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Live Cultures: Illness, Mortality, and Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Film

A Dissertation Presented

by

Bobby Dean Allbritton

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Bobby Dean Allbritton

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this dissertation.

Kathleen Vernon – Dissertation Advisor
Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Hispanic Languages and Literature

Daniela Flesler – Chairperson of Defense
Associate Professor, Hispanic Languages and Literature

Lisa Diedrich
Associate Professor, Women’s and Gender Studies

Adrián Pérez Melgosa
Assistant Professor, Hispanic Languages and Literature

Paul Julian Smith
Distinguished Professor, Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages,
City University of New York (CUNY)

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

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Live Cultures explores the ways that democratic Spain has been understood, written, and filmed as an ill kingdom, and how illness as bodily effect is an ontology that affects our understanding of our discrete selves. To consider illness a dark geography, as Sontag wrote in *Illness as Metaphor*, begs a continual re-interpretation of the relation of self, body and nation, an understanding of healthy or ill citizenship as it is inscribed into the body. This politicized inscription does not function alone but in tandem with gender, considering the ways that illness in its most base function operates some effect on the body and mind, on the notion of self as whole, complete, and functioning. Likewise, masculinity, in its role as gender practice that adheres to some concept of the ‘body,’ cannot be divorced from illness. I hold that illness is always already tied into masculinity, the two so fused together as to be inextricable. *Live Cultures* examines this fusion and its byproducts, those “sick masculinities” that are reconfigured as examples of national health, of organic space, and as carriers of contemporary violence in Spanish film.

The introduction attempts to locate the germs of the project itself by beginning with Sontag’s classic text in illness studies and continuing with Foucault’s extensive work on illness as social event, and further on to more recent texts on illness as cultural, social, and gendered

bodily effect. This project engages those texts that deal with the philosophical and political ramifications of illness, such as Adriana Cavarero's work on the perception of the political body or Elaine Scarry's *Body in Pain*, which is most closely interested in the representation of illness as metaphor. *Live Cultures* focuses on three such metaphors of illness in particular. In my first chapter, Hobbes' notion of the body politic is discussed in light of select contemporary Spanish films, utilizing the filmic treatment of the body to articulate a particular Spanish conceptualization of its own nationhood. This is seen effectively in the body of Javier Bardem, which serves to represent the stately body in both its exceptionalism and its ordinariness, its sickness and health, life and death—and in the interstices where these meet. In focusing on violence as virus, as ill contagion, my second chapter explores the metaphors that frame outpourings of contemporary violence as direct effects of cross-generational malaise. In an analysis of select films of Agustí Villaronga, I find this viral violence and its linkage to a concept of inevitable genetics to express a modern concern with the resurging traumas of the past. Finally, by studying a selection of recent films by Pedro Almodóvar, my third chapter reads the queering of death and mourning as a way of reimagining the finalizing temporalities of normative time lines. Analyzing Almodóvar's particular work with gender and death as touched by asynchronicity, I explore the reversal of the obliterating effects of death in favor of its productive capabilities, the creational aspects of death within life.

Dedication Page

To Travis
and the things we find in loss

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Acknowledgements

In a line from her book *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, Jeanette Winterson writes of the composition of human bodies, which she claims to be stardust and potassium atoms that have succumbed to decay, things that are nothing more than the radioactive waste of a supernova. It is a provocative thought, being made of dead things, particularly as I consider the end of this dissertation and my graduate studies at Stony Brook University. So many people have helped guide me here, leading me to this particular point of my life, that I would need reams of pages to acknowledge them all. And what of the dead ends, the wrong-way streets I went down, the people who I started this journey with and who no longer walk at my side? I write of my grandmother in the introduction to this dissertation, and it is she who must always be thanked above all, and for everything: for love, for kindness, and for the gift of a language that remains a little foreign to me.

I also want to thank Kathleen Vernon, who not only edited, cajoled, and guided me through the entire process with determination and patience, but who also has provided hours of good advice that sometimes had nothing to do with the dissertation at all. Lisa Diedrich was a gentle reminder of the strengths of disciplinary knowledge, and her notes often kept me awake at night thinking about my place in the field of Hispanic Studies. Daniela Flesler, Adrián Pérez Melgosa, Lou Charnon-Deutsch, and Paul Julian Smith also more than kindly pointed out ways to strengthen the dissertation at key moments. Their close readings of my work and combined insight have been invaluable.

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Introduction

Germ

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag famously called illness “the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship” before going on to say that “everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (2). Although her ultimate goal is to discredit the metaphors impressed upon illness, to flatten them and arrive at an untainted understanding of the term in its fullest sense, these opening lines suggest otherwise. The imagining of illness as geographical space, an emigration into a dark land, does something significant to the concept: it places boundaries around the category of illness, ordering it into an inhabitable and politicized space. Sontag speaks of illness as geography, which ultimately becomes at once a metaphor for identity and an understanding of the connections we as citizens have to our own undesirable and undesired countries—metaphorical and otherwise, interior and exterior spaces where we come into contact with other bodies, germs, and pathogens. Following this line of thought, representations of illness have the potential to challenge dominant narratives of wellbeing and health by representing the self as sick citizen and of one’s country as diseased and disabling. Sontag would disapprove that I’ve carried her metaphor further, that the opening moments of a work dedicated to stilling the metaphors of illness become, themselves, self-replicating signifiers. She is right to emphasize the fact that illness is a physical reality that affects the body in various and concrete ways. Nevertheless, it is vital that we also understand and critique the ways that illness as cultural category and concept—illness as metaphor, in other words—also delineates and upholds the shape of the social body, embedding patterns of sexual normativity while still carrying the potential to sustain new categories of personhood.

This dissertation proposes to explore the ways that post-dictatorship Spain has been understood, written, and filmed as an ill kingdom, and how trafficking in metaphors of mortality

and illness can redefine and subvert institutions and normative identities. To understand illness as a dark geography, as Sontag wrote, begs a continual re-interpretation of the relation of self, body and nation, an understanding of healthy or ill citizenship as it is inscribed into the body. It follows that this politicized inscription of illness onto the body will interact with gender and sexuality, considering the ways that illness in its most base function operates some effect on the body and mind, on the notion of self as whole, complete, and functioning. In short-circuiting the view of the healthy self, illness and its metaphors have the potential to rearrange normative perceptions of corporeal time lines, to bind or to splinter the relation of the physical body to a larger social body, and to redefine categories of gender and sexuality.

