

Almodóvar's Self-Fashioning

The Economics and Aesthetics of Deconstructive Autobiography

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There seems little doubt that Almodóvar is now the most successful Spanish filmmaker of all time, whether that success is measured in terms of financial or symbolic capital. With no fewer than eighteen feature films, none of which has failed to turn a profit, and countless honors, including the Prince of Asturias Prize, the Légion d'Honneur, many Goyas and innumerable Césars, two Oscars, and an honorary doctorate at Harvard, his career is unparalleled over some thirty years. His *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009) received a rhapsodic review from the chief critic of the *New York Times*, the most important “gatekeeper” for admission to the select world of art cinema in the United States (Scott 2009). The particular importance of this feature is that it focuses on the construction of an auteurist self for the filmmaker, the theme that will be a main concern of this chapter.

The contours of that career, which is of course still developing, remain unclear and cannot be reduced to the established models of film authorship associated with the “classical” auteurs (such as Welles and Rossellini) whom Almodóvar so regularly cites in his own oeuvre. Some sense of this unease comes from the diverse accounts of Almodóvar's career in different languages on Wikipedia. Thus in the English version, after rapidly dispatching “Early Life,” “Beginnings,” and “Short Films,” the anonymous authors simply enumerate the feature films in order of their appearance (Wikipedia 2010a). The trajectory established is thus purely chronological. The French version, somewhat more analytical, adds a section on “leitmotifs” to the chronological list. Almodóvar's persistent, but notably heterogeneous, themes are said to be: sexual identity; parent–child relations; women; the mise en abyme; references to world and U.S. cinema; drugs; and color symbolism (Wikipedia 2010b). A quote from the auteur, absent in the English version,

establishes his “passion” for cinema. Finally, spurning the simple list of films or motifs, the Spanish version places successive titles within a series of somewhat arbitrary “periods”: the “experimental period” of the shorts and first two features, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls like Mom* (1980) and *Laberinto de pasiones*/*Labyrinth of Passion* (1982); the “Fellini-influenced” period includes *Entre tinieblas*/*Dark Habits* (1983) and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*/*What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984); the “maestro-influenced” period stretches furthest (from *Matador* [1986] to *Tacones lejanos*/*High Heels* [1991]); while the “autobiographical period” concludes the cycle with *Todo sobre mi madre*/*All About My Mother* (1999), *La mala educación*/*Bad Education* (2004), and *Volver* (2006) (Wikipedia 2010c). In addition to this idiosyncratic periodization (apparently uncontested by Spanish-speaking collaborators of the website), the entry suggests some additional signifying contexts for the auteur, absent in other language versions, giving short sections on Almodóvar’s work as a producer, on his political activities, and on his “detractors.”

The three Wikipedias agree on some facts. For example, they all give Almodóvar’s date of birth as 1949, although the pressbook for *Los abrazos rotos* suggests with flattering vagueness that it falls within “the 1950s” (Almodóvar 2009b: n. p.). But the different versions disagree on other matters. For example the Spaniards do not mention Almodóvar’s alleged sexual orientation. The French claim he is “homosexual,” without offering a corroborative reference. And the Anglos call the director “openly gay,” although the only link they give in the entry is to a *Time* story of 2005 in which Almodóvar himself angrily rejects the label “gay director” and is rejected in turn by the gay rights organizations who say he “has never supported” them (Farouky 2005).

My point here is not to call attention to the controversy over even basic facts, intractable as they may seem, but to suggest the difficulty in providing plausible narratives to define this matrix figure and his growing oeuvre. Specialist scholars also struggle to constrain proliferating Pedros. An international conference held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (whose final session was attended by Almodóvar and a retinue of *chicas*) comprised four days devoted in turn to “History and Film,” “Ethics and Aesthetics,” “The Cinematic Universe” (on film form), and “Society, Culture, and Gender” (Zurian and Vázquez Varela 2005). This current volume is divided into six sections that include bio-filmography, Spanish and global contexts, re-readings of various films and sections interrogating Almodóvar’s cinema in relation to gender, art, commerce, and society. But a third collection employed a very different structuring principle, with loosely defined groupings of essays on “Forms and Figures” (sound, violence, comedy), “Melodrama and its Discontents,” “The Limits of Representation” (girls, brothers, and nostalgia), and (finally) “The Auteur in Context” (Epps and Kakoudaki 2009). Typically, Almodóvar himself has the last word, with his “diary” of the shoot of *Volver* (already posted on his website) reproduced in print as a final chapter. D’Lugo’s earlier monograph had also ended with an autobiographical text, in this case a “self-interview” on *La mala educación* (2006: 145–52).

