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# ALMODÓVAR'S FEMALE ODYSSEY

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Although Pedro Almodóvar's 2006 film *Volver* does not refer to Homeric epic, Odyssean motifs are ubiquitous in the narrative. As they must be, insofar as Homer's poem is the foundational text in Western culture of the very idea of homecoming, or *nostos*. A meditation on the notion of return (Spanish *volver*), the film focuses on the modern experience of the family, the connections between husbands and wives, parents and children, memory and identity. Irrespective of intention on Almodóvar's part, to raise and to represent the phenomenon of return is to start a conversation with Homer's *Odyssey*, which is, in our tradition, the home to which all narratives of homecoming must themselves return. Homer's poem thus exerts a powerful and abiding intertextual influence upon the film. In this essay, I explore these thematic parallels with Homer's *Odyssey*, and highlight the revolutionary nature of Almodóvar's film, which offers a resolutely original and feminist perspective on the idea of homecoming.

The plot of *Volver* revolves around the lives of two sisters: Raimunda (played by Penelope Cruz), who has a fourteen-year old daughter, Paula, and Sole, who works as hairdresser. Both sisters live in Madrid but often visit the village where they grew up, Alcanfor de las Infantas, to visit an elderly aunt and to take care of their parents' tomb. A close friend, Agustina, who stayed in the village helps care for Tía Paula, but, she herself, we soon learn, is dying of cancer. The friends' close bond is reinforced by a similar loss the three women experienced at the same time: Agustina's mother disappeared on the same day Raimunda's and Sole's parents died in a mysterious fire. Almodóvar's film shifts its attention between Raimunda, Sole, and Agustina, and the past that unites and later threatens to separate them. Two events precipitate the action: one evening, Raimunda comes home from her cleaning job to find that her husband Paco has tried to rape her daughter, Paula, who killed him in self-defense. At the same time, Raimunda's and Sole's aunt has died in Alcanfor. Because Raimunda is busy trying to hide her husband's body, Sole is forced to go to the village alone, where she hears about sightings of the ghost of her mother, Irene (played by Carmen Maura). After she goes back to Madrid, Sole discovers Irene in the trunk of her car. Meanwhile, Raimunda's neighbor has given her the key to his restaurant so she can show it to potential buyers while he is away, a serendipitous event that allows Raimunda to temporarily hide Paco's body in the restaurant's freezer. When a film crew arrives in the area looking for someone to provide meals, Raimunda sees a good opportunity and opens the restaurant with the help of her neighbors. While Sole reconnects with her mother in secret, hiding her from Raimunda, Raimunda reconnects with her past: she admits to Paula that Paco was in fact not her father, and in one crucial scene discussed in more details below, she reconnects

with her love of singing, a love her daughter had never known her to possess. By the end of the film, mysteries are solved, and the women—mothers, daughters, sisters, friends—are all reunited once more in Alcanfor de las Infantas.

There are many thematic and structural parallels between *Volver* and the *Odyssey*. The Spanish *volver* has several connotations: to return, to turn, to do again, and, in the phrase *volver en sí*, "to come back to oneself, to regain consciousness," a connotation also central to the Greek concept of *nostos*, whose semantic range includes "return from darkness" and "return from death." And the narrative of *Volver*, like the *Odyssey*, in fact, offers many variations of the theme: return of the past, return of the dead, the cyclical nature of life, and the link between homecoming and self-knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Like the ancient poem, *Volver* begins *in medias res*, with an adolescent whose imminent adulthood upsets the status quo. While there is no physical journey *per se*, several characters experience an emotional and psychological form of *nostos* during the course of the film: the most important are the return of the mother, Irene, who may or may not be a ghost, and the return of her daughter, Raimunda. Irene comes back from the dead, while Raimunda's homecoming has to do with revisiting and coming to terms with her own past. Past events are also key to Raimunda's anger at her mother and Irene's mysterious reappearance in Alcanfor de las Infantas. The film, like the *Odyssey*, is also very self-conscious about the power of art in our lives: songs, storytelling, old photographs, and movies shape the characters' lives and their self-understanding.

The film is also a return for Almodóvar in several respects. It is an opportunity to be reunited with two actresses, Carmen Maura and Penelope Cruz, with whom he has collaborated many times before—and who in many ways come to embody his idiosyncratic vision. There is yet another return in the film on the level of plot, which refers obliquely to an earlier film from 1995, *The Flower of my Secret*.<sup>2</sup> In the earlier film, a successful writer of romance novels, Leo Macías, becomes disenchanted with her life and yearns, among other things, to write in a different genre—she delivers a new manuscript to her editor for a series entitled "True Love," but, instead of the expected love story, she has written a gory tale of incest and murder. The new book is *The Cold Storage Room*, and as Leo summarizes the story for her dismayed editor, it is about a woman who is employed at a hospital, where she has the abject job of emptying bedpans, and who finds out her daughter has killed her father after he tried to rape her. To prevent discovery, she hides the body in the cold storage room of a neighbor's restaurant.

So with *Volver*, Almodóvar revisits the plot imagined by one of his own characters in the earlier film. But *Volver*, although deeply serious about its characters and their emotions, retains none of the darkness of the earlier plot. Like Leo in *The Flower*

of *My Secret*, Almodóvar experiments with genre: the film veers between melodrama and comedy, never completely yielding to either one. Despite the bleak circumstances in which the protagonists find themselves, the colors are bright and cheerful; the tone lively and spirited. There is sadness to be sure—illness, loss, death—and there is violence—rape, incest, murder—but the focus is on the characters' resilience, the intricate connection between past and present, imagination and reality, and, especially, the bond between mothers and daughters.

