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Auteurism in the Global Age: A Prologue

An earlier version of this paper was first presented in Cuenca in November 2003 at an international congress on Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, a fascinating event co-sponsored by his production company El Deseo and the University of Castilla-La Mancha. The conference was designed to launch the

new Almodóvar studies center at UCLM, a relatively new Spanish school located near his native village in La Mancha, which will make all of his papers and production materials accessible to scholars from any part of the world. A secondary goal was to demonstrate his status as a major world-class auteur to those Spanish critics and scholars who, despite (or perhaps because of) his enormous commercial and critical success

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worldwide, are still reluctant to take his work seriously. Thus, each day of the conference featured an international panel organized and moderated by a scholar from a different nation who had already written about Almodóvar's achievements—Román Gubern from Spain, Paul Julian Smith from England, Frédéric Strauss (the editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*) from France, and myself from the United States.

What was most fascinating about the conference was the way Almodóvar and his production company were blatantly controlling the auteurist discourse surrounding his films. This conference revealed their masterful negotiation of a complex network of local, regional, national, and international relations within the changing global film scene and the several ironies this mastery generates. On the one hand, in the world market Almodóvar is unquestionably the most successful Spanish filmmaker of all time, with the greatest number of box-office successes both at home and abroad. Although his film *¡Átame!* (*Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, 1989) was condemned by Hollywood censors (and changed the U.S. rating system as a conse-

quence) and his *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988) was bypassed by the Oscars, he succeeded in winning two of those awards for his last two films (the only Spaniard thus far to do so). *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999) won an Oscar for best foreign language film, and *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*, 2002) for best screenplay. Yet unlike two of his most well-known former stars, Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz, whose Hollywood crossovers he helped make possible, or his young rival Alejandro Amenábar, whose *Abre los ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*, 1997) was remade in English as *Vanilla Sky* with Tom Cruise and whose English-language co-production, *The Others* (2000), with Nicole Kidman, was a huge global hit, so far Almodóvar has remained committed to making movies only in Spanish and only in Spain, where he has total artistic control. Headed by his brother and executive producer Agustín, El Deseo is operated by a fleet of talented young Spanish men and women who owe their personal loyalty and careers only to Pedro.



Leo (Marisa Paredes) and her mother (Chus Lampreave) in *La flor de mi secreto*.

This commitment to making films only on his home turf does not make his works insular, for they continue to feature a rich intertextuality with Hollywood movies—a dialogue that paradoxically underscores his own originality and boldness by contrast. And despite Spain's key position within the European Union (whose cultural, economic, and political capital as a global power is growing), Almodóvar's films emphasize connections not between Spain and other European nations but with Latin America, which, despite its huge population, still has a marginal position within the current configurations of global power. As noted by several speakers at the conference, these connections are fostered by Almodóvar's inclusion of Latin-American characters in his stories, by his casting of Argentine actors like Cecilia Roth (the star of *Laberinto de pasiones* and *Todo sobre mi madre*), and by his reliance on Latin-American music, particularly Mexican boleros (a dynamic that was brilliantly analyzed by Kathleen Vernon). In fact, as Vernon points out, Almodóvar's films have helped popularize Latin-American music and culture worldwide.¹ By extending the reach of his films throughout the Spanish language world, he deepens his penetration of the global market in a way that rivals Hollywood and Europe while still remaining loyal to his Spanish speaking origins and retaining the outsider's edge. This strategy may remind us of similar ones pursued earlier by the Havana Film Festival and by the international film school founded by Gabriel García Márquez in Cuba.

To add a further layer of complexity, starting with *La flor de mi secreto* (*The Flower of My Secret*) in 1995, Almodóvar's films have celebrated the Spanish pueblo (local village) as an alternative to identification with the European Union. He is increasingly committed to a cinema rooted in localism and autobiography whose originality is appreciated worldwide rather than to a bland Euro-pudding that produces bad imitations of Hollywood blockbusters. A similar strategy was also visible at the conference: while celebrating Almodóvar's global reach and success, the conference was still situated in his home turf of La Mancha, whose marginal position it helped push into the mainstream. It was strategically scheduled a few months before the opening of what he claims to be his most autobiographical film, *Mala educación*, which stars handsome young Mexican actor Gael García Bernal, whom *Newsweek Magazine* has dubbed "the hottest new import" and "the latin James Dean" and who "first captured Hollywood's attention with the Oscar-nominated *Amores perros*" and "the erotic indie smash, *Y Tu*

Mamá también."² At the conference Almodóvar said he expects *Mala educación* (like *¡Átame!*) to have problems with the Hollywood rating system, this time over sexually explicit scenes with minors. Perhaps he hoped the conference would help recruit supporters for these upcoming negotiations. (At the time of this writing, the film has not yet opened in the U.S., even though it is already a big hit throughout Europe.)

As Christian Metz once observed in *The Imaginary Signifier*, film historians frequently find themselves becoming intellectual publicists for the texts they describe.³ This is precisely what happened to all of us film scholars at the International Congress on Almodóvar, where we may not have appeared as extras in his latest film (as some of us were originally promised), but where we were all held in thrall by the live appearance of Almodóvar and his performers (including his current reigning divas, Marisa Paredes and Cecilia Roth) and where we were all cast as interactive players in a promotional drama that got extensive coverage in the Spanish press. As a consequence, we all got a "good education" on how auteurism currently works in the global film market.

The Brain-Dead Trilogy

At the beginning of Almodóvar's *La flor de mi secreto*, the protagonist happens to see the end of an educational video that trains medical personnel how to counsel loved ones of brain-dead patients. The video's goal is to get survivors to let go of the dead and donate their vital organs for life-giving transplants. Signaling a shift to a darker tone for his hyper-plotted melodramas both emotionally and visually, this painful opening inaugurates a new line of experimentation for Almodóvar, introducing new ways of mobilizing the body to represent social, political, and generic change. By calling these films a "brain-dead" trilogy, I do not mean to imply that these movies are mindless. Quite the contrary, I am arguing that the "brain-dead" trope demands an active mode of spectatorship that makes us highly attentive to the fascinating interplay between the expressive powers of words and bodies.