In my own recent research I have explored Almodóvar's unpublished short stories of the 1970s, suggesting that the key themes they share with the subsequent films (most especially the twin motifs of the glamorous and vengeful transvestite and the mature fantasizing housewife) tend to support a traditional auteurist argument based on aesthetic criteria (Smith 2009b).¹ Almodóvar's work in text, as on celluloid, thus reveals a remarkable consistency of value, conceptual coherence, and stylistic unity. But I have also examined the corporate mentality of Almodóvar's production company El Deseo in its commercial context, revealing how it seeks to preserve and promote the "figure" of Almodóvar as part of its continuing business mission (Smith 2009c: 18–20). Kathleen Vernon (2007) has noted a similar blurring of boundaries in Almodóvar's appeal to music: the songs branded as "his" when released on CD are neither written nor performed by the director, nor, in some cases, even featured in his films. Yet they are somehow enlisted into his ongoing creative and commercial project. The line between the artistic and the industrial is thus difficult indeed to draw.

That line is of course complicated by Almodóvar's own continuing self-commentary, which follows a double movement of revelation and concealment. D'Lugo has noted that "through the evolution of a style and a conception of filmmaking, he has moved to a critique of his own past and the culture out of which his cinema has taken shape" (D'Lugo 2006: 129). But Almodóvar's extended printed comments in the lavish press kits that have long accompanied the releases of his features seek to influence the future also, providing a template for critical interpretation.² The pressbook for *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) distributed at the Cannes Festival is no exception. It is divided into eleven sections: "The Title" describes the film's inspiration in Rossellini; "The Credits" reveals the "ghostly, mysterious quality" of the shoot; "Editing" suggests "the fragility of film"; "Making of" focuses on the "secrets of the people . . . coordinating the fiction"; "Duplication" suggests the double as a theme in the film (as shown, for example, by the two names of its main character: Mateo Blanco and Harry Caine); *Chicas y maletas* (*Girls and Suitcases*) describes the film-within-the-film, freely based on *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988); "Noir" claims Penélope Cruz's Lena as a femme fatale; "Up and Down" identifies the staircase (down which Lena will fall) as a "cinematic icon"; "The Photo" presents another inspiration for the film: a picture of lovers embracing on the black sand of Lanzarote; "Parents and Children: The Monologue" introduces a comic short that is the "child" of the feature; and finally "Declaration of Love" asserts Almodóvar's dedication to cinema, which is "not only a profession, but also an irrational passion".

Offering his own list of signifying contexts, Almodóvar thus calls attention to aspects of film technique which are generally hidden or unrecognized; to cinematic sources that his audience may have some trouble identifying; to inspirations for his plot and structuring principles of his narrative; to items of the *mise en scène*; to peripheral works spun off from the main film; and to the cinematic obsession, at once personal and professional, which, he claims, contains and explains all these diverse elements.

In this essay I argue that *Los abrazos rotos*, a film about a filmmaker and his craft, can be read in part as a kind of deconstructive autobiography of Almodóvar's personal and professional career to date, complex and contradictory as it is. But it is not just the range, depth, and international profile of this career that makes the Almodóvar phenomenon so difficult to address in all its aspects. It is also the changes in broader cultural spheres, which this volume seeks to address and which have, in turn, transformed the context in which Almodóvar's cinema is both produced and received. *Broken Embraces*, I will argue, can be read in part as a series of reflections on current conditions for industry and authorship, conditions we can briefly address below.

El País's business section had reported back in 2007 that government policy intended to solve Spain's growing balance of payments deficit by promoting new priorities in exports: high tech goods and services, rather than the more traditional sectors of manufacturing, textiles, and cars (Triper 2007). The sole illustration used for this article is a photograph of Almodóvar looking through a viewfinder, citing his "promotion of the Spanish audiovisual sector abroad" as exemplary of this trend in cultural exports. But in spite of such Spanish praise of Almodóvar as a key exporter, the international film sector was beset by many and varied challenges which clearly affected Spain and *El Deseo*. For example the editor of *Screen International* (*SI*), the trade journal for the European film business, wrote that art-house cinema was facing an "ageing problem" (Gubbins 2008). In what *SI* calls this new "post-auteurist" era, festival programmers, specialist distributors, and exhibitors now feel the lack of "bankable name directors with built-in fan bases." Moreover younger directors favor "a more collaborative theory of production," with producers and writers "demanding more recognition of their role in the creation of a film." There has thus been a shift from "a handful of important directors" to a body of "important film-making," a change that *SI* claims to discern in the programming of recent festivals. While old-style auteurism arose in a pre-internet age when public demand was not so dominant, newer post-auteurs face the "postmodern challenge" of "engaging with audiences". Newly disrespectful, the latter may prove to be indifferent or even hostile.

This new climate of skepticism to auteurism and to film purism is compounded by trends beyond production and distribution. Thus *Sight & Sound* noted in a survey of the film industry that changes in specialized exhibition in the U.K. (as elsewhere) "have led to predictions that films by some of the world's finest auteurs may not make it into . . . cinemas" (Patterson 2008: 30). In the same year and in a special issue the editor of *Sight & Sound* asked "Who needs critics?" (James 2008). Given the decline in the status of film journalists, who had suffered mass culls in the United States, critics have been reduced to the status of consumer guides. Finding themselves unable to argue passionately in favor of art film or against blockbusters, because of the commercial priorities of their employers, film critics now tend to take refuge in humorous "satire" rather than to engage seriously with their chosen subject (James 2008: 17). While perhaps only one critic in the U.K. still

has the power to make or break a specialist release (the contributor to *The Guardian*, a national daily), film reviewers generally have rapidly “declined in market value” (James 2008: 17). Conversely bloggers, who are free from print media’s sense of professional responsibility and unfettered by policy interventions from superiors (James 2008: 18), can afford to take up passionately held positions, but have little social impact. A little later we will compare this Anglo-American panorama with the situation in Spain, whose media have also changed in ways discomfiting to a mature auteur like Almodóvar.