Why illness? At the beginning of Alejandro Amenábar's *Mar adentro*, a film that recounts the well-known (in Spain) story of quadriplegic Ramón Sampedro's fight for assisted suicide, a character poses a related question: Why death? Ramón is characteristically direct in his response, insisting that death is always with us, though we choose not to acknowledge it, that it will catch up with everyone, that it is part of us.¹ His answer redirects what we think of as a hard-wired instinct for survival at all costs. Why would one choose death over life? It is a question that hangs in the air, that no one comprehends in quite the way that Ramón does. It is also a question that I often find myself returning to in relation to my work on illness and mortality. What is it that I find there, in that dark country? Why would I choose illness? At least partly it is because we are all touched by illness and death at some point. We get sick with colds, we pass a cold on to someone; we get fevers, we get nauseated, we get food poisoning, we bleed; we are depressed, we are around people who are depressed. We are in accidents. We cause them. And then, in what we all hope is a long-delayed *eventually*, we will also face our own mortality. To say that this is a very personal project for me is to state the obvious, because illness is always

¹ An in-depth analysis of this scene and its larger importance in *Mar adentro* is provided in Chapter One.

personal. Whether it is my own health at risk or another's, illness returns me to my own personal wellbeing, or lack of it, and the weight of my interactions in the larger social body.

I think of a phone call I received, while walking in the snows at Syracuse. It was my sister, telling me that I needed to come home to Georgia because my grandmother was gravely ill. She had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and it was spreading through her quickly, the invading cancerous cells nesting in her like wasps. I don't remember much else from that time: the rest of the conversation with my sister, the flight I took, arrangements made to have my classes covered. I do remember walking in to the room she would die in. She had been released into hospice care due to the advanced stage of her cancer, and I walked in to that room afraid of her, afraid of her death, or just afraid of death. In that moment, she looked up at me from another world. I don't remember if we said anything to each other, if I sat by her side and spoke to her in Spanish to remind her of Puerto Rico. I do remember that illness, what it did to her, and how my own body held its promise. My family talked a lot about illness afterwards, about the likelihood of our genetic propensity for cancer and heart disease. In the weeks after her death it seemed like it could burst from us at any point, a betraying pancreas or liver or lung or breast that would let the illness in when we were least expecting it. Sometimes we still talk about it when a distant family member passes away, or when someone we know shows up in an obituary, but I think the urgency produced in mortal illness has largely passed. So when I am posed that question—Why choose illness?—I think of my grandmother, I think of my own body, and I think of how shattering the experience of illness can be. I also think of its binding powers, how it can connect, renew, and create relationships even as it destroys so much. Thus I am not denying the devastation of illness, or the realness of death and disease. Illness is shattering and devastating, yes, but how might that experience also generate something new within us, open up new

possibilities for identity formation? If illness is so deeply personal, it holds that it has the potential to define and delineate new facets of identity even as other features are ground down and destroyed. I want to hold on to the shattering experience of illness, but I also know that it can do so much more. This dissertation is the result.

It should be clear that I view the generative capacities of illness as a theoretical framework (a methodology of pathology, perhaps), and not a territorial issue. That is to say that, and at least in a Western context, the concept of illness is regularly viewed in sweepingly negative terms that seem to reproduce the same healthy/ill dynamic in social and political metaphors of the body. Writing about Spain has proved an interesting case, because its specific history means that metaphors of illness and mortality (to say nothing of masculinity) have taken on different shades and political overtones.² That is, references to amnesia and the viral spread of violence often carry implications of Spain's Civil War and ensuing dictatorship, and the types of citizens born in this moment and out of illness. Keeping those specificities in mind, I settle on three metaphors in particular: the body politic, viral violence, and death.

I want to capitalize on these metaphors as potentially radical ways of rewriting normativity. The films analyzed in the dissertation demonstrate new possibilities for politics, gender, and sexuality in ways that reflect the capacity of illness for being more than a damaging and destructive force. Or put in another way, I hold that the recasting of negative signifiers like violence, death, and illness provide possibilities for embracing a humanism grounded in mortality. Against the negativity of illness, I want to find traces of a freshly imagined contemporary Spain. I do not find Spain to be a particularly "ill kingdom" or "dark geography",

² The metaphor of the sick body as national body has certainly had productive outcomes, even when forming the underlying basis of an analysis. Studies such as Cristina Moreiras Menor's *Cultura Herida* and Teresa Vilarós's *El mono del desencanto*, to name only two, utilize the notion of the Spanish cultural body as diseased and sickly in order to diagnose specific cultural and political ailments and their treatments.

to return to Sontag, although it has a long history of being seen as both of these. Instead, I am attempting to understand the metaphors of illness that are bound into contemporary Spanish production, and how these constantly interact with gender—particularly, masculinity. It is my assertion that illness is used as a multi-pronged metaphor for a number of things; sifting through these metaphors, though, I hope to find that they always return to contagion, to the meeting of bodies in unexpected and explosive ways.

It is this metaphor, that of contagion, that seems to speak the most directly to the way that I envision the potential of illness, and can serve as a sort of master narrative for the dissertation. Fears of contagion often manifest themselves as fear of bodies in constant contact, and they can produce actions designed to close down this accidental interconnectedness. The fear of contagion by illness is a fear of the harm that proximity to the sick body can do, the ways that one's own discrete self can be affected through interaction with another. As Foucault writes in *Abnormal*, this fear originates in the quarantine practices of the 18th century, which served to create a disciplinary power that he refers to as “normalization.” It is this power, in part, that I am attempting to push against. The identification and curing of the bad germ, that abnormal cell that threatens the (social) body, becomes an imperative in the 18th century that continues to animate contemporary discourses of illness, gender, and sexuality.³ As Foucault writes of the quarantine: “There is a series of fine and constantly observed differences between individuals who are ill and those who are not. It is a question of individualization; the division and subdivision of power extending to the fine grain of individuality” (46). The meticulous observation of the sick

³ This is to say nothing of the (often anti-)racial and ethnic discourses that contagion has animated throughout Spain's history—from its utilization in medieval purges of Muslim and Jewish communities to 19th century eugenicist discourse and in contemporary anti-immigration rhetoric. This complex employment of contagion, with its variations on themes and racial stereotypes, would require an equally complex analysis. As such, I limit myself to the discussion of its effects on gender and sexuality.

individual⁴ thus centers around the “question of producing a healthy population” (46), one that must be policed in order to be kept safe. The state of quarantine (and the quarantine of the State) produces conflicting political “dreams”: one that desires release from the law and lawfulness, and the obverse, a fantasy of utter state control in the form of “an exhaustive sectioning of the population by political power, the capillary ramifications of which constantly reach the grain of individuals themselves, their time, habitat, localization, bodies” (47).