Whereas the trope of the brain-dead youth is merely a minor episode in *La flor de mi secreto* (a pivotal film that did not do particularly well in the global market), when transplanted to *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999) and *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*, 2002), those two stunning commercial and critical successes that gathered Oscars, Globes, Césars, and Goyas worldwide, it becomes the germinal image

that launches the plot of the former and fully flowers as the central premise of the latter. In all three melodramas this brain-dead trope refigures Spain as a motherland. It also fosters a fluid intertextual trans-subjectivity that runs within and across the three films. This paper explores the implications of this brain-dead trope and the way it functions in all three works.

This auteurist tactic of introducing a theme as a minor motif in one film and then transplanting it to later works where it flowers is familiar in the works of many filmmakers from earlier decades, especially those who consistently draw on personal material—such as Woody Allen, John Cassavetes, Federico Fellini, and Ingmar Bergman. (In fact, this practice became so commonplace in Bergman's work during the 1960s that he could end *The Passion of Anna* (1969) by saying in voice-over of his male protagonist: "This time his name was Andreas Winkelman.") But in our period, more resistant to auteurism, the recurrence of an unusual trope like the brain-dead youth strategically demands a retroactive reading that attends to such auteurist echoes and encourages the audience to follow the filmmaker faithfully from one text to the next.

In his *New Yorker* review of Belgian director Lucas Belvaux's recent trilogy (*On the Run*, *An Amazing Couple*, and *After Life*), Anthony Lane argues that whereas earlier series like "Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence* became known as a trilogy . . . because those studies of fretful solitude began to pattern themselves as variations on a theme, Belvaux, however, planned his campaign from the start."⁴ Contemporary cinematic trilogies become experiments not only in marketing strategies but also in narrative structure and seriality—ones that can occur within the film itself (as in inventive popular movies like *Groundhog Day* and *Run Lola Run*) or across a series of sequels (like *The Godfather*, *The Matrix*, *Kill Bill*, and *Lord of the Rings*). Or, as in the more complex cases of Buñuel's picaresque trilogy of *The Milky Way*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, and *Phantom of Liberty*, and Kieslowski's "Three Colors" trilogy of *Red*, *Blue*, and *White*, and the trilogies of Belvaux and Almodóvar, the experimental narratives become an interwoven "laberinto de pasiones" that is spun both within each film and across the three texts—a structural pattern that can be perceived and fully appreciated only through rereading all three films with hindsight. Lane traces such narrative experimentation back to earlier literary works like Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and the 1947 publication of "Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, in which a minor incident on a bus was recounted in ninety-nine different ways."⁵

One could add Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and many other literary works to his list. Yet I would also link this pattern to the current experiments with interactive open narratives that are increasingly popular in television, electronic games, and the internet and that are increasingly exerting a pressure on cinema—not only in the art cinema of European auteurs like Peter Greenaway, Mike Figgis, and Tom Tykwer, but also in popular Hollywood genre films like *Memento* and *21 Grams*.

By calling attention to this dynamic in Almodóvar's works, I am not claiming that he necessarily planned all three films as a trilogy in advance. The mere fact that he made another film between *La flor* and *Todo sobre mi madre* that does not contain the brain-dead trope suggests the contrary. Yet, even this work, *Carne trémula* (*Live Flesh*, 1997), his most explicitly political and doggedly heterosexual film to date, is illuminated by re-reading it in light of the trilogy. For, instead of a brain-dead youth, it features a straight paraplegic cop (played by Javier Bardem) whose lower body becomes dead flesh. It is as if the straight violent mindset from the fascist period and from Spain's patriarchal version of film noir (*cine negro español*) had to be exorcised before Almodóvar could do films like *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*, where heterosexuals and their relations are lovingly queered with a sexually mobile sensibility.⁶

Letting Go in *La flor de mi secreto*

In *La flor de mi secreto*, the brain-dead trope is confined within a video deceptively inset at the opening that trains us how to read the main plot. Behind the opening titles, we see two young doctors informing a grieving middle-aged mother that her 16-year-old son is "brain-dead," a concept she is unable to grasp and refuses to accept. The difficulty of understanding the ontological ambiguities of this condition is compounded by the meta-narrative status of the scene itself. At first it seems like the opening sequence of the main plot, but then, with a cut to a cameraman looking at the scene through his viewfinder, and a pan to a close-up of the teacher and then a long shot of the students to whom she is presenting this material, it is redefined as an inset documentary being used in a seminar for medical counselors and nurses. Later, after being introduced to the protagonist, Leo, a writer of romantic fictions marvelously played by Marisa Paredes, we return to this encounter and discover that this training video is actually a docudrama or fiction, for the doctors and the grieving mother are merely actors and the pri-



Leo and Paco (Imanol Arias) in *La flor de mi secreto*.

mary goal of the young men is not to comfort the woman for her loss but to persuade her to donate the vital organs of her loved one. Although this "brain-dead" sequence appears to be a false start, it functions as an analogue for the woman's melodrama that follows in the main plot.

The brain-dead trope applies primarily to Leo, for she is the one who is figuratively comatose. The first time we see her (between the two brain-dead training-tape sequences), she is asleep in a room dominated by framed portraits of her absentee husband. The trope also applies to the dead-end contracts (both literary and marital) that are drying up her creative and sexual juices. And to her unfinished novel *In Cold Storage* that documents her current death-in-life condition. And to those painful boots from her husband that cripple her feet and restrict her movement. And to her philandering husband, whose sex organ has been appropriated by her best friend, the treacherous teacher who uses brain-dead videos to persuade relatives to relinquish other vital organs of loved ones.

Leo must also let go of her masochistic attraction to the sexy flamenco dancer Antonio, the son of her

maid, who is introduced in a dance sequence that also is inserted (like the introduction of Leo) between the two scenes of the brain-dead training tape. When Antonio steals Leo's unfinished novel to finance his own dance debut, he sacrifices her words for the expressive powers of his and his mother's dancing bodies. As if to foreshadow this conflict, the first sensations we experience behind the film's opening titles are printed words paired with the percussive sound of flamenco dancing. Like Almodóvar's recuperative reinscription of bullfighting in *Matador*, *La flor* performs a similar makeover on flamenco. For the brilliant dance numbers by the mother-son duo infuse flamenco with incestuous overtones, linking it to Almodóvar's revisionist stereotypes of transgressive sexuality. But Leo now abandons those stereotypes and redirects her love interest to a plump, nurturing writer named Angel, with whom she develops a healing trans-subjectivity, which, like the mother/child bond, fuses identification with desire. As an editor at *El país*, this feminized fellow-lover of words adopts her *nom de plume*, Amanda Gris, and its contractual obligations, freeing Leo to write whatever she pleases.