Even as the fortunes of the Spanish film industry revived (box office and share rose in the domestic market at the end of the first decade of the millennium), old-school auteurism was under attack from two sides, at once discursive and economic: the decline in respect for art movies and the rise in status of genre films. It was a trend confirmed by the 2010 Goya Awards, where prison-set action movie *Celda 211* / *Cell 211* swept the boards and Almodóvar went home empty handed. This was in marked contrast to previous years. As recently as 2007 an austere art movie like *La soledad* / *Solitary Fragments* (Jaime Rosales) could triumph over expert but populist genre fare such as *El orfanato* / *The Orphanage* (J. A. Bayona). It was significant that *SI*’s territory guide to Spain for the same year, which claimed that “Spanish films are experiencing an upturn in popularity” included a survey of distribution and box office entitled “Giving the audience what they want” (Evans 2010: 40).

Significantly, this apparent shift in taste also affects the distribution of Spanish films abroad. Charles Gant uses box-office statistics to disprove the commonly held notion that “arthouse audiences don’t care for [foreign language] genre films”, citing a U.K. distributor who acknowledges the “precedent” of Spain in this cross-over niche (Gant 2009). Indeed, of the ten highest grossing European horror movies in the U.K. no fewer than four (including the top two) are Spanish: *El laberinto del fauno* / *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), *El orfanato*, *El espinazo del Diablo* / *The Devil’s Backbone* (Guillermo del Toro, 2001), and zombie movie *[REC]* (Jaume Balagueró, 2007).

Nuria Triana-Toribio offers valuable insight into this increasing convergence of arthouse and mainstream in Spanish cinema at home and abroad. In a major article she traces the career of two “directores mediáticos,” Álex de la Iglesia and Isabel Coixet, media-savvy cineastes who combine auteurism and commerce. As Triana-Toribio writes, while Spanish film professionals have long lamented the absence of effective promotion in their cinema (Triana-Toribio 2008: 260), U.S. film scholars such as Timothy Corrigan suggested equally long ago that the auteur is “a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception, . . . a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 261). She relates the rise of the *mediáticos* in Spain to increasing pressure on distribution: the saturation of screens requires aspiring auteurs to compete as never before to “place their product” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 262).

Triana-Toribio also studies in detail the new auteurs’ homepages with a particular emphasis on those of Álex de la Iglesia and Isabel Coixet. Hosted by a

site run by transnational retailer FNAC, they both present themselves as “potentially authentic and autonomous modes of expression” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 263). In practice, however, the self-authored websites negotiate that curious combination of personal intimacy and physical distance characteristic of the web, creating “auteur personas” with distinct (and distinctive) “habitus”: a Bourdieu-originated term defined here as “schemes of perception, thought, appreciation, and action” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 272).³

Both sets of habitus in these case studies are contradictory. De la Iglesia ostentatiously divests himself of expertise in any area except gastronomy, even as he presents himself as a “pure filmmaker” in thrall to obsessive cinematic creation (Triana-Toribio 2008: 271, 273); Coixet portrays herself as an engaged and educated artist, citing Gramsci and Stendhal, even as she proudly displays her work as a director of television commercials and provides links for consumers to buy her products (Triana-Toribio 2008: 273, 275).

Both de la Iglesia and Coixet have had features produced by El Deseo. And Triana-Toribio had earlier dedicated a study to the Almodóvar brothers’ production company, a Spanish pioneer in promotion and marketing (2007). In this piece she treats a question that is also found in the specialist trade press: transnationalism. And she seeks to link the increasing academic interest in the topic with the industrial changes recounted by the trade press. She reminds us, however, that El Deseo “boasts a world-wide projection already well established long before we started to hear the word ‘transnational’ in film studies” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 156).

In Triana-Toribio’s account the company was first founded to take advantage of the Spanish Socialist Party or PSOE’s institution of advance subsidies in the 1980s, described as “a new form of financing films through a partnership with the state” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 156). However, El Deseo’s aim from the start, benefiting from the business acumen and activism of Agustín, Pedro’s brother, was to “use national financial resources [to] make Spanish cinema take pride of place among the world cinemas in a sustained manner” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 157). She cites Esther García, the company’s head of production, who notes that, unlike other Spanish producers, El Deseo has a strong record of overcoming the problem of international sales. Moreover the company has both opted for “quality” and kept budgets low (around two million euro). Triana-Toribio wonders whether such a phenomenon deserves a new name. Surely the cinematically literate “transnational” audience for Almodóvar’s films, however actively cultivated, is little different from the old-school cinephile public which sought out foreign-language films abroad. She concludes that while “the strategies for making films that travel [may] have changed . . . the films that travel are little different from the past” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 159).