This moment, the incorporation (rather than exclusion) of the sick into the political and social bodies of the state, emblemizes the modern production of power. This system of power “does not act by excluding but rather through a close and analytical inclusion of elements, a power that does not act by separating into large confused masses, but by distributing according to differential individualities, a power that is linked not to ignorance but rather to a series of mechanisms that secure the formation, investment, accumulation, and growth of knowledge” (48). The repartitioning of individual bodies into more or less coherent clusters conjures up a power system that is easily transferred into a variety of institutions, and the government of the body becomes the process through which the family, sexuality, and identity comes to be governed. The ultimate result is the production of normativity, within which bodies are policed, kept healthy and correct, and differentiated from those “abnormal” bodies that do not hold to the terms of wellbeing, in whatever form this takes—political, sexual, mental, or physical. Foucault’s interpretation of the effects of quarantine serves to question commonly held presumptions about the purely destructive or chaotic forces of illness, and he holds up the immense creational potential to be found in illness. Even the installation of a concept like

⁴ Here, Foucault is directing himself specifically to the plague (as opposed to the major illness of the 17th century, leprosy) and the socializing effects produced in its victims. He will note, however, the category of “sick individual” has a multivalence that has been slowly developed and shaped over the ensuing centuries, and which has resulted in the extension of systems of political and juridical power over questions of physical, mental, and sexual health.

normativity, which is actively challenged throughout the entirety of this dissertation, emerges out of the state of quarantine, developed from an understanding of how illness produces bodily effects that have real social and political consequences. By underscoring the formation of government through the lens of the plague, Foucault defines population and the liberal state as biologically based, emerging from illness and the fear of contagion—which is, in many ways, a fear of death.

My bid for reclaiming the generative potential of illness and its metaphors, therefore, fashions a space—however liminal, however shadowed—to create and imagine new possibilities for the body politic. Jasbir Puar writes in *Terrorist Assemblages* that “all bodies can be thought of as contagious or mired in contagions: bodies infecting other bodies with sensation, vibration, irregularity, chaos... Contagions are autonomous, unregulated, their vicissitudes only peripherally anchored by knowable entities” (172). Speaking about contagion as abstract affective concept (rather than a solely physical interaction) allows Puar to highlight the interconnectedness of human bodies to each other. Likewise, her focus on infections or contaminations between bodies is an attempt to harness the unpredictability of contagion, which ruptures the borders between self and other in uneven and unexpected ways. The potential of contagion is that it complicates articulations of affiliation by rendering these unstable. In one sense, this is the answer to the political “dream” of lawlessness that Foucault mentions: a power grid that has been destabilized into an assemblage of loose connections and contingencies, fluctuating identity formations and mobile interpersonal sympathies. Puar radically recaptures the possibilities of imagining contagion and illness otherwise as a potential for queering representational practices and discourses of gender and sexuality.

The focus on masculinity in this dissertation, consequently, emerges from a number of converging lines. In proposing to destabilize gender and gender practices through the metaphors of illness, I work with films that utilize masculinity as a touchstone for understanding citizenship, the body politic, and the politics of the body. Much recent feminist and queer theory has chosen (and with good reason) to highlight the subjugated role that femininity plays in social structures of dominance or the ways that non-normative sexualities are marginalized in these same structures. As such, there has historically been a general hesitation to apply the same critical gaze to the roles of masculinity within society, no doubt for fear of once again silencing voices that only recently have begun to be heard. This is a valid fear, and at times the centrality that masculinity studies provides to the male body and gaze can come at the cost of a more thorough analysis of how femininity and sexuality are also part of systems of dominance. I follow Pierre Bourdieu, however, who holds that understanding the pressures exerted on masculinity as well as those that masculinity exerts on others is tantamount to understanding sexual domination in society. Bourdieu argues in favor of studying those “struggles over agencies which, through their negative and...largely invisible action, make a significant contribution to the perpetuation of the social relations of domination between the sexes” (*Masculine Domination* 116). Critiquing the dominant gender regime means that masculinity must be underscored, that it cannot be the invisible norm. Set against a backdrop of illness and contagion, the examples of masculinity found in these films attempt to complicate easy notions of gender and sexuality by destabilizing the normativity of gender. Ultimately this dissertation proposes that masculinity, in its role as gender practice that adheres to some concept of the ‘body,’ cannot be divorced from illness. I further assert that illness is always already tied into masculinity, as it is with femininity, and that illness and gender are so fused together as to be

inextricable from the other. I want to critically examine this fusion, showing that masculinity and illness are both interrelated and inseparable and that what I term “pathogenic masculinities” have most recently been reconfigured as examples of national health, of organic space, and as dark territory in contemporary Spanish film and literature.

In *The Body Politic*, the first chapter of the dissertation, I take Hobbes’ formulation of the body politic as a point of departure for a discussion of the impact of bodily metaphors in three films: Marc Recha’s *Dies d’agost* and *Petit indi*, and Alejandro Amenábar’s *Mar adentro*. I examine the various ways that these films employ illness in the creation and maintenance of the masculine body as geography, particularly focusing on those metaphors that reconceptualize the state of the (body of the) union by mobilizing immunity, defense, and life as its reinforcements. In *Dies d’agost* (2006), Recha sustains a sort of econarrative that connects the life of the citizen with the land/country that he inhabits, writing geopolitical topographies of the nation-state into the bodies of its citizens. The director relates the physical scars of the land to historical memory, and by portraying his characters as symbolic amnesiacs he reproduces the cultural significance ascribed to immunity, defense, and wellness. That is to say, amnesia is written into the body-as-landscape and yet presented as an impossibility—that memory will always return and that the land must eventually disgorge its skeletons. In evoking the landscapes of the body in its bullet-riddled pockets of memory, the question of life becomes important. In his 2009 film *Petit indi*, Recha sustains the ecological analogy by evoking animalism as an alternative to and elaboration of humanity. I take up Agamben’s theories on bare and thinking life and reflect on their ramifications for a corporeal topography rooted in health and illness. In making these bodies vulnerable through differing conceptualizations of life, the category of the human—the question of who is constituted as such, and how—is interlaced with the political rights owed to bodies that

do not conform to normative expectations of health, wellbeing, or personhood. Finally, I turn to Alejandro Amenábar's *Mar adentro* (2004) to reflect on the convergences between life, the body politic, and the biopolitical topographies that are created, reworked, and obliterated in the shades of illness, death, and life.

