterosexuality. Similarly, that Gal was disfigured by fire serves a form of righteous cover for Robert's experimentation on the skin of the film's title, even as that experimentation plainly defies ethical norms.

³ Williams writes, «Melancholia is an excessive, pathological form of mourning that fails to get over the loss of a love object or an ideal that functions as such» (168). Rather than eventual letting go (as in mourning), the melancholic doubles down on the lost object by incorporating it into the ego. Following these assumptions, Williams posits that melancholia replays the young child's loss through renunciation of attachment to the same sex parent (doubly taboo as incestuous and gay). In this view, heterosexuality is effectively achieved but at melancholic cost. While Williams seems to posit these psychodynamics as general to all subjects—certainly a contentious assertion—the theoretical account seems clearly pertinent to repressed gayness.

About halfway through the film's runtime, the audience encounters Vicente as he was in his native Galicia: A callow 20-something who works in his mother's hip second hand clothing store, rides a motorbike, and has an appetite for drugs. At a wedding party, he escorts Robert's troubled and highly medicated daughter Norma into the woods that are laden with libidinal partnering-up (in what presents as very funny caricature of public dyadic lasciviousness that occurs everywhere in Spain). Vicente at the very least attempts penetration against Norma's will. She halts him by biting his hand and passes out when he replies with a slap. While Vicente has the «alibi» of being blown away on drugs, he is also sufficiently cognizant of having committed a sex crime to restore her clothes to their usual washing specifications before he guiltily flees the scene. Already traumatized by her mother's suicide, Norma is committed to an institution and exhibits blinding fear at the sight of men—particularly Robert whom she associates with the assault as he discovered her afterwards—before she too kills herself.

In being «rebooted», little by little, in Robert's laboratory, the rapist Vicente becomes the young woman Vera. And, in what may be taken as a mordant commentary on womanhood's perils, one of the first things that happens to the tightly cloistered Vera is that she is raped by the androgenic primitive Zeca. For having been a man, Vera is also quite aware of the male penchant for voyeurism and visual concomitants of desire. Thus, Vera readily infers that Robert watches her via CCTV in the room in which she is incarcerated—and looks directly back at the unseen voyeur, her image on screen far bigger than Robert as he gazes, a fitting visual metaphor for the psychodynamics of the power of the fetish (Jhally 24-63). Vera also comes on blatantly to Robert almost as soon as the sex change is definitively finished, initially provoking repression of the doctor's desire for his creation as he flees in panic.

While Vicente is suicidal when his penis is removed, Vera later scripts multiple situations where Robert can «save» her with his medical skill, such as making superficial flesh wounds on her wrists and breasts. After Robert kills her rapist Zeca, Vera seems to melt before her Hobbesian «protector». Along with Robert's actions to save her, Vera appears to do the same for him when she torchily acts out ostensible devotion to her captor in front of his suspicious business partner Fulgencio who is set on blackmail. However, feigned devotion is actually Vera's clearest path to escape from Robert. Vera adopts *film noir/femme fatale* shadings, in other words, and employs pussy power strategically, albeit in a nightmare situation not of her own making. The film concludes with Vera's return to the clothing shop in Galicia where she tearfully tells her stunned mother that she is Vicente—and that she is in trouble for the *femme fatale* turn.

Without making apology for Vicente's brutal violation of Norma, *La piel que habito* explores vigilantism and the rightist ideology that succors it. Like Luis Buñuel's masterful *Viridiana* (1960) and its critique of Catholic faith as perfectly embodied by the titular character, Almodóvar does not take the easy route in examining the vigilante and his quest for revenge. Robert, who is brilliant and perhaps attractive at the outset, surely has reason to be ineffably aggrieved for having lost his wife and daughter in a series of calamities. Furthermore, Vicente's behavior toward the vulnerable Norma is criminal without question. Yet, Robert and Vicente are the mediums through which Almodóvar elects to stringently critique vigilantism and revenge that consumes its subject.

