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Almodóvar’s films, frequently associated in viewers’ minds with shocking, provocative scenes, sexual and violent imagery and troubled characters of diverse sexual orientation, also reflect these characters’ strive for human warmth, stability and happiness. While his filmography showcases changes in the Spanish society as it moves from the closely controlled dictatorial political system to a liberal one, it also displays traditional Spanish values and lifestyle. María R. Matz states that there is no movie in which the director would let escape a traditionally Spanish element, “ya sea como parte del decorado, de la música, o simplemente como un elemento cultural (relaciones familiares, religión, toros, comida, entre otros) que se presenta al espectador de la manera casual” (207). Almodovar’s films also abound in metafilmic, meta-fictional and intertextual references to the cinema and
literature, to the point that, according to Vilma Navarro-Daniels, “hacen visible al espectador su ficcionalidad, su artificio, el modo como están construidas, todo lo cual las hace ser autoreflexivas” and makes the spectators reflect on themselves as much as on the characters and relationships stemming from these movies. I intend to research the interaction between these two key characteristics of Almodovar’s films exploring the ways in which intertextual connections express traditional values, the new rhythm of Spanish modern society, as well as the complex relationship between normalcy and abnormality in his productions. Since the concept of normalcy is relative and the criteria for its definition are debatable, for the purpose of this paper I use this term when referring to heterosexual individuals not engaged in transgressive activities (such as adultery, abuse or murder), or traditional family composed of heterosexual parents and naturally born children.

In tracing intertextual connections, I will not look for influences of other authors but for implicit relationships using the model suggested by Roland Barthes in his work "Death of the Author” as a guidance. Barthes emphasizes the active role of a reader in interpretation of a text according to his/her cultural background and literary knowledge. The reader, according to Barthes, is free to determine a relation between the texts (in this case, I will consider filmic, literary and graphic arts text) independently of the author’s will or intention. Francoise Mirguet, exploring intertextuality of Almodovar´s films with Biblical motifs, explains that creating such relationships enables a “continuous dialogue” between the unrelated works which enhances comprehension of all the texts. “The artwork – or film in particular – is, in that sense, a text in a permanent rewriting process, of which viewers and critics, as part of the intertext, are an integral component” (29). Basing myself on this theory, I will proceed to analyze dialogues of Almodovarian works with literary, filmic and artistic texts of different time periods and national origins.

María R. Matz and Carole Salmon find that Almodovar’s films act “like an ongoing electrocardiogram, closely monitoring society’s behavior” (33). Even a superficial overview of such an “electrocardiogram” demonstrates a plethora of intertextual and metatextual connections, be it with other films, fairy tales, paintings or literary, religious, even Biblical, texts. Looking beyond the
surface of complicated and far-fetched, sometimes absurd plots, we can discover multiple subtexts that suggest unlikely associations of vaginal openings with sacred altars, contemporary Madrid with the 19th century Saint Petersburg and women’s struggle for survival against abuse in contemporary Spain with the Biblical story of Joseph.

*Hable con ella* (2002) is one prominent example as its’ fairy tale and religious subtexts reflect complexity and hermeneutic richness, as observed by Adriana Novoa, Brian Cope and others. Researchers comment on the name of the clinique where the comatose female protagonists stay, El Bosque (“The Forest”), which provides an appropriate fairy-tale setting and reinforces the idea of enchantment behind the unlikely awakening of female protagonist after four years in a coma. Jessica Burke notes the association of the name (Alicia) with that of Lewis Carroll’s heroine as, similar to Alice, she is lost in the Wonderland of her own mysterious world of coma “to which other characters have no access” (118). Adriana Novoa explores the way the traditional sleeping beauty plot reinvents itself when a comatose Alcia is awaken as a result of rape by her male caretaker Benigno who has been infatuated with her since before her tragic accident. The fairy-tale happy ending, however, receives a modern ironic twist in the end as the “prince” Benigno dies in prison of the drug overdose while Alicia is falling in love with his friend and confidant Marco.

El Bosque can also turn into an ironic misnomer if we regard the abuse of the female body as the triumph of the old-fashioned way in which male domination is expressed and, according to Novoa, “the loss of orality/communication/enchantment in a contemporary world transformed by the triumph of capitalism (and the failure of fairer alternatives, such as socialism)” (226). While the orality is hardly lost in the movie as its very title underscores its importance (Benigno continuously talks with Alicia as he lovingly attends to her), success of communication is questionable as she never responds and probably never hears him. As Jessica Burke observes, while dancing bodies in ballet scenes in the film communicate powerful messages, by contrast “the comatose bodies in the film are incommunicative and helpless against misinterpretation” (124). Benigno’s friend Marco supports this statement by comparing Benigno’s communication to talking to plants with which people may talk but not marry. At the same time, Burke admits that these unresponsive bodies
do help to foster communication between Marco and Benigno since, as a result of attending to the comatose women a friendship develops between them that otherwise would not have been possible.

In the same way the movie simultaneously subverts and affirms the fact of communication, it perpetuates and subverts gender stereotypes. Objectified and victimized Alicia corresponds to the traditional representation of a submissive and passive female body, while the other comatose woman Lidia challenges it through her non-traditional role of a bullfighter. Benigno can be perceived as a traditionally superior male subjecting a woman to his will and controlling her fate since Alicia’s awakening results from his making love to her. At the same time, as Burke observes, both male protagonists, Benigno and Marco, while not openly homosexual, feel comfortable with the idea of being introduced as boyfriends in prison as this would give them more time for visits. Benigno is the most complex character in terms of gender portrayal: true to the stereotypical male, he takes advantage of the unresponsive and vulnerable Alicia but, according to Burke, he also gains access to motherhood symbolically giving birth by awakening her from coma (123).