Viral Violence, the second chapter, considers the effects of violence on the sociopolitical body. I focus on the movements of violence through time and space, examining the way that it has been reconfigured as spreading social virus or physical manifestation of a psychic illness. In the films analyzed in this chapter, violence is metaphorically made into a genetic trait, a propensity for brutality that is directly connected to historical events and timelines. Similarly, it holds the germic promise of futurity, even when this future is a cyclical reproduction of the violence of the past. I analyze two films by Mallorcan director Agustí Villaronga, *Tras el cristal* (1987) and *El mar* (2000), as cautionary examples of the viral properties of violence. Although the majority of his cinematic production is wholly preoccupied with death and dead bodies, the supernatural, and historical impulses that affect contemporary lives, these films are particularly useful when thinking of what 'viral violence' can mean. Distanced in time, production costs, and quality, these films share several unifying similarities: the protagonists are children or adolescents, they share some sort of illness that is both socially created and physiologically bound, and the films themselves are all set in immediate post-Civil War Spain, or in unspecified, ambiguous times and places that have contextual links to Spain and its Civil War. These films portray the youth of Spain as those who will inherit its spiritual and historical ills, and frame the traumas of the past as germs of undefined, national illness.

The divisiveness of violence and illness in *Tras el cristal* and *El mar* is closely linked to issues of masculinity and the illness as metaphor. By infecting masculinity, Villaronga places

emphasis on the interconnectedness of sickness, gender, and violence. Using the Spanish Civil War as the great symbol for cyclical and generational violence, Villaronga captures the virulent sickness of Spanish citizenry by means of a nation-state that warps its citizens and citizens who will warp future generations. In doing so, these films seek to give voice to these subjects and their memories in ways that bind citizens together as a community. The cure, if one could even be suggested, seems to be in the telling and retelling of these stories, the recuperation of the words and stories that have been corrupted by the violent times of war.

The third chapter, *The Future Dead*, seeks to explore the liminal spaces where death is not *death*—that finite end of production, the final result of illness. This is not to metaphorize death completely or to obviate its realities, nor to say that there is such a thing as a good death, but to think of the ways that it (like violence or illness) may have a generative capacity that encourages rethinking normative identity structures. Death is rarely ever good, at least in the ways that we imagine “good” to mean. However, there may be something identity altering about being exposed to mortality and vulnerability through death, in the susceptibility to harm that marks our social interactions with others and constitutes, in part, a sense of self. I turn to Judith Butler’s recent work, which rethinks the potential of mourning and death, as basis for examining the formation of community ties, structures of time, and mortality itself.

The potential for exploring vulnerability in death is made clear in three films of Pedro Almodóvar: *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002), and *Volver* (2006). In looking beyond the opposition of the bad death to the good life, there is much room for looking back at Almodóvar’s cast of “bad men”, those fathers and lovers who are killed and incapacitated or those who exceed the bounds of normative masculinity in transgressive ways. The list is long and the relations to death and masculinity are many: David (Javier Bardem) in *Carne trémula*, whose

disability is intimately connected to his masculinity and inability to please his wife sexually; Antonio (Antonio Banderas) in *La ley del deseo*, who murders his lover's previous boyfriend so that the former will stay with him; Banderas's return as Ricky in *Átame*, who kidnaps and forces himself on Marina, his love interest; the deadbeat Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López) in *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*, who is murdered by his wife (Carmen Maura); Nicholas (Peter Coyote) and Paul Bazzo/Pablo (Santiago Lajusticia) from *Kika*, who both physically abuse the women who refuse to comply with their demands, despite their seemingly disparate dispositions; the priests of *La mala educación*; the men who put their women on the verge of nervous breakdowns. Almodóvar links masculinity and death, and in so doing he disables its normative strengths to portray it as perpetually moribund and affiliated with death. Masculinity seems to engender mortality in his films, pathogenically giving birth to death in a sort of motherly (read: creational) birth of bad blood. Such gender play alters those normative, forward-moving time lines that promote futurity and the creation of the new generation. As death is held to be an inevitable futurity with ties to the present (both in knowledge of its inevitability and through pathogenic masculinities), this chapter asserts that Almodóvar repurposes the forward motion of time to asynchronously connect the past, present, and future. Rethinking the "bad" outcome of death as productive, as a pathogen that creates (even in creating *more death*) allows for a queer unbinding of time, a type of release from the temporal holds placed on us. That is to say, death is no longer an end, but another sort of beginning—or that beginnings and endings no longer hold the same sort of meaning in these films.

In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the director's usage of creational and viral masculinities (what I will term 'pathogenic masculinities') sets up possibilities for new ways of imagining gender. By recasting the paternal archetype as a contagious nexus for sickness and death, the good health of

the ideal male body is shaded with an illness that reproduces and gives birth to itself. In *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar highlights the vulnerability of the body, its susceptibility to death and loss, and how masculinity both complies with and contributes to this process. Distorting masculine gender norms and linking these to mortality and vulnerability in characters like Lola and Esteban serves to advocate an understanding of gender's relationship to death, and how this colors human experiences of the world.

The second half of this chapter considers the queer disruptions of time in *Volver* and links these to *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*. In the focus on the movements of death in life, or in the use of narratives which vivify death and vulnerability, these films tamper with normative temporalities of life and mortality. In *Volver*, where the past physically returns to haunt the present, Almodóvar disrupts normative family structures through incest and a queer restructuring of time. *Volver* utilizes the product(s) of incest to carry the promise of futurity, even one born of the mortal marks of pathogenic masculinities. Borrowing from Elizabeth Freeman's compelling arguments for a queerness that inherently unbinds time, this chapter holds that Almodóvar's focus on masculinity reimagines a future for gender politics, one that is borne out of the dis-ease of living with, among, and alongside the ghosts of the past.

This dissertation maps the movements of illness through and among bodies, and the metaphors that are created in reworking the healthy standards of the ideal body. In thinking of the sociability of contagion, the linkages forged in fears of illness and our vulnerability to harm from each other, I capitalize on the power of illness to queer the body politic, cycles of violence, and the temporalities of mortality. I want to stress that illness is not always good, that it doesn't always produce a happy outcome, and that it damages and destructs. Similarly, I have no interest in making illness "do good" but to find new ways for providing *possibility*, to allow for new

types of kinship between the self and another. Binding community together in the shades of illness means that the roles of citizenship are complicated, the political force of bodies meeting in pathology offering possibilities for reimagining politics.

My goal is to think through a new sort of germ theory, which will work with distinct yet connecting definitions of the germ: at its most obvious and basic, as the starting point of illness; as “that from which anything springs or may spring; an elementary principle; a rudiment” and as “that portion of an organic being which is capable of development into the likeness of that from which it sprang; a rudiment of a new organism” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Reflecting on these definitions, this dissertation posits the germ as seed or point of departure from which something is grown. This is not an origin, not an “attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities” (“Nietzsche”, 142), as Foucault wrote, but an acknowledgement of the generational powers of the germ. The end result of this particular germ theory is two-fold. I am gesturing to a necessary widening of the temporalities of illness, the boundaries of what is understood as sickness and health and when the divide between the two occurs. I am also tracing a ‘methodology of pathology’ that suggests that any starting point, any theory of origin, will always be imprecise and must always conceal and imply a *before*. The germ is not the origin but the beginning of something that springs from something else, a movement that goes backwards and forwards in time ad infinitum. As Javier Marías writes in *Corazón tan blanco*, “Toda enfermedad viene causada por algo que *no* es enfermedad” (309). The germ is both product of something that came before and producer of that which is yet to come. Illness has the potential to reshape temporalities of life and death, and to aid us in recovering the past and imagining a new future, even if it is one born of a virus. To pass through illness and emerge, in life or in death, is no simple story.