It is also to the filmmakers' credit that an over the top-creation such as the brutal vulgarian Zeca—clad in a tiger suit with a tail as a disguise and «mooning» Marilia to prove his identity through the mole by his ass crack—can be seamlessly stitched into the film's otherwise methodical scheme without ruining it. To paraphrase Medhurst's observations about Almodóvar's *¿Qué he hecho para merecer esto?* (1984), Zeca is shocking in part because no one takes his manifest strangeness as anything but Zeca being what he is (129). Moreover, Zeca is a force of narrative movement. After he rapes Vera and is in turn shot by Robert about 30 minutes into the runtime, Marilia's revelations inaugurate the series of flashbacks that constitute much of the film and set the closing sequence into motion.

From New World conquest to New World cons

As noted, Robert is many things in this film—perhaps initially appealing, melancholic, repressed, a vigilante—but one identity that he does not assume is that of Spaniard. At the same time, he is not the first non-Spaniard protagonist in Almodóvar's corpus. Cecilia Roth plays the resourceful, admirable Mañuela as an Argentinian in *Todo sobre mi madre*. However, it bears mention that Mañuela's back story in the film seems a concession to casting and Roth's well-known origins in South America; the character could as easily have been from anywhere in Spain without perturbing the narrative trajectory.

By contrast Robert's origins as an outsider from beyond Spain may be construed as important in a film from the moment in which Spain's population wondered whether insertion into the global order—for example, being yoked to the euro and a Germanic financial model (*cf.*, Kuttner)—was causing far more problems than it had solved. Unlike Mañuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*, *La piel que habito* also features flashbacks (albeit brief) of Robert, Zeca, and Marilia's origins in the Bahia region of Brazil; the difference from Spain is underscored through

the visual spectacle of flashbacks to a *favela* setting (Zeca's back story) and an *uber-bourgeoisie*, vaguely colonialist estate (Robert's psychohistory).

Moreover, while Spain's signature contributions to western patrimony have arguably been in the arts—think Miguel de Cervantes, Pablo Picasso, Ferran Adrià—Robert is a man of science. In a culture characterized by warmth, expressiveness, and street life, Robert is also chilly, reserved and ensconced in a fortress both literal and metaphorical. In reading Robert in this manner, one may find the global inscribed within *La piel que habito*, but it is evident through a suspicious gaze upon globalization. In this view, the half brothers Zeca and Robert may be taken to channel the scourges of fierce New World classism at both ends of the continuum of socioeconomic striation. Career criminal Zeca is the crude and appetitive product of a hyper-commodified New World culture and its attendant «capitalist migraine»; as such he is symmetrical with Robert's elitist removal from the quotidian of Spain. In *La piel que habito*, even New World «Carnival» culture is instrumentalized to furnish cover for Zeca in a tiger disguise after robbing the jewelry store. In this manner, Almodóvar may indeed channel the global—but, pointedly, in terms that present it as a disturbance to Spain. While Almodóvar has regularly turned his critical gaze onto Spain and its institutions—consider the Catholic Church in *La mala educación* (2004) or the traditional family in most any of his films—Robert's shadings of the other readily intersect with popular anxiety over being sucked into the convulsive vortex of globalization. In turn, Vicente's encounter with Robert also speaks to the unwanted change in at least one Spaniard for the encounter with globalism's transformative energies.

At the same time, as often occurs in Almodóvar's corpus, identity is still more complicated. The trio of Robert, Zeca, and Marilia are constructed within the narrative as Brazilians, with flashbacks and references such as carnival that garnish this identity. At the same time, they are played by Spanish actors (highly celebrated ones in the cases of Antonio Banderas and Marisa Paredes) and speak *castellano* not Brazilian Portuguese. In other words, they are coded as New World «others» even as they betray the filmmakers' intense attachment to Spain; indeed, they are «others» circumscribed by our «acting out» of «them». Like Nazis in US films played by US actors speaking English, the other is somewhere out there and ineffably menacing—and thus demands rigorous containment via domesticating representational strategies.