Going further in this revisionist line, she enumerates a series of highly localist linguistic and cultural factors that suggest that *Volver*, say, is firmly “grounded in [its] nation of origin” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 160). Larger budgeted movies which are also made to be consumed internationally (such as del Toro’s *Laberinto del*

fauno) may, paradoxically, prove more vulnerable in the future, as they are funded only reluctantly by TV companies who are obliged by Spanish law to invest 5% of their income in cinema. Unfortunately the Spanish audience has “turned its back on [the small budget] home production” which comprises the great majority of local feature films (Triana-Toribio 2007: 161).

Triana-Toribio's media-savvy directors are, she says, “middle brow”; and the elastic nature of El Deseo's definition of “quality” (which extends even to genre films which push the envelope of conventional expectations) also seems to conform to Bourdieu's understanding of the middle brow as that which offers insecure audiences a shortcut to cultural capital which must elsewhere be laboriously acquired. Indeed if we return to Bourdieu's classic study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* we find a telling example of ethics and aesthetics in cinema. When confronted with a photograph of an old woman's gnarled hands, elite informants invoke art film in their responses, saying the subject could “almost be a character” out of Bergman, Dreyer, or Welles; likewise a chiaroscuro shot of a gasworks at night is said to be “beautiful because of [its] contrasts” (Bourdieu 1996: 45–6). In a similar way, Almodóvar's own citations of auteur cinema, increasingly prominent in later films, serve to establish his own cultural capital and to aestheticize his subjects. But note that, unlike in the cases of Bourdieu's photographs, which are studiously unpleasurable before they undergo the process of elite interpretation, Almodóvar's cinema, extravagantly art directed and colored, requires little cultural expertise to appreciate aesthetically. Indeed his films, less severe than many other auteurs past or present, have been regularly attacked for their visual excesses. Perilously poised between high art and vulgar commerce, Almodóvar's own oeuvre may thus well merit the label of middlebrow. Bearing this tricky position in mind, we can now turn in the remainder of this chapter to examine how Almodóvar's self-fashioning can be re-read in the various contexts sketched out above at the crucial time of the production and release of *Los abrazos rotos*, his seventeenth feature.

First of all, *Los abrazos rotos* clearly takes up its place in the late “autobiographical period” identified by the Spanish Wikipedia page, focusing as it does on a middle-aged filmmaker (Mateo Blanco, played by stage veteran Lluís Homar) who serves as a stand in for Almodóvar himself as he approached his sixtieth birthday. Mateo's lost masterpiece, reassembled only at the end of the film, is (as the press-book informed us) called *Chicas y maletas* and is a clone of Almodóvar's international crossover success *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* of more than twenty years earlier.

Confessional, albeit in a symbolic mode, such self-reference attempts to render long-term fans complicit with the films' creator by evoking shared and fond memories of past cinematic pleasures. In this case, however, Almodóvar does not engage the richly particularized cultural location of *Volver*. *Los abrazos rotos*'s background, both historical (the film is set in 1992 and the present) and geographical (the film was shot in Madrid and the Canaries), is only lightly sketched in. The film



Figure 1.1 Memories of past cinematic pleasures: Almodóvar on the set of *Chicas y maletas*, the film-within-the-film in *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

is of course a co-production, but this time not with France (CIBY 2000 and Pathé were long-term partners) but with the United States (in this case the major Universal's recently revived international arm). And as has been the case at least since *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), the budget was covered in advance by foreign pre-sales.

Unlike *La flor*, which includes a street protest against Felipe González's Socialist government, *Los abrazos rotos* appears unconcerned by current social conditions in contemporary Spain. Almodóvar went further in his personalized projection of the film. In repeated interviews he assured readers that Blanco's blindness (here caused by a car accident) was related to the director's own recently acquired "photophobia," a sensitivity to light which resulted in severe migraines (see Smith 2009a: 20). Mateo's conflict with the malign magnate who is the producer of his film (Ernesto Martel, played by film veteran José Luis Gómez) also recalls Almodóvar's early struggles with moneymen before the founding of El Deseo gave him artistic independence. For example, he has said in interview that he was obliged against his wishes to cast his producer's partner in the lead female role in *Entre tinieblas* (1983) (Vidal 1989: 94–5). In *Los abrazos rotos* Cruz's Lena is also the lover of producer Martel, on whom both star and director depend. While such conflicts may not correspond to Almodóvar's current situation (in which his loyal brother is his sole producer), this theme does connect with the current trend

elsewhere for producers to seek more credit for their creative contribution. Moreover the stress on movie finance in *Los abrazos rotos* (Cruz's character cannot leave the wealthy, abusive partner who is funding Mateo's film) testifies obliquely to the frequent and traumatic changes in film funding in post-Franco Spain.