Like the *Odyssey*, *Volver* has much to say about memory and loss. In the publicity materials accompanying the film's release, Almodóvar explains that:

[*Volver*] is a movie about the culture of death in my native region, La Mancha. My folks there live it in astonishing simplicity. The way in which the dead are still present in their lives, the richness and humanity of their rites makes it possible for the dead to never really die.<sup>3</sup>

The first scene shows women of all ages cleaning graves in a cemetery in the town of Alcanfor de las Infantas, where we first encounter Raimunda, Sole, and Paula. As they polish the gravestone, the women reminisce about the death of their parents. The ritual evokes the memory of the dead, but also the mortality of the villagers as the sisters' old friend, Agustina, is cleaning her family grave, it turns out, in anticipation of her own death.

As the film goes on, it continues to move back and forth between the two worlds of the village of Alcanfor and the city of Madrid. The area in-between is depicted as a noman's land filled with the wind turbines that have succeeded the famous windmills of Don Quixote. The modern machines clearly still signify madness and delirium. Almodóvar shot the film in his childhood village, Almagro, but gave it the fictional name of Alcanfor de las Infantas, literally the "camphor of the princesses" perhaps to evoke the embalming qualities of camphor and the dreamstate of the village, an ancient place where the dead and the living cohabit easily. There are many similarities, in fact, between Alcanfor and the Underworld: the village is full of ghosts and all activities revolve around them. Elderly women, dressed in black, seem to spend all their time caring for the dead—cleaning their graves and mourning in funeral processions. The only young person in the village is Agustina, who is dying of cancer. Alcanfor is also the final resting place for Raimunda's dead husband Paco, whom she buries close to the village, by the river.

In contrast with the Homeric world, in Almodóvar's *Odyssey*, women take center stage, while men play no active role; rather, they are obstacles which must yield in the face of the female-defined trajectory of the narrative. And as the film proceeds to get rid of men entirely (those who do not die get out of town), the women start to thrive. The feminization of the *nostos* narrative can be seen most dramatically through the lens of a defining moment, about half-way through the film, when Raimunda sings the song also entitled "Volver" while, unbeknownst to her, her mother is back—literally back from

the dead—and listening to Raimunda's song from inside Sole's car.

A 1934 tango composed by Carlos Gardel with lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, "Volver" is a perfect locus of *nostos* and nostalgia. From the glory days of Argentine tango, the lyrics express the bittersweetness of years gone by and the grief of return. The scene takes place at the restaurant Raimunda has opened for the film crew, during a festive evening, when she suddenly realizes that her daughter, Paula, has never heard her sing before. Longing and sorrow overtake Raimunda as she sings about remembering the past as a way of returning—note especially the beginning of her song

*Tengo miedo del encuentro con el pasado que vuelve a enfrentarse con mi vida.*

I am afraid of the encounter with the past that returns to confront my life

The shift to the feminine realm is beautifully encapsulated in the way in which Raimunda appropriates the Argentine tango, "Volver," and transforms this new world song tradition typically sung by a man, back into a traditional Spanish flamenco, a form that can be performed by both male and female singers. This extraordinary moment is also a homecoming for both mother and daughter. Irene, like Odysseus listening to Demodokos singing about his role in the Trojan War in *Odyssey* 8, completely breaks down when she hears her daughter singing. As Raimunda sings that "twenty years is nothing" ("*que veinte años no es nada*"), we see her coming fully into herself as daughter, sister, and mother. The twenty years in question are of course everything: in the course of the film, we learn more about the past of both protagonists: both women faced the same tragedy, and Raimunda's life turns out to be a reenactment of her mother's.

Homecoming is thus also repetition. In the same manner, modern works of art, whether they like it or not, must repeat (*volver*) the same gestures as ancient works. This to some degree is a consequence of our limited repertoire as human beings: we have parents and a home, we are born, we grow, we suffer, we love, we die; and at some point in our lives, we return, in imagination or in actuality, to our origin. But the source of this pattern, in imagination and in fact, is also a matter of literary history: like all tales of return, *Volver* must reckon with Homer's precedent.

When we analyze the film in terms of its Homeric precursor, we see the radical novelty of Almodóvar's feminization of the *nostos* narrative. Like Odysseus who tells his own story to the Phaiacians in the *Odyssey*, Raimunda is a character who sings her own song, and, in both narratives, songs also have the power to recreate the past. Similarly, instead of the father/husband hero, it is the mother figure who returns—as if from the dead in the case of Raimunda's mother—and the fundamental reunion is not between a father and his wife and son, but between mothers and daughters. In Almodóvar's revision of the epic, the mother returns, not as hero but explicitly as heroine. It is Irene who comes to restore order to the fractured world of her daughter

and her grand-daughter. And insofar as she succeeds in finding what is beautiful and orderly in the messiness of family life, the mother emerges as a heroine, one who nods toward her ancient male predecessors but looks as well toward the future. The film ends, fittingly for a narrative of return, where it started, in the small village in Alcanfor where the living encounter the dead, and where women—mothers, sisters, daughters—safeguard each other's *nostos* and tell the stories that keep the dead alive.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For *nostos* as “return from death and darkness,” and the connections between *nostos* (return) and *noos* (mind), see D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 6–33. For Benveniste, *nostos* also conveys “revenir à un état familier” (to return to a familiar state), E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 172. See also P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968–1980), s.v. *neomai*.

<sup>2</sup>As Daniel Mendelsohn has pointed out in an essay on “The Women of Pedro Almodóvar,” *The Flower of my Secret* itself can be seen as a turning point in the director’s career. See *New York Review of Books*, Volume 54, Number 3 (March 1, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/almodovar/volverlapeliculasinopsis\\_eng.htm](http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/almodovar/volverlapeliculasinopsis_eng.htm)

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