The idea of the second birth is ambiguous as it represents transgression from the traditional male behavior thus subverting the gender stereotype (“gender bending” as called by Burke), while at the same time reflecting the traditionally male impulse to dominate and “improve creation” (Novoa 226). The shrinking lover from the movie Benigno is watching and whose motif is interwoven into the main movie story line, also “perverts traditional masculine narrative while simultaneously maintaining its standards” (225). The man in love drinks the potion his beloved concocts thus performing a role of a guinea pig and sacrificing himself for her experiments by shrinking to unnaturally small size. He is then overpowered by the woman’s body and in the end enters her vagina disappearing in it thus symbolically raping her, which echoes Benigno’s loving act of rape and mirrors the concept of birth. Brian Cope relates this disappearance in the birth canal to the spiritual re-birth of the diseased Count in El Greco’s painting El entierro del Conde de Orgaz where the protagonist finds his way to God through a “nebulous” passage resembling a birth canal (29). Therefore, the association with the painting helps us interpret the fact of rape
as suggestive of Benigno’s spiritual illumination and complete unification with the object of his adoration. Alicia thus appears to play a sacral role in this illumination.

Cope thus associates Benigno’s evolution in the film with the “metaphorical path leading to the mystic’s physical union with God” (22), the fours stages of which (awakening, purgation, illumination and unification) correspond to Benigno’s emotional and spiritual metaphorical journey. In the beginning episodes Benigno selflessly dedicated to the care of Alicia displays “the extreme austerity and discipline” of the purgative phase (23). The researcher also compares Benigno’s constant talking to unresponsive Alicia to Santa Teresa’s talking to God during her prayers and meditations in the purgative phase (23). Thus, there arises a mystical metaphor of Alicia as God supported by the fanatical adoration of Benigno who bathes and dresses her also evoking associations with ancient religious rituals. Religious context is also apparent in the conversations of Benigno and Marco whose role of “Benigno’s confidant acquires the air of a religious confessor” (24). The awakening stage corresponds to flashbacks of Benigno’s early infatuation with Alicia before her falling into coma, and illumination stage to his sudden presumed ability to hear her and interpret her body signs as readiness to have sex with him, which he fulfils similarly to the mystic who “acquires the ability to channel God’s will” (28).

Michael Rennett remarks on Almodovar’s obvious obsession with religious motifs, sometimes implicit and other times open. María R. Matz who also comments on the pervasiveness of Catholic elements in Almodovar’s films, explains that they are part of the director’s strategy of incorporating pictures of traditional Spanish culture in his films. While one could expect predominance of religious themes in the movies such as Entre tinieblas focusing on the life in the monastery, the director treats this subject transgressively, adapting it to his needs and thus “mejor retrata la ausencia de valores religiosos” (212). Ballesteros believes the transgressive mixture of religion and sexuality in Almodovar’s films naturally proceeds from the peculiarly Spanish understanding of religion. To prove that, she sites the examples of Santa Teresa of Ávila, Saint John of the Cross, and Fray Luis de León, all of which created works fusing subjects of spiritualism and eroticism and established “an
amorous relationship between the ‘feminine’ soul (alma in Spanish) and a masculine God that Almodovar at once recycles and modifies, extracting, in the process, a transgressive performance from long-sanctified material” (75).

Explicit references to the Bible are frequent in Carne trémula (1997), perhaps the only Almodovarian film where the protagonist Víctor openly cites verses from the Sacred Book which he studies while in prison planning his new life and revenge on those responsible for his imprisonment. Víctor resembles his predecessor Ricky from earlier Atame! by his obsessive passion and the history of serving the sentence (Ricky in the psychiatric asylum and Victor in prison). However, Víctor presents a wiser and more stable version of Ricky perhaps due to the fact that The Bible has produced the reforming effect on him. While Ricky kidnaps and threatens the woman he loves, Víctor performs honest work and does not carry out his revenge plan on his beloved Elena who rejected him (to be exact, he does follow through with the first part of it – that of making love to her all night long, but she is the initiator, and he does not abandon her afterwards as he initially intends to).

Religious details abound in the setting of other films where, according to Matz, they appear “como elemento decorativo” of the typical interior of Franco and post-Franco era (213). Crosses make part of the Caribbean-style decor in the apartments of the protagonist writer and his ex-lover and publicist in Los abrazos rotos where they draw the viewer’s attention by their similarity. In this case, they shadow and symbolize the deep, if not apparent, connection between the characters as also confirmed by their son Diego. The first image that appears to the viewer of Atame! is the popularized kitsch image of the sacred heart of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, immediately followed by a scene in which the psychiatric asylum’s director has sex with a much younger patient Ricky. The heart-shaped glitzy box of chocolates Ricky purchases immediately after release for a starlet Marina, is a secular mirror of the first one, and the two hearts intertwine in a thread that unites the key scenes. The box of chocolates accompanies the heroine and her obsessed kidnapper Ricky who forces her to switch apartments. In one episode the camera moves from the box of chocolates to the same image of Virgin Mary, now hanging at Marina’s neighbor’s
apartment and watching over the two characters as they make love as if blessing their future together. The image of Mary and the lovers’ naked bodies multiplied in the ceiling mirror create a peculiar combination of spiritual and earthly elements which suggests the physical and emotional union between the protagonists. Margaret Nisch confirms and exemplifies the earlier cited argument by Ballesteros on the amorous relationship between the feminine soul and masculine God: “The couple’s physical authenticity in the love scene is interwoven with the utmost true, pure and unconditional love of Jesus and Mary” (99).

The return of the image of the Virgin corresponds with the awakening of Marina’s feelings toward the wounded Ricky: his sight arouses her profound pity and tenderness towards her lonely and unhappy aggressor, the feelings that can be compared to the Virgin’s universal forgiveness. The heroine’s name also fits this parallel as the removal of the letter “n” would make it identical to that of the Madonna. Thus, the evolution of Marina’s feelings and the unlikely abrupt change from hatred to love follows the same stages of the metaphorical path towards the spiritual union we traced earlier in Benigno’s case (in Hable con ella). Marina’s awakening stage corresponds to her kidnapping, realizing the danger of her situation and suddenly missing simple pleasures of life she is barred from (being among the people on the street, her Mom’s cooking, etc.). Her conversation with Mom asking what she is cooking reflects her longing for normalcy also symbolized in the final countryside scene where Marina comes to reunite with Ricky and to fulfil his dreams of being “normal”.