Interestingly, in Almodóvar's two previous projects with cineaste protagonists (*La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* [1987] and *La mala educación*), the main characters were gay men enamored of younger lovers. Although Homar (born 1957) is presented in *Los abrazos rotos* as the perfect heterosexual partner for the radiant Penélope Cruz (born 1974), in *La mala educación* the same actor had played an ageing pedophile whose obsession with the handsome Gael García (born 1978) was depicted as poignant, if not pathetic. Almodóvar stresses in *Los abrazos rotos* the continued sexual desirability of a mature protagonist (the film begins with Mateo somewhat implausibly picking up an attractive young woman on the street). But he also suggests the same indifference to sexual orientation that is characteristic of his own media projection. Displacing queer interest onto the minor character of Martel's son (also sexually obsessed with Mateo), Almodóvar blurs that conflict over his own sexuality that has been played out in press coverage in different countries and languages. The film's plot thus serves as a distorting mirror for the real-life concerns of a continuing media metanarrative.

Beyond disguised autobiography, Almodóvar also makes a clear bid in *Los abrazos rotos* for the traditionalist criteria of auteurism, albeit without neglecting overt visual pleasure: the production values remain reassuringly high (especially the expert art design by Antxon Gómez);⁴ the themes of artistic creativity and *amour fou* run through the entire oeuvre (although the crazed lovers in *Ley* and *Educación* are not the film-obsessed directors, but the young boyfriend played by Antonio Banderas and the ageing ex-priest played by Homar, respectively); and the stylistic signature is unmistakable, even given the presence of a new and potentially disruptive director of photography (Rodrigo Prieto, who shot the hyperkinetic *Amores Perros* [Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000]).

But these artistic questions are also industrial: sold initially on the back of the "figure" of the director (the Spanish poster carried the now familiar single credit, "Un film de ALMODÓVAR"), the new feature strove to further *El Deseo*'s continuing business mission of promoting the durable prestige of the company's only begetter.

El Deseo thus deployed its now traditional skills in marketing, which are held to be characteristic of those rare media businesses that spearheaded Spanish service industries at home and abroad. Yet perhaps the increasing emphasis on Cruz in the promotional campaign derived from the company's concerns about the ageing of the arthouse and its audience and the difficulty for Spanish films to connect with a skeptical local public. In April 2009 (as the film was released) Spanish *Vanity Fair* ran a frankly risible cover feature on the star couple with the strap line "Intimate and Secret" (*Vanity Fair* 2009). Penélope's pull quote was "Both of us know that when we are flirting [*coqueteamos*] we are on dangerous ground"; and Pedro's "At 40 I almost fathered a child." In the glossy spread inside, Penélope pretends to play



Figure 1.2 Almodóvar on location in the Canary Islands with director of photography Rodrigo Prieto. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

the harp for Pedro, as he reclines languorously on a chaise longue; or, again, she poses pensively in a Chanel couture bridal gown.

However unconvincing this media marriage may be, such role-play serves somewhat narcissistically to echo and reinforce *Los abrazos rotos*'s main plot strand: the love affair between Cruz's character and the brilliant director who casts her in his film. In an age, as we have noted, widely believed to belong to the post-auteur and in the midst of a global economic crisis felt with particular intensity in Spain, even the most bankable of veteran name directors may feel the need to lean more heavily than before on a younger celebrity, especially if she is the only Spanish actress readily recognizable abroad. Moreover, as Almodóvar's longest and highest budgeted feature, *Broken Embraces* seeks to separate itself off from those small Spanish pictures on

which local audiences had consistently turned their backs, staking its claim to the same transnational audience that prestige pictures like *El laberinto del fauno* won around the world. Whether that audience crosses over with the old-school cinephile public (as Triana-Toribio believes) or not, *Los abrazos rotos* was conceived as a film that would not only travel but would take most of its revenue abroad.

At a corporate level, there are other signs of El Deseo's desire to connect with changing audiences. The Almodóvars take their social responsibility seriously. Doing well by doing good, they see the sponsorship of younger directors, often from Latin America, as a cinematic duty that brings them little economic benefit but considerable credibility and good will. One El Deseo co-production, Lucrecia Martel's well-received *La mujer sin cabeza* / *The Headless Woman* (2008), was released just a few months before *Los abrazos rotos*. And responding to the pressure for disintermediation (going directly to the consumers), Almodóvar has, since *Volver*, exploited the internet in order to bypass the mainstream media in self-written blogs on two homepages to which I return later.

Also responding to the challenge of the internet and in a new strategy of de-aggregation (splitting the single work into a number of distinct parts), Almodóvar released part of *Los abrazos rotos*'s film-within-the film in a crudely comic short film satirizing the right-wing Partido Popular (*La concejala antropófaga* / *The Cannibal Councilor*) that was distributed independently on the web and television. Starring as it did Carmen Machi, Spain's most popular female television star, the short can be read as an attempt to connect with the mass audience who had followed Machi for some years on Tele 5's top-rated and long-running sitcom *7 vidas* (1999–2006) and its spin off *Aída* (2005–). The lavish photo shoots mentioned above might also be read in this way, as a canny (if unmonetized) de-aggregation of that once fetishized and unified work of art, the quality feature film. Moreover, when the DVD version of *Los abrazos rotos* appeared in Spain it was as a luxury two-disc boxed edition, replete with the extras (the short film, a photo gallery, and footage of Pedro directing Penélope), which the perfectionist Almodóvar had long resisted providing for earlier releases. With characteristic reflexivity, these commercial questions are incorporated into the film itself, where the "making of" footage shot by Martel's gay son plays a significant part in the plot.