Such shifts in erotic desire function differently in *La flor* than in earlier Almodóvar films such as *Matador* (1986) and *La ley del deseo* (1987), which were made in the wake of *la movida*, when Spain was still celebrating the speed of its peaceful conversion from Francoism to democracy and when Almodóvar's characters were still undergoing instantaneous transformations in gender and sexuality, particularly while watching melodramas spiced with porn. In the opening of *La ley del deseo*, the handsome heterosexual played by Antonio Banderas is instantaneously converted into a homosexual after watching a hot scene of narcissistic sex in a melodrama directed by a gay filmmaker, and in *Matador* the fatal attraction between two serial killers is intensified and their silent suicide pact sealed while watching the notorious "lust in the dust" climax of King Vidor's melodramatic Western, *Duel in the Sun*. Both films celebrated cinema's power to perform a dramatic sex change on the nation's cultural stereotypes, which Almodóvar's sexually mobile canon potentially accomplished in the 1980s and early 1990s by successfully penetrating and queering foreign markets. But by 1995, on the eve of the 1996 general election—when the right-wing Partido Popular defeated the PSOE—there was a need for a broad-based belief in the stability and strength of a democratic Spain that could survive this return to the Right. So it is not surprising that the pace of change in *La flor*, both for the female writer and the nation, is more gradual, and that the conversion takes place not within urban X-rated movie theaters but in the nurturing local village, which Almodóvar calls in the press kit the "cradle of Female crafts." *La flor* shows how earlier images of Spain and its traditional resources can be regendered female and recuperated as vital organs that can be transplanted for the twenty-first century.

Although this recuperative return to the maternal village had also occurred in earlier Almodóvar films, such as *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* (*What Did I Do to Deserve This*, 1984), where the grandmother takes her delinquent grandson after his mother bashes in the brains of his father with a hambone, and in *¡Átame!* where the liberated porn queen takes her beloved captor to get her mother's blessing, it is only in *La flor*, the film that Almodóvar calls a "neo-realist portrait" of his mother, that we actually see the pueblo and the curative effects of the visit.⁷

The fashionably lean, love-starved Leo is awakened from her suicidal nightmare and death-in-life condition by the voice of her mother, whom she accompanies on a trip back to the Motherland—their

home village in La Mancha, where Don Quixote and Almodóvar were born and where the Almodóvar conference took place. There her mother reminds her she was once called "gordita" and makes her pay attention to her own body. Not only does Leo's neurotic hard-edged persona prove to be dead weight, but her hard-bodied, cold-hearted husband, whose career choice—as a military strategist for Spain's NATO forces in Brussels and as a peacekeeper in Bosnia—now also proves more ominous in retrospect, particularly in light of José María Aznar's support of Bush and Blair in the recent Iraq war.

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, this rural move in *La flor* is not provincial, for it implies an acceptance of global melodrama in place of multinational militarism, world-class flamenco instead of world cup soccer, commuting between metropolitan Madrid and the local pueblos of La Mancha rather than between Brussels and Bosnia. The film refigures the Spanish nation and its changing relations both with the micro-regional village and the macro-regional European Union. Released when Almodóvar and his generation had become disillusioned with the performance of the González government, it asked: How do you let go of corrupt authorities that you once trusted and loved?⁸

Transplants in *Todo sobre mi madre*

Whereas in *La flor*, a film made shortly before the Socialists were voted out of power, the emphasis was on pruning away dead-end structures, the emphasis switches to the regenerative power of transplants in *Todo sobre mi madre*, a film made four years later when Spain was more solidly entrenched within the power structures of the European Union, which were fostering the flow of émigrés across weakening national borders. Yet in contrast to more recent films such as *21 Grams* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, in Almodóvar's story the transplant is not crucial to the plot. Rather, it is used merely as a trope for a trans-subjective intertextuality that enables names, plots, words, viruses, and other vital organs to pass fluidly from one body or text or nation to another, a process introduced through the recurring figure of the brain-dead youth.

In *Todo sobre mi madre* the two brief brain-dead scenes from *La flor* grow into a 20-minute prologue, which is tripled to launch the main plot. This time the opening sequence in the National Transplant Organization focuses on detailed close-ups of an I.V. bag and its drip, colorful dials on the high-tech monitors, and EEG waves that signal that the patient's a goner, before



Penelope Cruz as Sister Rosa and Cecilia Roth as Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*.

panning to the protagonist, Manuela (Cecilia Roth), who is introduced as a healthcare worker in search of a recipient for the precious liver.

We then fluidly follow her into her domestic setting, where she transplants the brain-dead trope into the main plot. Instead of a rejected wife dreaming of her absentee husband like Leo, Manuela is a vivacious single mother cooking for her teenage son Esteban, who (like Almodóvar) has been writing fiction since he was eight years old. Their mother/son conversation takes a strange turn when they begin questioning each other over whether they would be willing to prostitute themselves for the other. The conversation looks backward not only to Manuela's own personal history with her husband, who (we later learn) is a transvestite prostitute, but also to Almodóvar's previous film, *Carne trémula*, where the single mother played by Penelope Cruz was a whore who (as her son Victor lovingly brags) turned thousands of tricks to support him. The conversation also helps prepare us for this film's later Barcelona sequences, which are swarming with hard-working hookers. Yet instead of being linked primar-

ily to sexual mobility (as in his earlier films), this sequence's quick fluid movements across a variety of visual details, sounds, words, tones, and thematic immediately immerse us within a growing network of intertextuality, which energizes the narrative and extends the life, meaning, and mobility of all its discrete parts.

Nowhere is this intertextual dynamic more pointed than at the moment when mother and son settle down to watch *All About Eve* on television and see the scene in which Eve Harrington meets her idol, played by Bette Davis. This is the moment when the main title for *Todo sobre mi madre* appears on screen. In case anyone misses the blatant intertextual connection, Esteban claims the Spanish title of the Hollywood movie should have been *Todo sobre Eve*. These intertextual connections later become entangled with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when we learn that Huma Rojo (the Spanish star whom Esteban worships and who is now playing Blanche DuBois) got her smoking habit and stage name from Bette Davis, and also when his mother, Manuela, is later accused of being an Eve Harrington



Marisa Paredes plays actress Huma Rojo in *Todo sobre mi madre*.