The director plays with the concept of normalcy and its relativity as the asylum head tells Ricky: “tú no eres normal” (you are not normal). Ricky does not disagree but quotes the judge’s authority: “El señor juez dice que si” (Mr. Judge says I am) conveying the idea of different perspectives on normalcy. Ricky’s behavior is far from normal as he kidnaps and ties up the woman he loves, promises to take care of her but threatens to kill her and himself if she attempts the escape. He later tells Marina how he manipulates his “normal” aspect at the asylum once he falls in love with her feigning normal behavior, fulfilling all the tasks expected of him and thus convincing the judge. Both protagonists apparently strive for normalcy as Ricky repeats a few times how he wants to start a family, have
kids and a job “como una persona normal” (like a normal person), and Marina apparently forgets her movie star aspirations in favor of staying with Ricky. Normalcy seems to be established in the family scene at the end, although gender reversal also possibly takes place here as earlier observed. Margaret Nisch, however, comments on the unlikely “normal” happy ending that it plays with our conventional beliefs of normalcy demonstrating to us that the fairy-tale (normal or abnormal?) happy ending is preferred over the more likely and less happy reality, thus reversing the notions of normalcy and abnormality. Therefore, “the sunset becomes a metaphor for ourselves being caught up in conventions and assumptions about normality, and Almodovar finally comes to untie us” (104).

In the same pattern, the ironic relativity of other concepts and themes, such as spirituality, becomes apparent. D’Lugo relates the kitschy image of Jesus and Madonna and its incongruous combination with the mirrors of the bedroom designed to maximize sexual pleasure, to the “national-Catholic” customs of post-civil War Spain, when it was normal to decorate one’s house with crosses and other popularized religious elements. D’Lugo notes that these images, instead of introducing a religious context, are used to evoke a “hint of nostalgia” which is reinforced by Ricky’s return to his home village in the final scene. Religious iconography is featured in many other films, starting from one of the earliest Laberinto de pasiones (1982) (cross at the head of the bed in the incestual scene), to one of the latest Los abrazos rotos (2009). According to Nisch, the recurrence of such imagery sanctifies “the replacement of the ‘normal’ filmic image with factual, visual diversity in the striking caleidoscopic scene of Atame. Metaphorically speaking, they bless sexual variety in human relationships, as long as there is mutual agreement between partners.” (99)

Intertextual connection with sacred images breaks free of irony in much later film Todo sobre mi madre (1999) where the protagonist Manuela who loses her son is clearly identified with the Virgin in one of the scenes with Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona as a background. The camera focuses on the architectural element of Coronation of the Virgin on the Eastern façade which, as Navarro-Daniels notes, emphasizes Biblical aspects related to characters’ life and hope rather than death and suffering. They underscore the religious
message of hope, self-sacrifice and new beginning in Manuela’s life which will come with the birth of her friend Rosa’s baby. Manuela will name the baby Esteban in honor of her deceased son, and will take care of him as if he were her new son after Rosa dies. Thus, Manuela creates a new symbolic family composed of Sister Rosa (seduced by Manuela’s former lover who is also father of Esteban), herself and a new baby who recovers from AIDS (another possible religious allusion to a miracle). Navarro-Daniels sees a parallel between this atypical family and the sacred one showcased on Sagrada Familia. Such parallel highlights another instance of breaking away from the “normal” traditional family model while at the same time longing for normalcy as Rosa and Manuela strive to provide a happy life for the new baby.

If we regard Almodovar’s second feature film *Laberinto de pasiones* in keeping with the earlier cited Matz and Salmon’s thought of his movies as the “electrocardiogram” of the Spanish life, themes of drag and sex changes, queerness and nymphomania, fit perfectly in the epoch of change defying patriarchal norms of the Franco society. Unlike the characters we have so far analyzed who strive for normalcy, its protagonists Riza and Sexilia attempt to flee from it toward the alternative model of the “male/female dichotomy”, as refers Isolina Ballesteros to this subversiveness of “heteronormative values” (89). Riza ostentatiously performs his homosexual role as if to impress the supposed spectators in one of the first episodes in a café. Nymphomaniac Sexilia brags about needing multiple men to satisfy her and thus represents a new model of a liberated woman defying Francoist patriarchal norms.

Diego Montes and his lover Maria from *Matador* (1986) also subvert gender stereotypes defying all notions of normalcy. María, long in love with Diego, imitates his bullfighting skills in bed with her lovers whom she gores with a hairpin at the moment of orgasm. Her independent behavior (being a successful lawyer, taking initiative in sexual contacts and imitating a bullfighter’s art with coldblooded killings), contrast with traditional “normal” view of an obedient woman in Franco society. At the same time, she helps perpetuate the stereotypical guiding role of a man as she emulates the actions of her beloved. Two murders she commits mirror two murders of young women committed by
Diego and the couple therefore, constitutes “the androgynous image of the traditional matador” as defined by D’Lugo in Pedro Almodovar (49). The researcher observes that Angel, a young pupil of Diego who selflessly assumes the responsibility for all the murders, also displays “suggestively androgynous” pleasure: while describing the murder details to the police inspector, he “variously describes these bloody seductions from either María’s or Diego’s point of view, thus suggesting an ambiguous sexual orientation” (49). Another episode supports androgynous tendencies of the characters: before Diego actually gets to know María, he discovers her in the men’s room while she asks why he follows her. He responds “this is the men’s room”, to which her answer is “Don’t trust appearances”, suggesting that she might be actually closer to a men’s nature. These examples of the sexually ambivalent and liberated behavior, atypical for the traditional Franco society, create the basis for “a metaphor for Spanish culture torn between tradition and modernity” (D’Lugo 50).

In fact, the movie presents a curious case of interweaving and conflict of traditional and modern values symbolized by the traditional Spanish theme of bullfighting and unexpected liberating forces it projects. The fashion show where Diego’s girlfriend Eva participates, according to the words of the designer played by Almodovar himself, represents the division of the country, and D’Lugo explains this division by “The New Spain” which “represents a sexually liberating albeit violent rejection of that past” (48). Such conflict is also embodied in the roles of two mothers in the film. Berta, Angel’s oppressive mother with religious fanaticism instills a complex of guilt in Angel: this old-fashioned Spanish matriarch resembles Bernarda Alba from García Lorca’s tragedy whose control similarly stifles her daughters. Eva’s mother Pilar, a comical character, symbolizes “refiguring of the Old Spain into a modern and stylish culture” as she encourages her daughter in the modeling business, accompanies her to shows and even comically imitates model’s movements on the catwalk herself (D’Lugo 51). Matador along with Laberinto de pasiones can thus be classified as a hallmark of Post-Franco culture, la movida, which is a cultural (or “contracultural”, according to María R. Matz) movement during the first years of democracy representing “las ansias de libertad de un pueblo que pretendiendo modernizar el nivel cultural de España, tras el
férreo control ejercido durante el franquismo, estaba listo para los excesos tanto del cuerpo como del espíritu” (205). The generation of the movida thus can be compared to the cultural liberation movement of the 60s in the United States carried under the motto of “sex, drugs and rock and roll” which was similarly trying to break away from the old values of “normal” lifestyle towards exaggerated abnormality.