Chapter 1 The Body Politic

Most modern writing about illness works from the basis that it can be identified, in one way or another; sickness is reduced to a malignancy that is either tactile, visible with the mechanical eyes of the X-ray or, in the most insidious scenario, a generalized *somewhere* within the body's borders, when not the body itself. In reducing illness to a specific point—a cancer cell, a tubercular lung, a diseased body part—a separation is fabricated that distinguishes the self from the non-self. This cancer intrudes upon my body/space; it is the garden weed, the sleeper cell that has managed to slip past the defense and border guards of immunity and that, in its intrusion, transforms the body it inhabits. The shift may be local, in that I perceive the source of the illness as a distinct part or region of the body (“I have lung cancer”, the cancer is in my lungs, the cancer is the source of the fault and my lungs are its point of intrusion); or it may be wholly transformative, in that what changes is the very notion of self and its relation to the non-self (“I have HIV”, my immune system attacks itself, my body is the culprit *and* the victim, my self is at civil war). I attempt to distinguish my self from the non-self, from the illness that steals into my space. So when sickness is not one specific point but a debilitating all points at once, when it is seen not as outside intruder but internal turncoat, what happens to the perception of the body, which is so often taken to represent the self's discrete borders? Is the body space always already inhabited by illness then, both sleeper cell and hostile country?

It is this country that Susan Sontag writes of at the beginning of *Illness as Metaphor*, and it is one that Virginia Woolf will also call forth in her 1926 essay “On Being Ill”. For Woolf, the dark spaces reveal a common human topography of the body:

When the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to

view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness. (9)

In this passage, illness is both active intruder into the body's space and its indigenous inhabitant. It comes in raging: it dims the lights of health, it uproots the ancient trees in the gardens of health with its attack, and it exposes wastelands of the sick with its shadows. Woolf imagines illness to be an operative agent, a localizable intrusion capable of unleashing its destructive force onto the passive landscapes of the body's purportedly pure, Edenic gardens. Yet it is also an always-present possibility, she writes; when the blinding lights have dimmed, hidden countries are made visible in the darkness and flowered lawns and precipices mark the landscape of the sick. This second ideation of illness presents neither outside attack nor breach of the body's walls but a forgotten possibility that is always just over the horizons of health, the hidden kingdom that is present from the start and which requires the shadows of illness to reveal its shapes.

The differences between the two conceptualizations, more than a mere metaphorical slide by Woolf, reveal a split in some of the ways illness may be considered. At times these streams of thought diverge, so that sickness is an either/or, localized here or unlocalizably everywhere; at times they rush together, and sickness is seen as a virulent attack on the self's borders. Illness ravages the body's topography, but in that destruction it constructs an ill kingdom in its place; or, perhaps even more importantly, it reveals that these two lands always occupied the same corporeal space. Lost in the rapturous flowers and lawns of the night country of illness or watching the shadows cast their revealing nightlight, as Woolf seems to, we might ask what really distinguishes this "kingdom of the sick" (to crib from Sontag) from the gardens of health. Wouldn't the night lawns and precipices of sickness suggest that illness itself is casually

generative, that it too flowers and grows in ways that are more than simplistically negative? And if we can hold illness as an always-present possibility, how might that radicalize our perceptions of immunity, vitality, and the self and its others?

This chapter examines the employment of these discourses of illness in the creation and maintenance of the masculine body as geography in contemporary Spanish film, with a particular focus on those metaphors that reconceptualize the state of the (body of the) union by mobilizing immunity, defense, and life as its reinforcements. Within such metaphors, the body is made a country unto itself, a sovereign space with defensible borders that serves as a stand-in for national health and wellbeing. Taking Hobbes' formulation of the body politic as a point of departure, this chapter discusses how illness—as always present possibility, the dark country revealed—has also been used to this end. In the films of the Catalan auteur Marc Recha, particularly in *Dies d'agost* (2006), geopolitical topographies are threaded into the wandering bodies of the land's inhabitants in a way that suggests the inability to disassociate the one from the other. For Recha, the memories impressed into the countryside are bound to the cultural memory of its people; in casting the latter with a metaphorical amnesia, he reproduces the cultural significance ascribed to immunity, defense, and wellness. In other words, amnesia is written into the body-as-landscape and yet presented as antithetical to the impermeability of that physical landscape, a concept that is in turn grafted onto the mental skin of the characters of *Dies d'agost*. In evoking the landscapes of the body in the rips and tears of the thin skin of memory, the question of life enters the discussion. Analyzing the use of animalism as a substitute for and elaboration of humanity in Recha's film *Petit Indi* (2009), this chapter will also consider Agamben's distinction between bare and thinking life and its ramifications for a corporeal topography rooted in health and illness. In making these bodies vulnerable through differing

conceptualizations of life, the category of the human—who constitutes it and how—is interlaced with the political rights owed to bodies that do not hold up to normative expectations of health, wellbeing, or personhood. I turn to Alejandro Amenábar’s *Mar adentro* (2004) to reflect on this and the convergences between life, the body politic, and the biopolitical topographies that are created, reworked, and obliterated in the shades of illness.

When it was released in 2006, *Dies d’agost* [August Days] was primarily publicized as a ‘road movie’. This generic boxing-in would seem to imply either a brilliant marketing strategy or the evidence of a lack of any strategy at all, given that Recha has long been a critical darling but scarcely held a mass appeal for Spanish audiences. Buying into such a genre, therefore, may have secured the interest of a sort of audience (or the interest of any audience at all) that the film may not have had otherwise. Similarly, marketing *Dies d’agost* as a road movie classifies it as a certain ‘type’, promising adherence (however loosely so) to the rules of a specific genre and ultimately directing both film and spectator towards a general set of expectations. Interestingly, these expectations may find themselves complicated by the film’s opening credits, which note that it has been funded by an initiative of the “Màster en Documental de Creació de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra”, a program which helps young filmmakers produce and secure funding for their feature-length documentaries. *Dies d’agost* was awarded this distinction despite the fact that it clearly bends—when it doesn’t vaporize entirely—the recognized norms of documentary film. That this film consciously choreographs its scenes and references its mediated nature, or that the director inserts himself and his family into the scripted narrative in a way that emphasizes its fabrication, presents a direct challenge to the idea of genre filmmaking. Such clear self-referentiality raises a set of questions that become apparent throughout the film’s

narrative and that respond to the metaphorical proposals made by these two genres specifically: What is being documented? What is this trip for, and where is it headed?