(by the actress whom she replaces as Stella). Though Esteban wishes his mother were still on stage, he settles for seeing her perform in the medical seminar, which carries them back to the hospital for the second brain-dead scene, this time admittedly pure fiction.

In this fictional training video Manuela plays the grieving woman who is told by two doctors that her husband is brain-dead. While her son takes notes, we now see a concise convergence of all the meta-narrative variations from *La flor*: the dramatized scene, its filming, and its pedagogical use in the seminar. We also see Manuela drawing from her own experience to play this role, a form of trans-subjectivity frequently used by performers. Thus far in the film we have already seen a rich interplay between fiction and real life, as well as many intertextual connections with earlier narratives by Almodóvar and other writers, but this intermingling reaches a dramatic climax in the sequence that follows.

It begins with a shot of Esteban writing in a café near a barred window through which we see a giant facial close-up of Marisa Paredes as actress Huma

Rojo, posted in front of a theater, as if left over from her roles as pop star Becky Del Paramo in *Tacones lejanos* (*High Heels*, 1991) and writer Amanda Gris in *La flor*. Linking this image with the maternal, Manuela waits for her son in front of the poster, before they enter the theater to see a live performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is accompanied by Argentine background music that might come from Manuela's memories of her native homeland. Later, Manuela tells Esteban that 20 years ago she played Stella to his father's Stanley Kowalski in the same play, and promises to tell him their story as soon as they get home. He never gets to hear it, for just as *Streetcar* provides the back-story for Manuela's marriage and separation, the brain-dead video foretells Esteban's fate: he is run-down by a car and rendered brain-dead when running to get Huma Rojo's autograph in the rain. This time Manuela plays the brain-dead hospital scene for real and signs away Esteban's heart.

During this painful scene, and later when Manuela stalks the lucky organ recipient in Galicia, we hear two voiceovers by Esteban as if he were reading the last

entries from his journal: "Tomorrow I turn 17, but I look older . . . boys who live alone with their mother have a special face, like an intellectual or writer," and, "Last night, she showed me a photograph of when she was young. Half of it was missing and I didn't want to tell her that my life is missing that same half." As if trying to fill in the gaps in the photograph and the other half of Esteban's life, Manuela carries these voiceovers inside her as vital organs for a trans-subjective collaboration, a merging of voices that cannot save him (the way Leo was saved by her mother's voice) but that does extend his life story. Manuela continues, in maternal voiceover, with the episode she had promised to tell him: "17 years ago I made this same journey, but in the other direction from Barcelona to Madrid. I was running away then, too, but . . . I was carrying Esteban inside me. I was running away from his father, and now I am searching for him." As in her medical searches, she now seeks in her husband both the donor (who impregnated her) and the recipient (who will be regenerated by their son's journal).

In *Todo sobre mi madre* the interplay between bodies and words is developed intertextually through proper names and theatrical performances. Just as the name Esteban is passed from father to son and from one half-brother to another, the words of a playwright (whether a novice like Esteban or veterans like Tennessee Williams and Federico García Lorca) survive many performances and embodiments, as well as the death, of the author. And just as *Streetcar* drives the transformative events in Manuela's life (meeting her husband and losing their son), Esteban's journal is the narrative vehicle that fulfills his wish of meeting his father.

As the brain-dead prologue ends, Manuela disappears into a vagina-like tunnel, before she and her story are transplanted to Barcelona where they, and a new cultural stereotype for a globalized Spain, are reborn. There we learn that Manuela is a transplant from Argentina whose handsome Argentine husband Esteban became a transvestite in Paris.⁹ Moving masterfully among a trinity of female roles (as actress, nurse and mother), Manuela carries the story of the Motherland back from the pueblos of Latin America to Spain's metropolitan centers of Madrid and Barcelona, where she embodies Almodóvar's new super-maternal stereotype for a globalized Spain.

When I interviewed Almodóvar in 1987 and asked him why in Spanish Oedipal narratives the patricidal impulse was so frequently displaced onto the mother, he replied: "The idea of motherhood is very important

in Spain. It's as if the mother represents the law, the police. . . . When you kill the mother, you kill precisely everything you hate. It's like killing the power."¹⁰ By the time he made *Tacones lejanos* in 1991, Almodóvar had replaced the repressive patriarchal mother with a glamorous pop star who, as her daughter's primary object of desire, was still overpowering. But here in *Todo sobre mi madre*, the non-repressive maternal figure becomes an alternative non-threatening "mother superior" who supersedes his earlier transsexual stereotypes of post-Franco Spain—a switch that may have been partly motivated by the global AIDS epidemic. Those earlier stereotypes are embodied in Manuela's husband Lola—a self-centered, drug-addicted, transvestite prostitute dying of AIDS, who is forgiven and replaced by the resourceful Manuela. Not only does this new "non-virginal Madonna" valiantly save the transvestite prostitute Agrado from a violent attack in Barcelona's notorious red light zone and Huma's straying young lesbian lover from street drugs, but she also adopts both Lola's newborn son and the infant's mother Sister Rosa, a young renegade nun left over from *Entre tinieblas* (*Dark Habits*, 1983). Like the single mother in the miraculous birth that opens *Carne trémula*, this martyred mother is played by Penelope Cruz—an endearing role that helped secure her crossover (or should we say "ascension") to Hollywood.

Despite the key roles that transvestites play in *Todo sobre mi madre*, the mobility generated by the story is more a matter of subjectivity than sexuality. The film demonstrates that not only are all genders and sexualities cultural constructs, but that the ability to love and identify across barriers of gender, sexuality, and class is a courageous leap of faith. This idea is most powerfully expressed by the transvestite Agrado, who, after cataloguing her many costly cosmetic surgeries, concludes the performance of her life story with a line about subjectivity with which everyone can identify: "It costs a lot to be authentic because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you dreamed you are." Without this imaginative leap, how can a woman be impregnated by a female impersonator (a scene we saw brilliantly enacted in *Tacones lejanos*)? In another era and genre, a similar kind of imaginative leap was made by Desdemona and Othello across divisions of race, age, and culture, an achievement that made their tragic end more painful. Here the imaginative leap is threatened neither by jealousy nor betrayal but by AIDS, the first time that global disease has been addressed in a film by Almodóvar. Although AIDS kills the transvestite father and

transgressive nun, the miraculous recovery of their child (the third Esteban in the series) proves the virus can be conquered.