La ley del deseo (1987) with its focus on homosexual and transsexual characters can also be categorized as breaking away from normalcy, especially since it culminates in death following sexual climax, similarly to Matador. While the protagonists strive for love and stability in relations, they similarly defy all the standards of normalcy through their homosexual orientation and murderous instincts. Antonio falls obsessively in love with the script writer Pablo to the point of murdering Pablo´s previous lover and killing himself after sex with Pablo. In Matador, feverish obsession with death is for the characters the natural and necessary culmination of passion. However, commenting on both of these movies in the interview with Marsha Kinder published in Marvin D´ Lugo´s book, Almodóvar excludes masochistic aesthetics and insists on the “normal” aspects of his films: they are about “pleasure, sensuality and living – about the celebration of living” (139). He also clarifies that absolute pleasure does require a price which is “parallel with the pleasure. This is the theory of Matador. If you can find an absolute pleasure, you also have to pay an absolute price” (139). In this declaration Almodovar seems to draw inspiration from George Bataille’s theory on the taboo and transgression, according to which transgression of a taboo, such as adultery or murder, is viewed as an essential stage to reach the pinnacle of pleasure and total liberation (sovereignty). He creates the metaphor of climax as “a minor rupture suggestive of death”, and Diego and María put this theory into practice by killing each other at the moment of orgasm. Bataille also affirms that maximum erotic pleasure is inextricably linked to the idea of death and can help overcome the fear thereof. The idea of death and/or violence can thus stimulate sensuality, as happens in Matador. Matz confirms this argument stating that the couple wins over Tanatos: “aunque a simple vista es la muerte, por la que ambos están obsesionados, quien se lleva a los dos amantes; realmente es el deseo, la pasión, quien gana la batalla alcanzando a ambos
el goce final” (211). A police officer who arrives at the scene, similarly states that he has never seen anyone so happy.

Aside from transgression, most Almodovarian films also share the focus on the performative function of the characters and thus relate to the theatrical art. Script-writer and film director Pablo Quintero from La ley del deseo flaunts his homosexuality to impress the public and recruit potential lovers; Tina (his sister) asks a street cleaner to hose her down voluptuously exhibiting her body; Diego and Maria in Matador set up a scene of final lovemaking with bullfighting accessories to imitate the act of fighting before dying, the model Eva participates in theatrical fashion shows, etc. D’Lugo comments that Spanishness as a concept itself can be considered part of performance in Almodovar’s films where it is employed for shaping a conflict or juxtaposition between the old and the new: “Spanishness is seen as a performance within which identity is highly changeable, as in a fashion show” (52). These characters might be striving for liberation from the oppressive society and its norms, but they are rooted in Spanish traditions and way of life with which they can play but cannot escape.

Similarly, an episode in ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? (1984) makes obvious the use of a Spanish bar as a performative site: the writer tries to convince Gloria’s protesting husband to forge Hitler’s handwriting for a book while the crowd on the other side of the window closely follows their every movement. The scene seems to suggest that any of the café clients can become performers at any moment as they share their lives with other visitors, shedding part of their privacy. The window may also suggest the Brechtian division between the performer and the spectator to maintain the symbolic distance between the two or else the symbolic division between fantasy and reality, underscored by many fantastic and exaggeratedly absurd elements in the film (the girl moving objects with her gaze, Gloria easily giving away her son to a pedofilic dentist, etc.) Performance element is also obvious in the male exhibitionist showing off his male attributes in front of the prostitute Cristal and Gloria who is needed for extra audience. D’Lugo comments on Gloria’s detached expression during the sex scene “in the face of the male’s vain illusion of power” while Cristal feigns pleasure, adding to the comic effect as Gloria’s expression “underscores her comic detachment from the world around her” (42).
Cultural references, performative sites of Almodovar’s cinema and characters’ acting within a movie (what could be called double acting), as well as identifying themselves with spectators, set a metafilmic ambiance typical for Almodovar as it also recurs in *Atame*, *Tacones lejanos* (1991), *Hable con ella*, to a smaller degree *La flor de mi secreto* (1995) and *Los abrazos rotos*. In many (*Atame, Los abrazos rotos, Hable con ella*) metafilmic techniques suggest that life and cinema (or theatre) have so much in common that one can be confused for the other: Mateo in *Los abrazos rotos* seems to recover Lena and happiness he felt with her, by recovering a film where she stars; the shrinking lover’s reverse birth in *Hable con ella* preludes Alicia’s second birth (awakening from coma) and Marina’s conversation with the fictional monster in *Atame* precedes the appearance of Ricky whom she initially identifies with a real-life monster. Such blending of life and acting also suggest that the characters’ excentricities, (such as queerness and nymphomania in *Laberinto de pasiones*) are a mere facade hiding their regular “normal” face. The movie’s ending confirms this conjecture and again, just as in *Atame*, reconciles (or confuses?) normality and abnormality as Sexilia finds happiness in the “normal” union with a newly heterosexualized, and therefore, “normalized”, Riza. This happy ending also ecos the same fairytale narrative analyzed above in *Hable con ella*. D’Lugo notes, however, that the typical fairytale ending of *Laberinto* is combined with the realistic setting, “more closely rooted in contemporary social history and creativity than most of his subsequent filmmaking” as it reflects the youth culture of Madrid awakening from the dictatorship-infused stupor. Therefore, this film “embraces hybrid forms of expression and experience”, the result of which is the parody of storytelling conventions (17).