To be clear, the journey is not all metaphor. The basic premise of the film revolves around twin brothers Marc and David, who embark on a lazy trip through the countryside of Cataluña. Marc (the director playing himself, or a version thereof) has been attempting to write a chronicle of the life of Ramon Barnils, a Catalan journalist who, according to the film's voiceover, "spoke of stories forgotten, or that some didn't want to remember." After recording interviews with people who knew Barnils, he has arrived at an impasse with the work, unsure of how to continue and spending hours listening to the recorded interviews on a loop. Hoping to break free from this creative block, Marc decides to visit Ramon's hometown for inspiration, to rest, and for the fresh air. He calls David (Recha's real-life twin brother playing himself, or a version thereof), who agrees to the trip. Their journey takes them through cracked, dry lands, into rivers and reservoirs, and back home again. The initial premise of the story, then, is about that road trip, but it is also about their relationship to the land they travel through, how their bodies and selves are woven into the history of the surrounding landscapes; it's about the stories that are told and forgotten, the people that disappear and only sometimes come back.

In many of his films, Recha uses his protagonists as proxies for societal relations to the land and its past, which in turn becomes a larger consideration of Spain, its history, and cultural memory. In casting himself and his family members to play crucial roles in a film whose primary task is the study of nature and self, *Dies d'agost* plays with its own mediated quality, stretching the bounds of what its chosen genres can do and directly confronting and complicating the notion of kinship. David Recha, previously cast as the titular "brother" of the director's earlier film, *Pau*

i el seu germà (2001),⁵ once again occupies the role of brother once-removed by playing a character that is almost himself, but not quite. Likewise, the film's omniscient voice-over is provided by their sister,⁶ who periodically interrupts the narrative to tell stories about growing up with Marc and David, to reveal her jealousies towards their relationship with their father, or to narrate the forgotten history of the land. The on-screen brothers remain unaware of her voice or her revelations, although even this is clearly another sleight-of-hand, given that Marc is at once screenwriter and director of the words and images that are lost to his character.

In this way, and as he will do in 2009's *Petit Indi*, Recha deconstructs normative familial structures by providing alternative meanings to the relationships between brother, sister, and the concept of family itself. When Marc's archival research and relationship with Ramon Barnils is first described, a picture of a smiling family flashes across the screen: a man and three boys. Other than the concurrent voiceover, which is simply recounting Marc's rising frustrations with his work, there is no context provided for the photo. Is this the director's family? Later, the same picture physically appears at Marc and David's campsite. A girl who they have met on their travels, moments after glancing at the twins and confiding in them, "I would have loved to have brothers", sees the photo. When Marc and David are gone, she steals it and goes on her way. The narrator remarks that she has confused Ramon's family portrait with the Recha brothers; but this is an assumption that the spectator has likely made as well, given that the sister-as-voiceover has already made reference to her three brothers, their father, and the relationship between them. In

⁵A fascinating title itself, given that Pau is also the name of David and Marc's other brother. Thus the director manages to reference not only David, who is Pau's brother in actuality and in the narrative of the film, but himself, also implicitly called forth in the "the brother" of *Pau and his brother*.

⁶There is some disagreement on this, and there have been critics who assert that an actress "plays" the role of the sister's voice-over, which does not appear in the film's credits. Ultimately it makes little difference in verisimilitude, as no one in this film is playing a faithful version of him or herself anyway.

blending Ramon's family into his, Recha emphasizes the importance of family even while he destabilizes more established ways of relating to it. In other words, underscoring the replaceability of one family for another⁷ while still maintaining the cultural significance of the family structure itself seems to highlight the interconnectedness of people—even when such interconnectedness is continually misread, displaced, or denied.

Dies d'agost posits a similar affinity between the relationship of the self to the physical landscapes of Catalunya. Clearly, traditional kinship structures of family and self are thoroughly destabilized in the film; Ramon's family is made indistinguishable from Recha's (and for at least one character, even *becoming* Recha's family), and the latter is in turn so consciously mediated, its blood ties so fully reworked, rewritten, and reconstituted, that it is completely transfigured. These efforts at destabilizing familial ties serve to radically blur the borders between the self and the other in a similar fashion to the reconfigured connections between the body and the land it inhabits.

Similar to Woolf's experience of illness and the bodily mutations and revelations brought to light under its sway, for Recha the idealized body does not inhabit the land so much as coexist with(in) it; man is not merely an intrusive cancer on the pure horizon of the land, but the land itself. The opening images of *Dies d'agost* make this fusion particularly explicit. In the first shot, a rippling body of blue water fills the screen, immersing the viewer into the film. Slowly, so that the image is just a blend of shadows that seems to rise from the depths of the water, a still of Marc and David is crossfaded into the shot before the screen eventually fades to black. The sounds of nature—birdcalls, wind in trees, insects buzzing—are slowly amplified over subsequent shots of moving clouds. Finally, the camera returns to the reservoir, where the

⁷A family that is, at once, misrecognized as another and made to be a stand-in for a third, that of the girl who wistfully steals the photo as an attempt to write herself into an imagined family of brothers.

brothers are floating and staring up at the sky. This complicated series of shots and reaction shots unite the gaze of the camera (and of the directorial Recha who sits behind it) with the spectator, with the land, and with the characters themselves. By crossfading the still of the brothers with the water, the film explicitly forges a link between this body of water and the bodies of these brothers. The shots of the sky, followed by the brothers gazing up into it, place the spectator alongside them, floating in the water.⁸ The body is not so simply the defensible divide between self and other, the individual and the ecosystem, but an unbounded member of a larger organism that will be confronted with new illnesses: pollution and systemic imbalance, violence and its remains, memory loss.

Yet is this ideal state of man, the body as geography, a real possibility? For the on-screen brothers, the land they pass through is foreign to them—they do not know its history, they do not understand where they are; they get lost, ghosting through abandoned buildings and gleaning fragmented histories of the past through the people they encounter. They are not ‘at home’ in this landscape nor do they ‘belong’ in it because of some masculine affinity to the natural world. Marc set out for the countryside to clear his thoughts, to escape the obstacles that block access to the ‘forgotten past.’ In these terms, the film *is* both road trip and documentary—a journey through cultural memory and a documentation of the reworked relationships between self (Recha as director) and other (Recha as disembodied citizen). The destination posited, then, is the recuperated self, the mapping of the body’s lost, interior spaces; but it is also all points at once—the body is made porous, the fundamental relationship between self and non-self transfigured into an ambulatory nation-body.⁹

⁸ Not so casual a location, either, given that we are later told that this is the “summer of the drought”.