The discovery of this miracle is made possible by the loving relationship that exists between the two nurturing mothers who were both impregnated by the same transvestite, and between the two sons who, as vital organs, are transplanted from one motherland to another. The fluid trans-subjectivity that flows between these women and the various sons, transvestites, lesbians, actresses, infantile fathers, and other dependents they mother, strengthens the alliance among female impersonators of all genders. Almodóvar addresses this reception community in his inclusive dedication: "To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider [who committed suicide after the death of her son] . . . To all the actresses who have played actresses. To all women who act. To all men who act and become women. To all the people who want to be mothers. To My Mother." Almodóvar extends this list on his official website to include many other actresses who have played actresses on screen and ultimately places the female principle at the root of all narrative: "To me, three or four women speaking is the origin of life, but also of fiction and narrative."¹¹ It is this hyper-feminized trans-subjectivity that makes this movie the "mother" of all Almodóvar's maternal melodramas.

Far from suggesting that Almodóvar's trilogy is brain-dead, what I am arguing is that the image of the comatose youth becomes a new way of refiguring the crucial link between intertextuality and changing subjectivity—particularly when these processes are linked to loss, growth, and recovery. This recurring image runs across the three films and weaves them together, with *Todo sobre mi madre* at the emotional center. For this film not only replays the opening of *La flor de mi secreto*, but literally sets the stage for *Hable con ella*. As the official website points out: "*Todo sobre mi madre* ends with a theater curtain being opened to reveal a darkened stage, *Talk to Her* begins with the same curtain, also opening."

Resuscitation in *Hable con ella*

In *Hable con ella*, the masterpiece of the trilogy, the brain-dead case study takes over the entire film where it is doubled in two comatose young females: a ballet dancer named Alicia (Leonor Watling) and a matador named Lydia (Rosario Flores), who, when awake, were both masters of the body in motion. In the hospital their bodies are faithfully attended by verbal men who love

them: Benigno (Javier Cámara), a lonely male nurse who used to be aroused by watching Alicia rehearse; and Marco (Darío Grandinetti), a sensitive Argentine journalist (like Angel in *La flor*), who was writing an article on Lydia for *El país*. Only the male nurse is nurturing, but he transmits both his love and maternal powers to the weepy empathic journalist. Only the dancer is brought back to life—through acts of love, both verbal and physical, that reawaken her body as a motherland. Though such acts would ordinarily be called "rape," the maternal Benigno performs them as part of his tragic devotion to his beloved, with whom he identifies and to whom he willingly donates his vital organs, even at the risk of his own life.

Despite this doubling of the brain-dead narrative and the film's emotional lushness, *Hable con ella* still feels almost pared down, particularly in comparison to the hyper-plotted, heavily populated ensemble piece, *Todo sobre mi madre*. This effect, I would argue, is partly the result of finally placing the brain-dead trope at center stage, instead of on the margins in an inset film or prologue. This move also enables several other narrative and emotional strands from earlier Almodóvar works finally to be pushed to their limits.

Hable con ella puts the emphasis not on letting go (as in *La flor*) nor on regenerative transplants (as in *Todo sobre mi madre*) but on "resuscitation," which requires an interplay between the expressive powers of words and body language. This combination is well suited to cinema and to the "dumb show" dimensions of melodrama—those non-verbal histrionics of the genre that Almodóvar has always mastered but that are now pushed all the way into dance. For the first time in the brain-dead trilogy, Almodóvar uses the comatose bodies to motivate long monologues and to alternate between these two modes of verbal and gestural expression. Although the split between words and body language is crucial in two dubbing sequences from earlier Almodóvar movies—the inset porn sequence at the opening of *La ley del deseo* that I have already mentioned, and the *Johnny Guitar* sequence from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, where Carmen Maura and her straying lover are dubbing the Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayward dialogue into Spanish,¹² this split does not dominate these earlier films nor the other two works in the brain-dead trilogy, as it does here in *Hable con ella*. With its miraculous recovery and bad timing, the romance of Benigno and Alicia combines the fairytale of *Sleeping Beauty* with the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, two paradigmatic love stories that have both

been repeatedly adapted to the pure gestural language of dance.

Behind the film's opening titles we see "Cafe Müller," a dance performed by the troupe of world-famous German choreographer Pina Bausch, who functions (like Huma Rojo) as this film's primary diva. Instead of beginning with an establishing shot of the theatrical setting, this dance sequence opens with a close-up of a female dancer, which immediately hooks us into the expressive power of body language. Taking over the introductory functions of the brain-dead video prologues from the earlier two films (as well as the flamenco dance numbers from *La flor* and live theater from *Todo sobre mi madre*), this nonverbal performance prefigures the double brain-dead drama of the main plot. As Almodóvar puts it, "*Hable con ella* begins and ends with two of her [Bausch's] works that melt miraculously with the plot. It's as if I had entrusted her with that choreography."¹³

What we actually see in the opening dance are two women in white slips moving blindly in a room full of chairs, with eyes shut as if sleepwalking, while a man

in black (whom Benigno describes as, "the saddest man I've ever seen") runs ahead to move chairs out of their way. When the film cuts to the audience, we see Benigno and Marco, who both identify with this male attendant and who associate the female dancers with their respective beloveds. Although still strangers, Benigno is attracted to the empathic Marco (both emotionally and erotically) when he sees him moved to tears by the dance. The devoted Benigno has come to the theater so that he can describe this performance to the comatose Alicia, whom he has been nursing the past four years, and (like Esteban in the prologue to *Todo sobre mi mama*) so that he can get an autograph from the diva—a photograph of Pina Bausch inscribed to Alicia.

The opening performance enables us to perceive all human movement as dance, especially when set to music without words and presented in fetishizing close shots. The daily grooming and massaging of Alicia's inert body, the ritualistic dressing of Lydia in her suit of lights, the contrasting movements of matador and toro in the corrido, Marco's methodical killing of a snake, and the graceful gliding of an anonymous male



Brain-death takes center stage in *Hable con ella*.