Theatre and real life are intextricably connected in *Todo sobre mi madre* where again, it is hardly possible to distinguish one from the other. The movie abounds in intertextual references and allusions to theatre (Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and involves a figure of a writer, the protagonist’s son Esteban who dies tragically. The title of the movie is also the title of the book by Esteban which provides his mother with double fictionality: that of the character in the movie we watch and in the fictional book featured in the movie. We can argue that in this way, the
movie involves us, the viewers, in the fictionality of the film’s world since through watching we enter the fictional world of Esteban’s book and become subjected to his authorial will. As Vilma Navarro-Daniels explains, “Esteban juega así el papel de duplicar a Almodóvar al interior del largometraje: tal como el director crea y decide los destinos de sus personajes, Esteban hace otro tanto con la suerte de su madre, convirtiéndola en el personaje de su propia obra” (n.p.).

The performative aspect continues its interfilmic thread (“representación interpuesta” - interposed representation of film directors, as named by Javier Herrera) through the evolving figures of directors of movies within movies (and frequently also script writers) in La ley del deseo, Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (1988), Atame, La mala educación, and culminating in Los abrazos rotos where the depiction of the director reaches the highest intensity in the split personality of Mateo/Harry. According to Herrera, Mateo/Harry reaches the highest complexity due to his blindness, persistant loyalty to his alter ego persona, and to the fact that the whole plot is revolved around another movie (Chicas y maletas) production. Lena, its star who becomes Mateo’s lover, therefore symbolizes the movie and the object of desire of both the movie director and the producer, and, as Herrera puts it, “el mecanismo de cada uno para poseerla” (122). Although she dies, Herrera affirms that her imperishable image will always live in fiction holding un poder curativo a pesar del inmenso dolor por la pérdida definitiva de ese trozo de vida que se ha ido para siempre” (122). The metafilmic technique is further advanced here by yet additional movie (documentary) being filmed by the producer’s son which holds a key to the producer discovering Lena and Mateo’s relationship, escape and liberation from her lover’s oppression, as well as the truth about the tragic accident in which Lena dies. Los abrazos rotos therefore demonstrates the immense power of the filmic art, or simulated reality, over the real life through the surviving image of Lena on film and the curative effect of the restored movie on its director who later watches it.

In Mujeres al borde, where borders between sanity and mental balance, truth and deceit, love and theatre, reality and its parody are particularly blurred, love itself is represented as performance through deconstructivist approach analyzed by Carlos Jerez Farrán. Parodying techniques also noted by
others (such as D’Lugo and Boquerini) recycle bits of Hollywood melodramas of the 50s, TV commercials, stereotyped pick-up lines and musical texts to create a general parody of love declaration as “otra de las muchas construcciones culturales que han contribuido a moldear nuestra conducta por la influencia que ejercen subconscientemente en nuestros sentimientos” (Jerez Farrán 71). The movie, the action of which takes place mostly in Pepa’s apartment, similarly to Todo sobre mi madre, imitates a theatrical production or a parody of one since one of the characters (Ivan, the object of Pepa’s desperate love) is present mostly on photographs, phone messages and Pepa’s dream which is accompanied by Ivan’s voice dubbing Johnny Guitar in the movie by Nicholas Ray (1954). The voice of Ivan dubbing love declarations accompanies images of him courting women from different corners of the world in Pepa’s dream, which offers yet another example of mixing reality, dreams and theatrical performance. The only real part of Ivan in this mixture, “lo ‘único verdadero en él” is his voice, whose singificance is emphasized by the close-up of the microphone while he works (Jérez Farrán 74). The juxtaposition of the amorous text and Ivan’s unfulfilled promises to Pepa makes him an embodiment of falsehood. His word is then “un frágil depositario de veracidad, estabilidad y seguridad, desenmascarando como charlatanería la sinceridad que proponen estos dos galanes, Johnny e Iván” true to the male stereotype of a manipulative womanizer (76). Pepa’s dubbing the female part of the Ray movie’s dialogue and receiving the “seducción simbólica que sugiere el micrófono” perpertrates the traditional female stereotype of submissiveness which is also reinforced by total silence of women listening to Ivan’s advances in Pepa’s dream (74). This stereotypical portrayal thus parodies our dependence on and passive reception of popular culture stereotypes.

The text of the concluding song “Teatro” summarizes the hybrid nature of the movie in which “el arte se convierte en realidad y la realidad en una imitación del arte, de la ficción” (74): “Teatro – lo tuyo es puro teatro/falsedad bien ensayada/estudiado simulacro.” This blend of theatre and reality, as well as metafilmic technique is what Herrera calls “puzzle fílmico” tracing its origins to the baroque theatre tradition (120). Similarity between plot elements, characters or metafilmic references, while tending to overload and
complicate Almodovar’s films, also “enriquece y posibilita una explosión de lecturas que la expanden ad infinitum y convierten en universalmente válida su aportación, tal y como sucedió en su momento con Velásquez y Goya, Calderón y Lope y más recientemente con Picasso y Buñuel” (120). Multiple puzzle pieces serve as examples of interfilmic and metafilmic techniques: already analyzed Amante menguante in Hable con ella, the plot of Almodovar’s Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (1988) used as “esqueleto argumental e iconográfico” for movie within movie Chicas y maletas in Los abrazos rotos, the main storyline of Volver described as the plot of Leo’s “black” novel in La flor de mi secreto (which, interestingly, appeared much earlier than Volver); Pablo Quintero’s letters to semi-fictional Laura P. in La ley del deseo refer to her as Bitter Heel (Tacon amargo) which is a play of words on Tacones lejanos (Distant Heels), the title of another Almodovar’s movie, etc.

Mixture of normalcy and abnormality is also demonstrated in comical and parodic elements of absurdity which characterize ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? (1984) The characters seem to personify craziness and excentricity as they commit suicides, murders, give away their children to pedofiles and prostitutes, get addicted to drugs, etc. Relatives (including murdered Antonio’s mother) and neighbors reacting to the murder without much surprise and continuing their “normal” behavior, as well as the fact that the police never discovers the truth on their own, - all of these abnormal circumstances are presented as normal in the de-humanized atmosphere of the city. Vinodh Venkatesh comments that the city enables “queer potential (a likely reference to the movida)” as Gloria appropriates “the phallus in the karate studio, away from the suffocating gaze of her husband and her mother-in-law”. It also enables a killing instinct as Gloria eventually murders her husband with a bone resembling a phallic symbol (363). Countryside, by contrast, is “the longed-for space of heteronormativity that Almodovar evokes” and mother-in-law, symbolizing it, is its “last vestige” (363). Her departure, consequently, causes Gloria´s sadness for the first time in the movie, while this feeling was not appearant earlier, even at the moment of her husband´s death.