4. *LOS AMANTES PASAJEROS*: LAUGHING MATTERS?

In characterizing Almodóvar's relationship to genre, Andy Medhurst develops a paradox. To wit, Almodóvar has scaled the heights of recognition as a European

auteur ensconced in the rarified precincts of cultural production. At the same time, «The grand tradition of European art cinema has never been an environment in which comedy could breathe easily; indeed, it may be fair to say that one of the qualities that unite disparate films and filmmakers shoehorned into the art-house tradition is their humorlessness» (119). Hence, for the sake of reinforcing Almodóvar's elevated status, «his serious dimensions must be stressed, his humor pushed to the side» (123).

Medhurst stresses Almodóvar's inimitably calibrated tension: «By eluding the neat and lazily polarized labels of 'art-house director' and 'popular entertainer'—in large part through various shadings of comedy throughout his career—«he has been able to produce work of almost unrivalled richness» (130). At the same time, as Medhurst acknowledges, Almodóvar has shifted from the emphasis on what he calls «the comedy of shock, daring the audience to follow him into zones of risk and outrage» (134)—as well as in-your-face body humor—to more subtle registers of the comic. How do these patterns play out in Almodóvar's most recent release from 2013?

Los amantes pasajeros is typical Almodóvar insofar as the cast includes members of his informal entourage of long-standing (Cecilia Roth, Antonio Banderas, Penelope Cruz, Javier Cámara, Lola Dueñas), with whom collaborations extend as far back as thirty years. However, in other regards, the film is atypical. *Los amantes pasajeros* is far more of an ensemble film than other Almodovarian efforts as it lacks a clearly identifiable protagonist. While heavily dependent on coincidence, an Almodóvar staple, the narrative trajectory is also relatively straight with only one digressive sequence into the cowardly Ricardo's shambolic love life; the contrast with the intricate narrative jig-sawing of *Los abrazos rotos* and *La piel que habito* is striking. Along with being limited to the plane's setting for perhaps 90 percent of the brisk 90 minute runtime, stylistic signature is also notably restrained as compared with Almodóvar's recent work and is mainly channeled into a lip-synched version of the Pointer Sisters' «I'm So Excited», as performed by the campy stewards. Finally, *Los amantes pasajeros* is distinct in genre terms as an unabashed venture into comedy with slapstick shadings, the most extended foray in this direction that Almodóvar has attempted since 1988's *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. Nonetheless, the bawdiness of Almodóvar's early films is long gone, perhaps because the rest of Spain has caught up with him. In line with a recurrent auteurist pattern, most of the male characters in *Los amantes pasajeros* are gay or bisexual. However, the gesture is no longer shocking in this historically Roman Catholic society; among other indices of traditional-indifferent liberalization that advances justice, Spain has since 2005 recognized gay marriage.

Los amantes pasajeros's bid to smuggle in political subtext is flagged by Joserra's reference to the «*pacto de silencio*» that the crew maintains about previous mishaps on the fictional Peninsula Airlines' flights. The term is laden with unmistakable significance as it references the post-Franco agreement to not disinter the past. Specifically, under the pact, Spaniards resolved to not convene Truth Commissions, nor to pursue prosecutions over the raft of Franco-era crimes, in a quest to move the nation forward without finger-pointing. In Almodóvar's version of a pact of silence, as noted earlier, the young auteur airbrushed Franco from the annals of history (D'Lugo 97). Only as he approached the age of 50, in 1997's *Carne Trémula*, did Almodóvar explicitly break the self-imposed silence via the original recording of the odious Franquista «Law of Exception» that is piped into the diegesis of the film's opening scene via radio. Reference to the pact of silence in *Los amantes pasajeros* may be taken to channel the filmmaker's concern with *not* being silent about Spain's politics during its most significant post-Franco crisis.