Javier Cámara as Benigno.

body through a swimming pool—all of these actions are transformed into dance. At times the camera movements also appear to be choreographed, as in the sequence where Caetano Veloso is performing; as it sweeps across the faces of spectators and unifies them as a reception community, the camera also seems mesmerized by his song. This choreographing of movement suggests that any physical action can potentially be redeemed, depending on how it is performed and narrativized. To translate this complex body language into verbal description is inevitably reductive, even when it is as detailed as Benigno's account of the opening dance.

Benigno is the film's primary advocate for words. He claims talking is the first step to overcoming problems and the best way of showing women you love them. Having devoted 15 years to nursing his mother, this mama's boy admires and emulates women's ability to talk about their emotional lives, which is the core of maternal melodrama and, according to Almodóvar, the root of all fiction and narrative.¹⁴ Yet Benigno rejects two patriarchal institutions that frequently play a crucial role in this genre because of their simplistic ap-

proach to language: psychoanalysis (with its so-called "talking cure" and diagnostic labels), and the law (with its binary choices of true/false and innocent/guilty). He resists other binaries (like gay or straight, male or female) and reductive definitions of key words like *brain-dead*, *psychopath*, and *rape*. He complicates the "talking cure" of traditional melodrama by combining it with illicit sexual moves performed offscreen—a combination whose verbal and hormonal infusions, miraculously bring Alicia back to life. As Alicia's dance teacher Katerina (Geraldine Chaplin) puts it, "Nothing is simple!" a point she illustrates with her dialectic description of a dance about World War I called "Trenches," which she is choreographing for Geneva, a city associated with peace: "From death emerges life, from the masculine emerges the feminine, and from the earth emerges . . . the ethereal." This description makes us realize why, after watching "Cafe Müller," it's so difficult to read Benigno's actions simply as rape. As Almodóvar puts it, "Telling the plot of *Hable* in a few words sounds crazy and is unfaithful to the film's spirit. . . . My stories are harder to tell in a few words now,"¹⁵ and, I would argue, that is because of

his increasing reliance on physical gesture transformed into dance.

Yet consider an analogous narrative situation of sex with a comatose action heroine in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003), where extreme acts of violent revenge are performed with comic glee against the exploitive male nurse and the buddy to whom he pimps his patient's body, sentiments that are partly set up by an alternative intertextual choreography of martial arts action and anime. By the end of Volume 2, Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga is also bent on reinventing the motherland, but (unlike the one envisioned in Almodóvar's brain-dead trilogy) it celebrates the sheer exuberance of cartoonish, comic book violence and the generative power of reflexive movie mayhem rather than any form of humanizing love or political critique.¹⁶

The radically different subjectivities of Tarantino and Almodóvar are self-defined (and probably partly shaped) by the different databases of intertexts that they draw on in their respective movies. Despite his own intertextual dialogue with Hollywood melodramas, Almodóvar purposely resists the kinds of master narratives that Tarantino recycles and uses his own

dazzling inventiveness (like Katerina and Bausch) to re-choreograph these transgressive scenarios as fully embodied love stories. This is not the first time he has demonstrated how the fluid emotional landscape of melodrama can redeem any extreme act: rape in *¡Átame!* and murder in *Matador*, *La ley del deseo*, and *Tacones lejanos*. For Almodóvar has always used sexual mobility to challenge the calcified political correctness of every ideological persuasion.

As in *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella* celebrates a loving trans-subjectivity that fuses identification with desire—one that can flow between mother and child, nurse and patient, friends and lovers, teacher and student, performer and spectator, regardless of gender. The film's gender mobility is demonstrated through the basic reversals of having male attendants grieving over their female brain-dead beloveds (instead of mothers mourning sons and husbands, as in the previous brain-dead films); by including a male nurse and female matador as key characters; by choosing two male protagonists for a maternal melodrama; and by using the offscreen closeted coupling between Benigno and Alicia as the subversive heterosexual act that deviates



Hable con ella: the masterpiece of the trilogy.

from his alleged homosexual identity that is presumed by so many others, including Alicia's father. The film suggests that the relationship between any two individuals (such as Benigno and Marco, or Alicia and Katerina) can potentially have erotic dimensions, even if they are not explicitly developed on screen. This idea is strengthened when Lydia's reconciliation with her former lover Niño (the famous torero) emerges out of an ellipsis.

It is precisely this kind of transgendered subjectivity, with its combination of identification and desire, that is fostered by cinema spectatorship and by other kinds of moving performances involving live theater, music, dance, and narrative.¹⁷ Marco is first drawn to Lydia because of the desperation she expresses on a television talk show when trying to avoid discussing the painful breakup with her former lover Niño. Both Lydia and Benigno are drawn to Marco because of the tears he sheds while watching performances by Veloso and Bausch. Benigno shares Marco's travel adventures by reading his travel books and identifying with the Cuban woman he describes, and he merges with Alicia by adopting her passions for dance and silent cinema.

Benigno presumably has sex with the comatose Alicia after seeing a silent film, another art form redefined as dance, that proves as transformative as porn. In this faux silent classic, "The Shrinking Lover," after drinking an untested potion brewed by his scientific beloved, the devoted hero shrinks to a size smaller than a fetus or tampon, then climbs into his lover's vagina (which is as welcoming as the tunnel to Barcelona in *Todo sobre mi madre*). Parodying the American cult film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) while echoing the Oedipal dream told at the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953), this plot is reenacted by Benigno with a little help from his friend Marco and from Alicia's hair clip. Though its snapping teeth might evoke the castrating image of *vagina dentata* (at least to a Freudian shrink like Alicia's father), Benigno reads this fetishized hair clip through the romantic climax of "The Shrinking Lover," where the sleeping beauty's gigantic rubbery vagina is visibly toothless and benign. After Benigno steals the barrette from Alicia's bedroom and then bequeaths it to Marco, this slippery fetish is slipped back into Benigno's pocket before his burial so that (like the shrinking lover) he can be reunited with her for eternity as "in-mate" or "intern" (the preferred term for prisoners in the Segovia prison).