Longing for old-fashioned ways of the countryside and simple pleasures of life is juxtaposed to the urban craze,
neuroticism and vices, bringing to the fore the falseness of the latter. Gloria’s son strives for “normal” communication and comfort in his family finding it only in his grandmother, and the two come to symbolize the oasis of family love seeking refuge from the vices of the city in the grandmother’s village. The grandmother evolves to a much more outspoken and disgruntled figure in *La flor de mi secreto*, where, similarly, she returns to the village and brings her nerve-wrecked daughter Leo with her for emotional restoration. Affectionate reunion with her village friends and reciting the poem “Mi Aldea” inspire a feeling of nostalgia and comfort not traceable in earlier scenes with urban setting. Memories of Leo’s difficult birth inspire an allegory of symbolic birth in which María Matz sees a metaphorical umbilical cord uniting city and village through “la fértile tierra manchega, labrada, llena de encinas, acogedora, con blancos rebaños de ovejas” (209).

While nothing unites the city and the countryside in *Kika* (1993), the same opposition and nostalgia for the village as symbolic motherland re-emerges as Madrid is presented as a sick place of rapes and shoot-outs. Casa Youcatalli contrasts with it as idealized rustic space which its owner Ramón associates with his mother in one of the flashbacks. The idea of artificiality of the city is underscored by the filming of the cityscape which, according to D’Lugo, has been “replaced by a dehumanized mediascape populated by all-seeing photographic cameras, television monitors, and the off-site video camera, all of which appear to cater to the insatiable voyeuristic impulse of the city’s inhabitants” (81). The abundance of technological devices replacing nature conveys the sense of unnaturalness characterizing contemporary city life in which there is little privacy or protection from aggression as shown in the fact of Kika’s rape filmed by her boyfriend Ramón. D’Lugo calls both him and the rapist “symptomatic products” of technologized and mediatized society whose feelings have been mutilated by the technology similar to the way another character, Andrea, has been deformed in unnatural Gaultier’s costume which “technologizes her” (84). Just as the natural rustic space opposes artificiality of the city, Kika’s figure contrasts with the other mechanized characters by her innocence and upbeat naturalness. Unfortunately, these qualities do not help her withstand the vices and the pressure of the de-humanized world as she is raped by Paul Bazzo, while being filmed by her
boyfriend, which can be symbolically and somberly interpreted as the invasion of the urban sprawl and sophistication into the rustic simplicity and innocence.

Brad Epps and Despina Kakpudaki note, in fact, that “Spanish reality, especially that of Madrid” of post-Franco era is what Almodovar draws his inspiration from making it “quasi-heroic, quasi-burlesque setting” for his written works and his films (5). It is very obvious in the Carne Trémula (1997) clearly marked by Franco’s influence on the Spanish society and probably the only film that makes open references to the historical events of the Franco and post-Franco era with social changes related to them. Although it is not the principal theme, the fear instilled by Franco and his repressive regime wraps the movie in a circular way focusing our attention on its importance for the film composition, the director and Spanish culture in general. The film starts and finishes with the episodes of a woman about to give birth and unable to get to the hospital, the first of which occurs during Franco era and the second almost thirty years later. In the first episode she can’t make it in time because the state of national emergency declared by Franco at the outset of the movie instills too much fear in people to go out and there are no cars in sight. In the second one, the situation is different as the streets are jammed with traffic, and Víctor (the now grown-up baby from the first episode) now accompanying his wife states, “It’s not the same Madrid. We lost fear a long time ago.” Echoing the theme of fear and embodying it on the personal level, Víctor’s lover Clara defies her abusive husband saying “one day I will lose fear of you.” She dies while confronting and also killing him in the end, which can be treated symbolically as homage to all the victims who died in the struggle for freedom against the regime. D’Lugo confirms that in this film “personal narratives of physical confinement are framed by the more expansive historical narrative of Spain’s deliverance from the Franco regime’s political confinement” (94).

The grey, apathic and monotonous city of post-war Franco days featured in the beginning of Carne Trémula evokes the urban setting that plays a key importance in the composition of La Colmena, a novel by Jose Camilo Cela which brings us back to the importance of literary component or intertextual relation with such in Almodovarian work. Paul Ilie states that the city in La Colmena assumes the role of the
main character due to its miserable, vagabond and starving nature, which puts the stamp on its inhabitants: “...the city impacts our conscientiousness until ingraining itself as a personality, like a separate life of any of the individuals that inhabit it” (135). These lives, snapshots of which create a kaleidoscope of the novel and of post-war Madrid, are monotonous, unpretentious and depressing. The urban setting therefore exercises a de-humanizing force revealed in moral void of these characters, similarly to Almodovarian ones (coincidentally, Clara of Carne Trémula compares her depressed interior state with the decrepit condition of urban slums where Víctor lives). The significance of a city as a dehumanizing and demoralizing force would also draw attention of a reader familiar with the Russian literature of the 19th century to the parallel with the role of St. Petersburg in the works of the prominent Russian novelists Dostoevsky and Gogol. It is important to note at this point that any intentionality of a relationship with the Russian classical prose is impossible to prove and is not likely altogether. Intertextuality hypothesis is thus based on Barthes’ theory as implicit and possible ties enriching the comprehension and interpretation of all the works involved.

Dostoevsky acutely feels negative and demoralizing influence of Saint Petersburg since for him the city is the symbol of materialism, rationalism and individualism concepts, foreign to the Russian morality based on Christian ideas of solidarity and brotherhood. Moral degradation of the protagonist in his short novel Notes from the Underground who declares himself to be vile and spiteful man and does everything to prove it, can be considered a direct consequence of the Western rationalism ideas that gain force in Saint Petersburg in the second half of the XIX century. The narrator/protagonist characterizes the city as “the most abstract and intentional city in the world” referring to its artificial roots as it was ambitiously built by Peter the First on the swamps not adapted for construction work (6). Unnatural tone in descriptions of the city especially predominates in the second part of the novel entitled “Wet Snow” where snow is painted in unnaturally dark and ugly colors: normally white, bright and fluffy, here it is “yellow” and “dingy”. Thus the author is using a metaphor of distorted nature and by extension, of distorted moral values when people (exemplified by the protagonist) get disconnected from their organic roots
in cities contaminated with sin and harmful ideas. Ralph Matlaw in his introduction to Notes says that one of the causes of the Man’s moral illness lies precisely in urbanism. “In this strange artificial setting, man loses touch with nature, distorts the meaning of natural phenomena, and ultimately distorts his own personality” very much like Leocadía in La flor de mi secreto loses touch with her roots in Madrid and goes to recover her emotional balance and capacity for happiness in her native village (XIII).