⁹ An ability that will be challenged by the disability of the nation-as-body in Amenábar’s *Mar adentro*, discussed later in this chapter.

Thus, even as it posits both an essential connection between body and (home)land and their interchangeability, *Dies d'agost* reveals the disconnect between the contemporary citizen and the physical landscapes he inhabits. It is possible to read this as a conflation between regional identity and homeland, a thread of nationalistic *catalanidad* that seeps into the film's narrative. Still, as much the same thing happens with the invocation of Galicia in *Mar adentro*, the relationship between citizen and nation-state that is prized in these films (and in many others) reveals how the contemporary Spanish body politic is continually called forth and reworked in corporeal terms. In invoking the loss of cultural memory as the catalyst for this disconnect, Recha makes a specific claim to Spain's past, to himself as imperfect citizen, and to the significance of cultural memory and its impression on its citizens.

If these borders are so thoroughly blurred and made interchangeable in Recha's word, it is in direct contrast to the ways the body is generally conceived of in Western thought. In *A Body Worth Defending*, Ed Cohen notes how the concepts of biological immunity and self-defense as we know them first emerge in legal discourse, which in turn operate on the notions of self in health and illness: "For nearly two thousand years, immunity, a legal concept first conjured in ancient Rome, has functioned almost exclusively as a political and juridical term" (3). Self-defense, likewise, originated as a 'natural right' some 350 years ago by Hobbes. Finally, "one hundred and twenty-five years ago, biomedicine fuses these two incredibly difficult, powerful, and yet very different (if not incongruous) political ideas into one, creating 'immunity-as-defense.' It then transplants this new biopolitical hybrid into the living human body" (3).

How does immunity come to stand for the individual and the isolating effects of the body's self-defense against its environment? Cohen returns to the origins of the word: "For two millennia, immunity refers almost exclusively to privileges and entitlements conferred on

individuals or collectivities that exempt them from political obligations and responsibilities. Immunity from prosecution, military service, taxation, legal culpability, or financial indemnity occurs when the law formally sets aside its supposedly universal obligations for particular subjects or groups of subjects” (40). In doing this, he notes, the concept of legal immunity seeks to apply both universally and partially, constraining all citizens even as it creates exceptions to those same constraints. “Thus immunity seems paradoxically to contain the troubling distinctions among 'all,' 'some,' and 'one' that both define and disturb the political domain by foregrounding the exceptions which provide the rule” (40). In the transference from legal immunity to biological, “Medicine localizes the ability to recover from or to avoid disease in the specific actions of our cells and molecules... [and] imagines the individual organism as the space within which a cellular struggle for survival (a.k.a. Disease) takes place, and conversely defines a specific microbial agent as the hostile cause against which the organism must wage its relentless war with death” (5). This fusion is an important one, for it completely reworks the conceptualization of the body's processes in a way that incorporates the politics of the nation-state into the skin of its citizens. The body of the individual defends itself against, is invaded by, or resists the foreign agent, and in doing so stabilizes its borders; through this we find the locations of illness, we map our bodies as sovereign topographies that must be defended.

In his films, Recha actively resists the immunity-as-defense paradigm by reimagining what constitutes the body, life, and its borders. Nature and the land are brought into the limits of the self, combining these in such a way that each is always found in the other. He strikes at the imbalanced disconnect between man and nature in *Dies d'agost* most obviously through the character of Pere, a forest ranger living in an abandoned house in the middle of the forest that the brothers meet on their journey. He is, as the voiceover explains, “a man of the forest”, although

no further information is provided as to what that means, or how or why Marc and David may not be considered as such. The narrator explains that Pere likes “to lose himself in solitary places, to observe wild animals. He knew the trees, and where the birds and rabbits hid. He could find beehives or the almonds growing in a forgotten field.” He also provides the brothers with even more urgent information, showing them where they can get water, since all the wells in the city have dried up during the drought. He teaches Marc and David some of the history of the land and shows them a bird that mimics the sound of his trumpet.

Whereas Pere knows the land and in some ways represents a sort of natural, whole memory of its past, the brothers (perhaps as exemplary urban citizens) primarily function in the lack of knowledge, memory, and past. This is pointedly noted while Pere is giving them directions on getting to a campground; David points out another trail, but Pere quickly tells him it’s impassable because there is too much shrapnel in the trees. Marc ventures, “From bombs during the Civil War?” Pere nods. This is one of the two scenes in which the Civil War is referenced explicitly (even while multiple shots implicitly reference the war and its aftereffects on the land), and the calling forth of this event is an important moment in the film.

What follows, then, is crucial for understanding just how Recha weaves together the Civil War, the land, and these men. The three (Pere at this point has briefly joined their journey) visit a ruined building. The voiceover explains that this is “Mas Andreu”, “a house used during the Battle of the Ebre to lodge the ranks of the 4th Battalion of the 42nd Division of the 15th Corps of the Republic”, which included the Recha brothers’ maternal grandfather. The twins do not recognize the building or know of their personal ties to it, so they spend most of the time simply avoiding the bugs inside it and taking in its state of disrepair. They look around the area, they find a mattress in a tree and seem to shrug it off as an oddity of country living. The sister’s voice

explains that some soldiers, their grandfather included, would sleep in the trees as a way to escape the flea-infested house. Eventually they continue their trip, leaving the house behind as a rustic curiosity. The fact that this moment is not taken up by the characters (even when clearly done so by the directorial character of Recha) is significant, and as such it functions as a lost moment for Marc and David. When they leave Mas Andreu, they leave behind the possibilities of connecting to the land in a very visceral, personal way, and this seems meant to signify a loss of private histories in the perceived public lay of the land.

As they depart the site, the camera then pans over the valley while the voiceover tells of the bloody battle that took place there. Dying of thirst,¹⁰ some soldiers attempted to drink from the milky waters of the Ebro and were pulled in by its rough currents, drowning. The sister makes a final comment: “That land was sown with skeletons. People said if you stared at the bottom of the muddy waters you could see the dead roaming”. And what grows from this, what seeds spring up from the skeletons of the forgotten dead? Like the buckshot shells Pere collects or the shrapnel stuck in the trees, the physical remnants of a poorly-remembered past have left an imprint in the land. These are pointedly clear images. In emphasizing the unbounded link between man and nature and condemning the interruption of that link in his protagonists/himself, Recha questions the entry point of illness in the land—where does the germ enter, is it localizable, or is it systemic?

The chronicle Marc seeks to tell, then, emerges out of his ongoing curiosity toward what he vaguely refers to as ‘Ramon’s period’ and the frustration of not being able to tell it. He finds himself haunted by ghosts; not just the specter of Ramon, but the stories from this time period.