The love story of Benigno and Alicia alternates with the tale of Marco and Lydia, its primary analogue,

as theme and variation, the same way that *Hable con ella* is a variation on the earlier two films in the brain-dead trilogy. Thus we see Marisa Paredes and Cecilia Roth (who played the female protagonists of those two earlier films) in the audience listening to Veloso, whose lyrics apply to all three movies. And we don't have to see the accident that renders Alicia brain-dead, because we already saw Esteban's similar accident in *Todo sobre mi madre*, which also occurred in the rain. The two parallel stories told by Benigno and Marco are interwoven seamlessly together like a classical *pas de deux*, moving fluidly both backwards and forwards in time while braiding comic and tragic strands together in a rich Shakespearean weave.

Despite Benigno's strong desire for narrative closure, which helps drive him to suicide, the film creates the sense that the whole story can never be fully told. For it still contains ellipses that haven't been explored and it ends with the beginning of a new story, formalized in the title "Marco and Alicia." This new story is also launched by dance: two more Bausch numbers performed in the theater where Marco and Alicia happen to meet. Looking backwards, the first dance, which again moves Marco to tears, shows several men passing the body of a woman between them, evoking "Cafe Müller" and the tragic scene in which Lydia's broken body was carried out of the corrida. Looking forward, the second number expresses hope with the openness of its ending: a series of couples who diversify the traditional moves of romance by changing partners.

In *Hable con ella*, the nurturing interplay between physical gestures and words proves to have a transformative effect not only on the body of the dancer who is impregnated and revived, and on the writer who becomes bonded to the male nurse through identification and desire, but also on those of us in the audience whom this film manages to convince that every physical act (no matter how transgressive) can potentially be re-narrativized as an act of love.

These are the revitalizing transplants that can potentially turn vengeful patriarchal nations into nurturing motherlands—a view that is very appealing not only in Spain, a nation historically burdened with a colonial legacy of brutal violence and still plagued with national scandals over widespread domestic abuse, but also in our present global political context of deep irreconcilable hatreds. Such sentiments are consistent with Almodóvar's brief courageous speech against the Iraq war at the 2002 Oscar ceremonies, where he won for Best Original Screenplay. His brain-dead scenarios imply that Spain's imaginary of mobile transgres-



Benigno brings Alicia the inscribed photo of choreographer Pina Bausch.

sive sexuality and nurturing maternal voices, which he helped make central to its cinema, has a curative power to offer the rest of the world, particularly in an age of mindless, brain-dead violence. As the film's press book puts it: "*Talk to Her* is a story about . . . silence as eloquence of the body, about how a film told in words can . . . install itself in the lives of the person telling it and the person listening . . . about the joy of narration and about words as a weapon against solitude, disease, death and madness."

Afterword

This connection between Almodóvar's brain-dead trilogy and his opposition to Aznar's support of Bush's war on Iraq may have seemed somewhat strained when I presented this paper in Cuenca. Yet it has become more evident in the wake of subsequent historic events: the March 2004 terrorist train bombings in Madrid, and Spain's general election the following Sunday, when Aznar's government was ousted because of its dishonest attempts to blame the bombings on ETA and

to disavow any connection with its own unpopular militaristic policies on Iraq. The vote demonstrated that the anti-war sentiments espoused by Almodóvar in *La flor de mi secreto* and at the Oscars were widespread throughout Spain.

Almodóvar was even more outspoken on the following Tuesday (March 16th) at the press conference for his new film, *Mala educación*. After referring to press reports that Aznar's Partido Popular (PP) had planned to postpone the general election so that they could stay in power, Almodóvar claimed, "We were on the verge of a PP coup d'état!" In retaliation, the defeated Partido Popular immediately filed a lawsuit against Almodóvar for slander. According to BBC news reports, "four thousand PP supporters rallied outside the party's headquarters on Wednesday and denounced Almodóvar's film, which deals with sexual harassment in a religious school, as an attack on the Catholic Church."¹⁸ Although this scandal surrounding the film was very different from the one Almodóvar had predicted at the Cuenca conference, it generated an even greater notoriety that boosted his movie's box-

office appeal. *Mala educación* was immediately chosen to open the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, edging out Hollywood's apolitical "favorite," *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (despite the fact that Tarantino was heading this year's jury).¹⁹ At the March 16th press conference, Almodóvar also proclaimed:

We have just lived through moments of great pain, and extreme tension. . . . Consequently, all of the staff at El Deseo decided to postpone the [premiere] party, but the week ended with liberating news. We are again returning to being a democratic nation, something that we have ceased being over the past few years. I am very happy to again be living in a nation of freedom and solidarity. . . . Furthermore, we have saved the press screening because finally it's about our work and us, and I hope that the film gives us reasons for celebration at the party.

Although some Spanish critics and political pundits accused Almodóvar of having exploited the bombings and election merely to promote his latest deviant movie, the scandal made many Spanish moviegoers more eager to see it, as if they were hoping it would express a libertarian anti-Aznar, anti-patriarchal perspective that they shared. The film also did extremely well in Europe, particularly in Paris, partly, I suspect, for similar political reasons.

As I have been arguing for over a decade, despite his earlier disavowal of Francoism in the 1980s, Almodóvar's continued celebration of sexual mobility and subversive pleasures has consistently confronted the legacy of political repression in Spain. And his growing auteurist success and celebrity in the global sphere, which he learned how to leverage, help remind us that pivotal Spanish events (such as the Civil War and the peaceful transition from Francoism to democracy) have frequently been read as dress rehearsals for political developments in other parts of the world. This reminder might give some of us hope, not only in Spain but worldwide, that the "liberating news" of Aznar's defeat will prefigure the defeat of George W. Bush, and that the United States will also soon return "to being a democratic nation."