From the above intertextual literary and filmic examples ensues a common allegory of the city as a stage, artificial space which only simulates life where people are actors feigning or theatrically simulating reality. This pertains to the earlier analyzed importance of the performative aspect in Almodovarian films which, as it appears, can be also applied to the works of the Russian classics. The Underground Man admits that he is not living a real life but going through boredom, which is why any action, albeit vile, makes him feel alive. He also imagines audience in front of him “in order that I may be more dignified as I write”, which demonstrates a theatrical element in the life of this Dostoyevskian character (48). Village, as opposed to the artificial stage of the city, symbolizes for the novelist the space of spiritual freedom as home of peasants who embody purity of faith versus The Underground Man who embodies the artificiality of the city. In the village people can be their natural selves and not fear the failure of not performing up to the expectations of the public, as can also be seen in ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?, La flor de mi secreto and others already described.

The image of St. Petersburg as a gray city with malignant pressures on the consciousness of its inhabitants, is also important for another 19th century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol who wrote the cycle of St. Petersburg stories united by a common theme which Thais Lindstrom defines as the theme of the city “as an enemy – a world of impersonality and ruthlessness where it is individual folly to retain the human and personal” (n.p.). Just as Dostoevsky, Gogol abhorred the corrupting forces of bureaucracy, vanity and commercialism characterizing life in the city where he felt, people cared less for each other than for materialism and personal advancement, explained in more detail below. Lindstrom, just like Paul Ilie in his analysis of La Colmena, considers the city obtain a status of an independent character
whose “malefic image” and contrast between luxury and squalor exercise dehumanizing and depressing effect on the consciousness of its inhabitants (n.p.). She states that Gogol’s theme of urban climate spurring indifference and impersonality was developed “in all its shattering aspects” after the two World Wars by American and European authors, and among these Almodovar, intentionally or not, occupies an important place (n.p.).

*Tacones lejanos* (1991) is another film suggesting an unlikely parallel with Gogol’s work due to the similarities in the narrating style and peculiarities of the genre. A crime movie and a detective investigation on the surface, *Tacones* reveals great depths of genre variety referred to as “heterogeneity” by Guillermo Iglesias Diaz, who observes in it elements of “comedy, crime, melodrama, metafiction, critical irony, parody – everything combines in perfect harmony to give the spectator something more than just pure entertainment” (222). One example of irony and gender variety (or “gender bending” as earlier cited by Burke) is the fact that the crime is left without being solved while the judge with peculiar habits of disguising himself even in his private life, gets sidetracked by insignificant and comical details, such as color of blankets and the size of the victim. A similar “border-crossing of genres” can be observed in the works by Gogol where realistic scenes of St. Petersburg life and its inhabitants are interwoven with fantastic elements like a nose separating from its owner and acquiring a life of its own or a ghost of a poor official whose new overcoat gets stolen, haunting people on the streets. The reader can never be sure if the characters are dreaming, hallucinating or if h/she is presented with a parodied version of St. Petersburg dark reality, too bitter to digest if unaltered. Thus emerges a peculiar combination of reality and fantasy which can be considered an early precursor of the Latin American magic realism and which was earlier analyzed in examples of ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?

Gogol’s story “The Overcoat” presents the most salient, although most likely unintentional, parallel with *Tacones lejanos*. Important similarities lie in the creators’ technique of parody and in the relation of both works to crime and failure to solve it, what Iglesias Diaz calls “perfect examples of ‘anti-detective’ stories” (220). The parodied characters here are a small government official Akakii Akakiyevich whose very
name sounds like a parody of one, and nameless Very Important Personage who embodies the worst traits of a Russian burocrat invested with certain power. He intentionally keeps Akakii Akakiyevich waiting while he finishes his conversation with a friend stating that he is busy although he “had long ago said all he has wanted to his old friend, and their present conversation had for some time now been punctuated by long pauses, interrupted by the one or the other slapping his friend on the knee and saying ‘Ah, Ivan Abramovich!’ or ‘Yes, yes, quite right, Stepan Varlamovich!’” (262). Parody, according to Iglesias Diaz, is also crucial in Tacones lejanos, where the director depicts an exaggeratedly simple-minded judge working on the case of the murder who has never solved any cases. He pays exaggerated attention to silly details and never discovers the truth being deceived by both Rebeca and her mother. The robbers of the overcoat in Gogol’s story are also never discovered, either due to the corruption of the police or to an ironic twist of fate, which is what causes the exaggerated grief and subsequent abrupt death of the protagonist. Iglesias Diaz believes that parody serves as a way to “open the text, to break down the frame these movies are enclosed in” so the reader gets the feeling the characters continue living beyond the frame of the film, once it is over (214). Such breaking down of the movie frame seems to be the ideal way to open it up for interpretation based on intertextual relations with multiple literary and filmic works. As for the interfilmic ties with other Almodovarian works, silly police/criminal investigators live on failing to solve other crimes as if we are presented with the same characters in slightly varying disguises (in Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? two police officers fail to recognize the truth even when the wife-murderer admits to it, and in Mujeres al borde they are easily misled by accepting a morphine-induced gazpacho). Unreliable narrators in both Tacones lejanos and “The Overcoat”, also help to “open up” the filmic and literary texts for intertextual connections. The story of Tacones is presented from a point of view of its protagonist Rebeca, according to Iglesias Diaz a “pathological liar and an unreliable person”. Therefore, we cannot be sure whether the story is real or what we see is a version of reality as perceived by Rebeca. She (or the film director) manipulates our viewing experience confusing us and making it “difficult to establish a difference between fiction and non-fiction” (218). In “The
Overcoat”, the unreliable and confusing narrator is one of the salient and enigmatic features of the story. A seemingly omniscient narrator selectively focuses his attention on insignificant details (just as the judge in Tacones), brings up anecdotes concerning secondary characters inconsequential to the main story development, carries on sentences of enormous length and constantly contradicts himself: “Having mentioned his wife, we had better say a word or two about her also; to our regret, however, we know very little about her, except that Petrovich had a wife who wore a bonnet, and not a kerchief...” (241). Such narrative peculiarities, besides producing a comical effect, puzzle the reader as to the purpose of multiple digressions and lead some critics to argue that the story itself is a mere exercise in absurdity, “a parable, a hermeneutic puzzle, an exercise in meaninglessness” – which certainly rings true for many episodes in Almodovarian films (Brombert 48).