The renewed debate between art film and genre movies, prominent in Spanish cinema of the 2000s, is also internalized in *Los abrazos rotos*, fed back into perceptions of Almodóvar's own artistic development. Mateo's production manager Judit (steely Blanca Portillo) remarks dismissively early on that Mateo might make more money by writing "one of those fantasy films for kids" (the blind director has now become a screenwriter with the pseudonym "Harry Caine," presumably named for Welles's character in *The Third Man* [1949]). Although this remark may well be a wry acknowledgment that teen movies, both domestic and foreign, are now the biggest grossing features in Spain, a central sequence in *Los abrazos rotos* has Mateo and his lover Lena, played by Cruz, intently watching Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) on television. But, as if aware that this allegiance to old-school auteurism

may no longer be shared by his audience, Almodóvar makes sure to embrace genre film with equal warmth. Mateo's lost masterpiece *Chicas y maletas*, indulgently described as "a work of genius" by Judit in the final sequence of the film, is no Wellesian or neorealist drama but rather one of those farcical comedies that Almodóvar himself abandoned in the quest for "quality" that became so central to El Deseo's corporate mentality. There is thus an unresolved ambivalence to genre film here. When Judit's son improvises a vampire premise for a film (one which Pedro himself had orally recounted at the conference held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, mentioned earlier), Mateo eagerly climbs on board, offering to help the young man with the script. We are thus left in no doubt that this most populist of teen-friendly themes is worthy of creative development.

The final area to consider in this survey of how *Los abrazos rotos* interacted with changing social and cultural conditions is one to which I have already briefly referred: newspapers and internet. Although El Deseo is often acclaimed for its professional marketing and Pedro has long been indefatigable in his promotional activities, it is striking that the press coverage in Spain is decidedly mixed. Almodóvar has openly argued with the Spanish Film Academy (AACCE), which has failed to nominate his features for their prizes as often as he would have liked (Anon. 2005). The premiere of *La mala educación* was marked by Almodóvar's controversial and unfounded claim that, after the terrorist outrages in Madrid on the eve of a General Election, the Partido Popular were planning a coup d'état (see D'Lugo 2006: 128). Likewise the main media story on the release of *Los abrazos rotos* was not the film itself, but Almodóvar's public quarrel with the leading newspaper, *El País*, which had featured so often within his films and had already provided so much advance publicity for his newest feature.

At the time of writing, Almodóvar, the pioneer of Triana-Toribio's media-savvy directors, has two homepages. The first is hosted, like those of de la Iglesia and Coixet, by French book and video retailer FNAC (Clubcultura 2005). Although claimed as an "official site" in three languages, it has not been updated for five years, with the most recent "News" being the pre-production of *Volver*. The biography given in the "Autor" (sic) section is skimpy, but shares some family photos; the "Films" section offers posters, brief synopses, and, for later works "Comments of Pedro" (i.e. self-penned texts originally from the pressbooks) or access to dedicated sites; "Bibliography" and "scor" (sic) allows surfers to buy books and CDs associated with the films from FNAC; while "specials" collects links to Almodóvar's exhibition of still photography (also held at FNAC's central Madrid store) and his self-interviews. While the design of the layout is reminiscent of El Deseo's distinctive graphics (designed by Juan Gatti), the lack of attention to detail (the frequent misspellings and tardy updating) are far from Almodóvar's normal perfectionism. Moreover with no facility for posting comments (de la Iglesia and Coixet actively participate in online forums with fans) the site remains fixated on his master's voice and declines to engage with audiences. As a commercial strategy for organizing reception, this avowedly auteurist site is clearly deficient.

Almodóvar's personal focus was now evidently elsewhere. And a second, more professionally presented trilingual site, which also claims to be "official," hosts his more recent blog (Almodóvar 2009a). This offers texts and photos (carefully copyrighted to Pedro himself) minutely documenting the pre- and post-production processes of *Los abrazos rotos*. Framed by stylish graphics designed to evoke the sprocket holes of a roll of celluloid, the text is in Courier typeface, evocative of a vintage typewriter and intended to personalize the electronic medium. Aware of the demand for intimacy in such a format, Almodóvar meditates on the nature of his blog in somewhat contradictory fashion. It is worth citing him at length:

I started writing this kind of "journey notes" in October and I intend to go on recording what is happening in my life in the little free time I have for writing. I hope to carry on doing it at least until shooting finishes. It will be a way of letting off steam for me and also provide a future memento. And above all, it will increase my level of stress and anguish, because literally I haven't even got time "to wipe my ass", as my mother would say. What's more, I'm not a diary writer. Apart from scripts (which I write because I'm driven by a hysterical need to tell stories, I need fiction like I need oxygen) I've only been able to write the rest of my literary output under pressure, in circumstances in which I never had any time. Even if it's hell on my nerves, I've decided to write this blog while I'm working, even if at times it may be rushed and arbitrary. The good think about writing a blog is that no one can accuse you of being egocentric. I promise to tell only the truth, but that doesn't mean I'm going to tell you everything about me and about the film and its preparation. On the contrary, I intend to say as little as possible about the story and the characters, I'll wander around on the fringes, in purely tangential elements. You'll think I've got a real cheek, and I'm sure you're right. (Anything to celebrate the lack of intermediaries.) (Almodóvar 2009a).