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Notes

1. Kathleen Vernon, "Las canciones de Almodóvar." Paper presented at the Congreso Internacional Pedro Almodóvar, November 27, 2004.
2. Sean Smith, "The Hottest New Import," *Newsweek* (January 5, 2004): 104.
3. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 14.
4. Anthony Lane, "Three's a Crowd," *New Yorker* (February 2, 2004): 94-95.
5. *Ibid.*, 94.
6. Instead of a brain-dead video, *Carne trémula's* prologue contains an extraordinary birth on a public bus, a scene that is doubled (à la Queneau) in black-and-white newsreel coverage of the event. The film's performative style prefigures the ballet sequences in *Hable con ella* with two wonderful non-verbal sequences accompanied by moving boleros, which transform ordinary human actions (a basketball game and hot straight sex) into dance. This extraordinary sex results in the birth of a child, whose 26-year old father Victor was born at the film's opening in January 1970, when Franco's government imposed a State of Emergency in Spain that suspended all forms of freedom. Between these two births that frame the film, Spain undergoes a radical transformation. As Almodóvar puts it, "Twenty-six years earlier the streets were deserted, now . . . the sidewalks are crowded with happy, drunk, consuming people. People in Spain have lost their fear long ago, and for this reason only, Victor's son is born in a much better country than his father was" (www.clubcultura.com/clubcinemastes/almodovar). Curiously, in depicting these cultural changes, *Carne trémula* remains exclusively heterosexual; even Victor embodies a straight version of *la movida* that evokes those sexually mobile characters usually played by Banderas in earlier Almodóvar movies.
7. Marvin D'Lugo, "Genealogía de las 'sórdidas comedias neosurrealistas' almodovarianas." Paper presented at the Congreso Internacional Pedro Almodóvar, November 26, 2004.
8. Marsha Kinder, "Refiguring Socialist Spain: An Introduction," *Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-32.
9. Marvin D'Lugo, "The Geopolitical Aesthetic in Recent Spanish Cinema," *Postscript* vol. 21 no. 2 (Winter-Spring 2002): 79-90.
10. Marsha Kinder, "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1987): 43.
11. www.clubcultura.com/clubcinemastes/almodovar.
12. Peter Evans, "Citas filmicas en las películas de Almodóvar." Paper presented at the Congreso Internacional Pedro Almodóvar, November 27, 2004.
13. www.clubcultura.com/clubcinemastes/almodovar.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. As in the ironic ending of *Natural Born Killers* (which Tarantino wrote but didn't direct), *Kill Bill's* murderous

antagonists are finally domesticated through the purifying blood ties of the twisted American family—in this case, Beatrix Kiddo's transformation into BB's beautiful Mommy dearest. Yet, this comic ending is merely a brief lapse into banality, for the final noir image of Beatrix driving alone down a two-lane blacktop carries us back to the edgy opening and reassures us that her most memorable blood ties are still her driving lust for vengeance. She sticks in our memory as the Black Mamba killer, that indomitable blonde roadrunner whom many of us movie-lovers find so thrilling.

17. The foundational nature of these spectator dynamics is dramatized in *Mala educación* when we see the first homosexual encounter between two young schoolboys in a movie theater as they watch a sexy heterosexual scene featuring the gorgeous Sara Montiel, who is clearly an object of identification and desire for both boys and whom one of them will later impersonate on stage as an adult. This

sequence also potentially complicates our prior understanding of the sexual mobility dramatized in the opening porn scene of *La ley del deseo*, where the Banderas character switches his sexual orientation. Similarly, *Mala educación*'s complex love triangle involving two brothers enables us to reread the main plot of *La ley del deseo* and its sexual mobility in new and more provocative ways.

18. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment.
19. Brian Brooks, "On the Scene," *Indie Wire* (www.indiewire.com).

Abstract *Flower of My Secret* begins with a training-video for counseling relatives of brain-dead patients. When transplanted to *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*, the brain-dead trope launches the plot of the former and flowers as central premise of the latter. It refigures Spain as a motherland through a fascinating interplay between words and bodies.



Almodóvar (center) with the author (third from left) and the other academic panelists at the 2003 international congress on the filmmaker.

Filling the Embarrassment of Silence:

In her essay “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” Constance Penley suggests that if the “breakthrough” of Linda Williams’ study of film pornography, *Hard Core*, was “to get us to think of pornography as film,” then “the next logical step” would be “to consider pornographic film as popular culture.” As a way of determining “what traits pornographic film shares with the production and consumption of a whole range of popular forms,” Penley points to a tradition of bawdy songs and dirty jokes that she sees as having a connection to the use of humor in pre-World War II American stag films.¹ This is a productive connection to make, but one that omits a body of mass media erotica that can be particularly illuminating for the study of film pornography: recorded erotic performances on phonographic records.

This paper is an analysis of a little-known genre of phonographic recordings called “blue discs” or “party records” made between the 1930s and 1950s. Sold under the counter, and often made anonymously or by tiny independent labels, these records

Blue discs can help to bridge the historical and technological gap between an oral tradition of erotic performance and film, as well as adding context to the discussion of dynamics and tensions found in film pornography.

are not commercially available, although collectors of vintage 78-rpm records have frequently obtained them.² Blue discs can help to bridge the historical and technological gap between an oral tradition of erotic performance and film, as well as adding context to the discussion of dynamics and tensions found in film pornography. In addition, blue discs offer a valuable case study in the use of the woman’s voice in the sound media, a topic that has stimulated an interesting and

diverse body of research and theory about gender, performance, and sound media. Following Penley’s suggestion to address a “range of popular forms,” I’ll begin by contextualizing these recordings in terms of performances in several adjacent media: the burlesque stage, radio, film, and oral riddling traditions.

Blue discs were first made at the historical moment when the tradition of the American burlesque stage was coming to an end. In his historical study of that tradition, Robert Allen describes how nineteenth-century burlesque had featured the “transgressive power of the union of charismatic female sexuality and inverse subordination,” embodied respectively by a visual and a verbal performance.³ Over the course of the century, women on the burlesque stage became increasingly mute visual spectacles, as their performance moved from intricate punning on high art conventions to graphic sexual displays like the striptease, which “did not become a standard feature of burlesque until the mid-1920s.”⁴

Allen’s historical overview presents a trajectory where “the appeals of burlesque became increasingly bifurcated: verbal humor provided usually by male comedians and sexual display provided by female performers.”⁵ The female burlesque performer morphed into either the mute, unthreatening “doll-like, decorative sexuality” of the Ziegfeld girl, or the “unruly” female performance of Mae West, Sophie Tucker, or Bessie Smith, figures whose transgressive power “was channeled and defused through their construction as grotesque figures.”⁶ In the later embodiment of burlesque, the verbal work of salacious, double-entendre humor was performed almost entirely by men. In fact, it became so customary for women to be “the mute objects of sexual humor in burlesque sketches” that a special term was invented to designate one who actually spoke: the “talking woman.”⁷ Seen in this context, the