Los amantes pasajeros's opening title cards also insist, with a palpable wink, that «esta película es ficción y fantasía». In the film's penultimate scene, the wayward plane crashes into the edifice labeled «Aeropuerto de La Mancha». The real world referent to this airport is located in the provincial capital in which Almodóvar was born, Ciudad Real. In turn, Ciudad Real («Don Quijote») Central Airport was built at a cost estimated to be as high as 1.1 billion euros in the relatively backwater region (Peregil 1), 100 miles/160 kilometers south of Madrid. However, like many projects undertaken in Spain during the boom years of the millennium's first decade, the airport collapsed into bankruptcy. After less than two years of operation, the complex was an empty hulk with «one of the longest runways in Europe» but «only hawks and falcons gliding in» (Harter 1). In *Los amantes pasajeros*' version of the airport fiasco, a montage around its facilities eloquently emphasize abandonment (empty halls, still luggage claim, silent waiting areas) before the plane slams into the runway off screen. The mordant joke: The plane *crashes* (get it?) into the deserted airport, synecdoche of Spain's current troubles.

The film is set almost entirely on a plane, *mise-en-scene* that (like other enclosed places, such as islands and stage-couches) sets off bells that chime «microcosm». While the plane's «tourist» class area is crowded and features people of obviously non-European origins, the more luxurious «business» class zone is characterized by few people and wide open space along with individualized service from the stewards. The psychically-gifted Bruna is the lone featured character who traverses this class divide in the plane's geography while on a quest to lose her virginity. The other travelers in the plane's elite zone include the businessman Señor Más, escort service entrepreneur Norma, and Ricardo, the «aging rock star»-

type actor. The business class occupants are rounded out by a young couple and the mysterious Señor Infante, clad in a crisp suit and tie, who is discovered to be a hired assassin. The other important cast members wear uniforms; to wit, the trio of male stewards (Joserra, Fajas, and Ulloa) and the two pilots (Alex and Benito).

While *Los abrazos rotos* and *La piel que habito* also prominently feature very wealthy characters (Martel and Robert, respectively), the earlier films' class politics condemn their various shadings of rightwing ideology. *Los amantes pasajeros* assumes, by contrast, a more indulgent stance toward its moneyed travelers. The film's ostensible sympathy with Spain's current problems—e.g., vertiginous 27 percent unemployment (much higher among young people), slashed public services, rampant home foreclosures—is undercut by a curious narrative element. To wit, the less wealthy passengers outside the perimeter of the business travelers have all been drugged to sleep to facilitate an easier flight for the crew. This artistic decision in the script is easily read as a crass form of class consciousness that silences Spain's robust working class and immigrant populations. It also rings false in the light of a series of general strikes and grass roots mobilizations that included an extended occupation of Madrid's central plaza, Puerta del Sol, in the summer of 2011.

In the final scene, all is asserted to be well that ends well. Alex, the married-with-kids pilot, ratifies his gay relationship with Joserra the steward in their arm-in-arm exit across the tarmac, with fetishistic emphasis on their uniforms. The other stewards and stewardesses also exit, similarly arm and arm, with notable *esprit de corps*. In other words, drugged proletarians in the tourist section notwithstanding, Spanish workers march onward from the microcosmic plane wreck.