In spite of his tantalizing promise of disclosure, then, Almodóvar also admits that he will conceal key elements of his self and of his new film. Indeed, devoted as he claims to be to cinema, he gives away nothing at all about his private life, beyond the characteristic reference to his beloved late mother. And yet he speaks in the first person, addresses the reader directly in the second person, and celebrates the "lack of intermediaries" specific to his chosen genre and medium. This double movement of revelation and concealment is, as we have already seen, typical of Almodóvar's self-fashioning as a public artist in which carefully selected aspects of his life and art feed off one another.

Similar to the shooting diary for *Volver*, the blog provides fascinating material (both text and image) on Almodóvar's working methods: script corrections in north Africa and Mexico; table reads with the actors in Pedro's office; hair and costume tests for Penélope in *El Deseo* (her character will undergo the same process in the film itself); and shooting on location in Lanzarote and in the same studios at Barajas outside Madrid where *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* was filmed some two decades before. However, the blog also displays a disconcerting lack of self-consciousness, revealing as it does Almodóvar's residence in luxury

hotels around the world (from Tangiers to Cuernavaca) and dwelling on his participation in the annual Rose Ball in Monaco, which, in his honor, was given a *Movida* theme. At a time of unprecedented economic crisis in Spain, Almodóvar documents himself consorting with the crowned heads of Europe, whom he does not fail to flatter (Princess Caroline is said to be “warm” and Prince Albert “charming”). Lacking once more a facility for comments from readers, the blog is, in spite of its disclaimer to the contrary, profoundly egocentric.

Absent from the (professionally translated) French and English versions of this second website, but given a foregrounded role on the Castilian original, are extended texts documenting Almodóvar’s feud with *El País*. Significantly they turn around *El Deseo*’s transnational projection, which, we remember, takes pride of place in the company’s image of itself. Writing from Cannes, where *Los abrazos rotos* was in competition for the Palme d’Or (May 26, 2009), Almodóvar inveighs against the festival coverage by *El País*’s chief film critic, Carlos Boyero, and its arts editor, Borja Hermoso, perhaps the highest profile “detractors” of the director. The former had written that “not being a masochist” he would refrain from seeing *Los abrazos rotos* again at the festival (the Spanish premiere had already taken place), while the latter had attacked Almodóvar for telling the press that he was treated better in France than in his home country.⁵

Replying to Almodóvar’s attack on their colleague in an open letter posted on the paper’s website and reproduced by the director (May 27, 2009), *El País*’s “staff committee” responded unsurprisingly with some hostility. They deny the filmmaker has a right to veto the paper’s choice of festival reporter; remind him of the extensive positive coverage the paper has already provided for his film; appeal to their right to freedom of expression in print, no different to his in cinema; and suggest that this “tantrum” does not enhance his “figure.” Keeping the story alive, vampire-like, through another news cycle, Almodóvar responds to this response (May 28, 2009), citing Boyero’s abusive bodily rhetoric (which included the words “indigestion” and “masturbation”); protesting that he will not be “bought off” by the previous positive coverage, but will continue bravely to speak his mind; and denying that Boyero is a critic at all, given the prejudices to which he so clearly and openly gives voice.

How can we read this polemic in the context of Almodóvar’s continuing self-fashioning? Clearly it was a self-defeating strategy for the celebrity director, in that he succeeded only in lending the critic, much less known than himself, the oxygen of publicity that he no doubt craved. And anyone reading Almodóvar’s texts receives an unhealthy impression of, at worst, paranoia or, at best, “negativity bias” (Marano 2003). The latter is a widespread, but unattractive, psychological quirk whereby critical comments, however infrequent, are felt by their victim to outweigh positive opinions, however numerous and flattering. While one could perhaps read the polemic cynically as part of Almodóvar’s continuing attempt to compete to place his product ahead of that of other auteurs, it seems more likely that, as *El País*’s staff committee observed, his behavior served rather to damage his “figure,” that reputation which *El Deseo* is so devoted to burnishing.