It is evident from what has been analyzed so far that the majority of Almodovarian characters, committing murders, searching pleasure in death or escaping from society norms, defy stereotypes and explore new identities or expand the limits of the existing ones. However, the director curiously turns around to portray the most conventional role of all times and regions, which wins him huge success and the high critical awards (Oscar and Spanish Goya for Best Director), - that of the grieving mother in Todo sobre mi madre (1999). Ballesteros also states that Almodovar's early films “drag, cross-dressing, and sex changes carried an almost unquestionably subversive charge, whereas in later films such as Todo sobre mi madre and Los abrazos rotos characters long to find peace and happiness or mourn the loss thereof in attempt to recover normalcy (89). Jo Evans remarks that the self-sacrificial figure of Todo sobre mi madre embodies her son’s “oedipal fantasy” as he is re-writing it “on the camera lens” that leaves open the implication that the film and his creation are the extensions of each other (338). In the depiction of this protagonist Almodovar reverts to the traditional Spanish female figure grieving for her son, in a fashion not typical for his earlier work. Why does this non-rebellious and less-feministic role turn out to be so appealing? While the answer might not be simple, a possible clue might be found in the same search for normalcy and “normalizing thrusts”, however relative the concept may be, that stimulate
Marina and Ricky in *Atame* or Leocadia in *La flor de mi secreto*, and the one that raises “the increasingly organized, complex, and sophisticated questioning of normalcy and normativity” (Ballesteros 90).

In fact, it can be considered ironic that after the search for family comfort and human solidarity, the director returns to dark and bizarre themes in *La mala educación*, as if to emphasize the relativity and instability of normalcy and normativity. As Víctor Fuentes comments, Almodovar thus reaffirms that “his cinema was still dedicated to marginality... and that its only law was the 'law of desire', no matter how transgressive it may be” (430). As the director alludes in an interview with Maruja Torres, the focus on the darkest side of life most likely stems from the autobiographic nature of the film and his own dark experiences as a teenager singing in the choir at the Catholic school. As Almodovar states in this interview referring to his Catholic school experience, “terrible things were happening to me. You already know what I mean” (12). Victor Fuentes, who researches Almodovar’s self-proclaimed interfilmic plagiarism and its “interplays” with autobiography in *La mala educación*, states that “it lies between autobiography and fiction, personal experience and partly ‘plagiarized’ invention, and is more properly an autobiographical metafictional and a metacinematic movie” (432). The director also stresses the importance of autobiographical elements in another interview: “everything that is not autobiographical is plagiarism” (Hirschberg 42). These words summarize the intertextual nature of his films with multiple references to Hollywood and Spanish cinematography (in this case, film noir), and raise an interesting question about the nature of intertextuality in general: where does the boundary between the intertextuality and plagiarism lie? In fact, the director admits the influence of Hollywood on him in the interview with Marsha Kinder where he names numerous Hollywood classics, references to which appear in numerous scenes of his films: “all the influences on me and all of the film references in my films are very spontaneous and visual. I don’t make any tributes.” (134) Further on in the same interview he does acknowledge that in *La mala educación* he is paying homage to *Double Indemnity* (1944) by Billy Wilder which is the “‘noirest’ among the ‘noir’” (148).
Since the director comes to fame during the Madrid’s cultural liberation movement La movida, just like in the Laberinto de pasiones and Pepi, Luci, Bom, the city suddenly awakening from the weight of the dictatorship and discovering what it is capable of in the face of freedom, can be considered a shaping force of vices featured in the film. In view of this, the title of the movie can refer to the reevaluation of the Francoist past and “the focus on Madrid of 1980 as the symbolic site of origin of cultural and political attitudes destined to reshape Spanish social and political life for the next quarter century” (362). In the process of reshaping and as a protest against the previous restrictions, the city opens up to liberal political and cultural influences leading to “moral ambiguity” (364). This moral ambiguity and indoor setting of Enrique’s dark production office once again evoke the somber underground setting (“underground” in literal and psychological meaning) and the moral decay of St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground. Just as Madrid vices can be related to its liberation from the dictatorship, St. Peters burg rotten moral atmosphere is attributed by Dostoevsky to its liberal welcoming of the Western values.

The trend towards stability once again resurges in Los abrazos rotos where at the end of the film we are presented with a “normal” scene of a typical modern Spanish family of a couple and a son dining together. Normalcy is again intertwined with abnormality since the couple is not married and father is not aware of his own paternity, but, as Matz affirms, it does not matter “pues los vínculos afectivos son más fuertes que los biológicos” (209). Family structure and composition divert from the established norms thus defying the “normalcy” and also reflecting the contemporary Spanish society where traditional families with many children are no longer the norm. At the same time these movies maintain traditional “normal” basis of mutual love and respect. Most Almodovar’s films present family (or at least, some component or simulation of the family) as “un núcleo que ayuda a los personajes a lidiar con los problemas y las pequeñeces de la vida diaria”, and in this lies the essence of their normalcy (209).

Thus, the important characteristics of Almodovar’s films: interplay between social norms and abnormality and rich intertextuality comprising real, possible and implicit (often non-intentional) relationships to other Spanish or
foreign films, Biblical texts, fairy tales and literary works help shed the light on the interpretation of both his films and broader cultural context of the post-Franco society inhabited by his characters. By showcasing families in crisis, lonely and crazed people searching for stability as well as those escaping from it; gay, bi-and transsexual characters transgressing the boundaries of “normal” men and women but brought together by love and human warmth, the director establishes the new social norms thus normalizing the abnormal. He therefore shapes the new Spanish “normality”, creating what María R. Matz calls “su propia visión de lo que España debe ser” (222).

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