Given the film's implicit concern with Spain's crisis, the fate of the businessman, Señor Más («Mister More») is of particular interest. Throughout the film, Más is a figure of Weberian «Protestant Ethic» rectitude, stubbornly reading a copy of the right-wing paper *Vanguardia* while a mescaline-driven orgy erupts around him. According to the newspaper article referenced in the film's dialogue, Más is indeed responsible for the Aeropuerto de La Mancha's failure. As he strides across the tarmac in the closing scene, mobile phone in hand, his estranged daughter Piedad calls to warn him to not return home as the police are waiting for him. Having been told earlier by the psychic Bruna that he will be arrested and serve time, the ramrod straight Más accepts his fate. Indeed, he appears pleased that the estranged daughter (working as a dominatrix) is returning to the family circle. The film's redemptive closing positions Más as admirable if starchy. Nonetheless, this artistic decision smoothes over Spain's class politics through refusal of a more feisty posture toward State-corporate complicity in the implosion of Spain's economy. There are no harsh accents in closing; the final diegetic image captures

Benito's pilot hat exploding through the foam on the runway, a not subtle reference to ejaculation monumentalized in closing freeze-frame. At the same time, the errant flight to Mexico never leaves Spain's airspace for becoming stuck in a vortex over Toledo. Hence, in *Los amantes pasajeros* version of Spain's crisis, it is «contained» within national reference points—and within individualistic, home-grown solutions that eschew and even deny the impact of global pressures on national (European Union) economies (Kuttner 110-131).

The indifferent-to-negative continuum of reception to *Los amantes pasajeros* may have been partly due to its having raised front page political issues—and then glossed them over for a more emollient tale, in a manner redolent of Almodóvar's mother Francisca Caballero among the villagers to whom she read (noted in the opening epigram). While no one can condemn Almodóvar for trying to make people happier—he is immersed in entertainment as an art and a business—*Los amantes pasajeros* has not been received as a vehicle that does so in practice. In an interview that betrays shadings of defensiveness, Almodóvar observes that the film «is doing really well in Spain» (Calhoun 3). In fact, its opening weekend in March 2013 recorded a quarter of a million spectators and 1.9 million euros in box office receipts, second in Spain that week to the Sam Raimi directed *Oz, the great and powerful* (Belinchón). Nonetheless, *Los amantes pasajeros* effectively disappeared from cinemas within only two months. Spain's most highly circulated daily, the left-leaning *El País*, derided *Los amantes pasajeros* as «ridícula» and, with open anti-intellectualism, found it more suitable for doctoral theses than viewing. Carlos Boyero's attack finishes with the lament that one could not leave complaints about the film in a *libro de reclamaciones* at the ticket window (Boyero 5). *ABC*, a journal of the right, emits less scorching fury at the film, but inventories the generally weak reviews in British press and wonders whether the director is losing the touch (*ABC*). While *Los amantes pasajeros* is artistically accomplished and carefully crafted, damped-down reception to it may be grounded in disappointing prescriptions for a nation in a wrenchingly difficult phase.

5. CONCLUSION

In exhaustively viewing Almodóvar's films years ago in preparation for composing *Global Auteurs*, I emerged from the screening room with heightened regard for the Man from La Mancha and his feel for human subjects. An appraisal along such lines is not inevitable; enacting start-to-finish review of Lars von Trier's corpus while writing the same book left me with strong distaste for the Danish auteur's chilliness and seemingly undifferentiated contempt. Von Trier's subsequent «keep-this-man-away-from-microphones-for-his-own-sake» public idiocies

such as claiming to «sympathize» with Hitler (British Broadcast Company 2) have done nothing to change my appraisal of his work. By contrast, in preparing this article on Almodóvar's three most recent films, I also reviewed earlier ones that did not impress me at first blush (*Matador* [1986] and *La ley del deseo* [1987]). I emerged far more taken with the artistry and implicit politics of these mid-1980s' efforts as well.

More than a decade into the new millennium, Almodóvar's still steady stream of films continue to be events that reward viewing. However, in the wake of *Los amantes pasajeros*' relatively disappointing profile, students and enthusiasts of the director's body of work can harbor hope for further Almodovarian reinvention within his auteurist patterns, in the light of the director's long record of it. Finally, as concerns the Global Almodóvar thesis, the director's recent efforts present ambiguous testimony as to how it plays out—but nonetheless these films furnish evidence that the *Spanish Almodóvar* is the center of gravity of his body of work.

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