But beyond pragmatics (Almodóvar could hardly have devised a surer way of alienating the Spanish press), this quarrel responded to and was facilitated by broader cultural changes, mentioned earlier, with which Almodóvar appeared to be unfamiliar. Thus the journalists' collective clearly felt no need to genuflect to an Oscar-winning auteur, whom they remind in their response is "not sacred." This new found skepticism to auteurism, within whose hallowed precincts Almodóvar was in any case never securely implanted in Spain, is combined with changes in film criticism as an institution. In an age of declining readership (*El País's* circulation, the largest non-sporting daily in Spain, is only around 400,000), even the quality press may feel the need for controversy to boost newsstand sales and internet footfall (the polemic garnered 131,000 hits). Boyero, flagrantly solipsistic and crudely satirical, is exemplary here, in that he openly refuses to engage seriously with his chosen subject even though he writes for what is felt by many Spaniards to be the newspaper of record. In this he does indeed mark a radical break with the earlier and less subjectivist traditions of Spanish film criticism (such as that practiced by *El País's* previous critic, Ángel Fernández Santos, nostalgically invoked by Almodóvar), which aspired to objectivity and avoided personal idiosyncrasy.

Hence, when Almodóvar attacks Boyero for walking out of a festival screening by demanding Iranian auteur Abbas Kiarostami (a piece of evidence he takes to be damning) or insists on the sanctity of the distinction between news and comment, he shows himself to be insensitive to changes in the habitus (to schemes of perception, thought, appreciation, and action) of both journalism and film culture in general, changes which younger "directores mediáticos" have proved more skilled at negotiating. The fact that Boyero is so clearly supported by *El País* as a matter of policy can only prove this point. Out of tune with the new demands on newspapers, Almodóvar also displays a tin ear for the particular pleasures and potentials of the blog, even as he reproduces the (too) passionately held positions typical of that medium. Revealing no personal intimacy, other than an acute sensitivity to criticism, and exposing the physical distance his glamorous lifestyle puts between him and his public, he can only alienate a Spanish audience already more kindly disposed to genre films than to art movies.

I would suggest finally, then, that these public arguments, which now constitute the principal vehicle for Almodóvar's continued self-fashioning, are more significant than they first appear. Indeed, they are structurally similar to the rise of "scandal politics," which has been treated so acutely by Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells. For Castells, political scandals (exceptionally frequent in Spain, as elsewhere) are one of the main characteristics of the new "network society": they result from the lack of clear differences in ideology between political parties; reveal that questions of personality now supersede those of policy; and demonstrate the complicity and volatility that results when figures from fields such as politics become active participants in the media, only to find themselves unable to control the resulting "stories" (Castells 1997: 337–42).

Mutatis mutandis, this is a fine description of Almodóvar's predicament. With no clear distinction now accepted between high and low culture and with Pedro's personality long used to promote his films, Almodóvar is not only actively complicit with the media, he even calls attention to that complicity, as when he cites in his blog the favor he did to *El País* in granting the paper unique access to the shoot of *Los abrazos rotos*. Yet, like the malign magnate at the heart of his film, whose lover is seduced away from him even as he funds her career, Almodóvar and his devoted co-workers prove unable to control the outcome of their proliferating media strategies.

More particularly in the age of the internet, amateur "detractors," previously excluded from the mainstream media, now possess a powerful echo chamber for any negative views they may come across. Triana-Toribio writes of her "mediáticos" that they "reconcile the paradoxes surrounding authorship in Spanish cinema [by] foster[ing] the cult of personality on which traditional auteurism rests while at the same time making this individuality accessible to the wider public" (2008, 276). The problem, then, for *El Deseo* is to devise plausible narratives that can effect a reconciliation between the (public) personality and the (private) individuality of an increasingly complex matrix figure.

To return to the starting point of this chapter, such polemics may barely compromise Almodóvar's current status as the most successful Spanish filmmaker of all time, especially outside his native country. And Marsha Kinder has shown convincingly how the conspicuous self-referencing in *Los abrazos rotos* enriches the film, demanding that spectators re-read the director's "entire body of work" at a crucial time for film: "an historic moment when the medium has gone digital and its methods of distribution are being redefined" (Kinder 2010: 28, 33). The changes in broader cultural spheres that I have sketched above, both economic and aesthetic, thus render Almodóvar's position and oeuvre more precarious. Almodóvar was once known, especially in Spain, by the label "post-modern," a term suggesting a radical skepticism to authoritative forms of politics and culture in his cinema, as in his person. Ironically, however, it has been more recently, when he has openly embraced political activism (on behalf of the Socialist Party) and high culture (on behalf of the venerable auteurs he has so showily cited in his own films), that Almodóvar's own hard won authority has been so frequently called into question. If the self-fashioning that he has pursued so doggedly can be described as a kind of deconstructive autobiography, it is because of just such discursive paradoxes.

Notes

- 1 Francisco Zurian analyzes these stories in chapter 2, this volume.
- 2 Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen (chapter 6, this volume) explore this phenomenon over the course of Almodóvar's career.
- 3 See Vicente Rodríguez, chapter 24, this volume, which provides details of the operation and polemics related to the Almodóvar webpages.

- 4 For a detailed discussion of Gómez's collaboration in *Broken Embraces*, see Sanderson, chapter 22, this volume.
- 5 Cerdán and Fernández Labayen also address this exchange, taking it as representative of the sustained "dialogue of the deaf" (to use an eloquent Spanish expression) between Almodóvar and the Spanish press.

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