¹⁰ The soldiers’ thirst, an oblique reference to the drought that takes place during the titular August days of the film. The narrator has also noted earlier that in the present-day drought the “fountains were dry, harvests were ruined, the trees died of thirst and fish couldn’t breathe. People roasted in the cities.”

Yet the period is never explained properly: if Barnils produced the majority of his journalistic work in the 70s and 80s, writing about current events of the moment and the lingering effects of the dictatorship (not so separable, these), then wouldn't Ramon's period be the fledgling Spanish democracy? At a surface level the film critiques the violence of the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, but locating 'Ramon's period' in the years of the democracy may be one of the film's many complex undercurrents. After all, it is not really the Civil War that is being indicted but what comes after, the culture of apathy, the stifling of memory, the abandonment of the land and the past. Marc is often distant and quiet, gnawing at him is the burning question: "How to approach the period Ramon spoke of?" This road trip, then, not only represents a literal 'moving forward' through the geographic space of the countryside but a temporal move backwards, through the ruined buildings and muddy rivers that connect past to present.

The people that they meet on their trip, similarly, become ghostly archetypes of life: unfixed, nomadic, and roaming through the countryside. There are three of these secondary characters, and of these only Pere is named. The young woman who steals Ramon's picture, referred to as 'she' or 'the girl', wants to move to New York and dance flamenco—her older sister died when she was young, and it traumatized her parents. She often goes and visits her sister in the cemetery and talks to her grave. She wonders what it would have been like had her sister lived—she thinks, would her parents have been happier? A second woman they meet is a bartender at a campground. When she was younger, her father used to move her family around, taking jobs wherever he could. Her parents are now separated.

It is particularly interesting that the stories of these characters are just snapshots of lives, snippets of information that are not pertinent to the plot, that are only told in voiceover, and are never explored. These people disappear as quickly as they have come, walking off into the

sunrise or disappearing into forests and never coming back. Their stories are unimportant to the larger storyline, generic, but in the comparison between minor and major narratives Recha is once again able to suggest the permeability between self and other. In the end, the stories proliferate and this valley tells as many tales as that man, this river has as murky a past as this woman. The woman who works at the campground, for example, tells stories of the people who live in the area, spreads rumors about those who have vanished or moved on, and is familiar with the lay of the land. So, Recha isn't simply positing that there exists only some masculine affinity with the land, as could be surmised by the importance placed on Pere's storyline. The brothers do not live in opposition to the land, but in ignorance of it and its past. It is only as the twins continue their travels that they become vaguely aware of the ghosts that haunt the land: the untold, unofficial histories that people and places have taken part in.

When Marc inexplicably goes missing one day, during a hiking trip in the mountains, David and the woman bartender search for him for hours. She goes back to the campground to wait for Marc, but David stays to look for him in the forest. He spends the last third of the film looking for his brother, which is an interesting development that not only underlines the film's insistence on how people come and go, and only sometimes return (perhaps making a gesture to the official and unofficial body counts of the Civil War), but also sets David up with a parallel search that stretches beyond the absence of his brother and into a tributary plotline that involves rumors of a giant catfish. Throughout their trip, the brothers have heard stories of an enormous old catfish in one of the reservoirs they camp at. As their travels progress, the tales surrounding the catfish grow: it was the first catfish in the area, introduced by a German tourist decades ago; it is five meters long; it preys on hapless fishermen who fall into the river; and it has been rarely seen but sometimes its splashing can be heard. It is even broadly hinted that David has an

encounter with this fish when one day, after searching in the mountains for his brother, he goes back to the campsite to rest and bathe in the river. He hears a distant off-screen splash. The camera tantalizingly stays focused on him, rather than follow the sound. As the sounds of the birds and the water lapping at the shore is heightened, the spectator waits for something to happen. The fish does not appear, David sees nothing, and the scene ends. In this way, the search for Marc slowly becomes a search for the rumor of something that may or not be, a story that has much to do with the untold histories of the people and the land they move through.

It is also a story of pollution, of environmental illness, of the introduction of germs into the organism's self. If Recha has collapsed the human body and the ecosystem in order to draw lines between space and inhabitants, he is also clear about the health and illness of this roving body politic. The infection of this body with a metaphorical amnesia is correlated with the 'infection' and proliferation of the catfish ("like a sort of garbage truck with a very large mouth," the sister notes) which have "unbalanced the ecosystem", eating everything in sight. What's more, the introduction of the catfish into the man-made reservoirs of Cataluña directly recalls the way the sister-narrator has spoken of the Civil War skeletons caught in the depths of their waters. This in turn encourages the spectator to think back to those opening shots of the brothers floating in the reservoir, and the temptation is strong to see this as an infectious moment—the brothers as living skeletons, destructive catfish, cancer cells in the tissue of nature. But if anything, Recha is aware of his place(s) in this non-documentary, the roles he consciously inhabits as screenwriter, director, and protagonist of this film. So this is indeed an infectious moment where illness and health are brought into tension with the male body, but it is also a moment that is thoroughly taken into account in the film's larger story. That is, the lines between the self and the non-self, the germ and the host body, pollutant and polluter are completely reconfigured and the

oppositional relationships between these things so transformed that the simple language of sick or healthy is no longer apt. In this, and as Woolf has done much earlier, Recha finds that sickness and health inhabit the same body, that in the darkness of the illness, secret gardens of skeletons have begun to flower.

David doesn't find the catfish; however he does eventually find Marc, who never tells his brother why he left. Marc, similarly, is unable to learn anything new about Ramon Barnils. During his absence, we are told, he went to the village where Ramon spent the last six months of his life. He is allowed into the room where the journalist stayed, and it is completely empty, all furniture removed. The film thus joins these parallel storylines—the search for and the rumors of the giant catfish with the search for and the interviews of Ramon—as if to suggest that there will always be some figure that cannot be caught, something that cannot be fished from the low tides of memory. On this ambiguous note, the voiceover states that Marc has all the information he needs and is ready to return to the city. Thus, part of the project is to connect Spain's slippery past to its people, the land, and their stories—the rumors, the fables, the lies, the truths, all of it. The trip begins with an attempt to disentangle Marc from the frustrations of working with and in the past, but it is precisely in their flight from memory that the brothers stumble upon its imprint—in the bullet-riddled buildings, forgotten barracks, and muddy rivers, so deep and murky that it's difficult to determine what lies at the bottom of it all. And in that muddy river a shadow passes, the shape of a catfish—here to be read as a symbol of loss and life and an attack on the distinction between animal and human, state and citizen.

Song & Silence

The November 2009 issue of National Geographic sported a stirring image that quickly began appearing on television shows, websites, and in newspapers across the globe. This photo,

which featured a group of chimpanzees mourning the loss of a fallen matriarch, seemed to touch a nerve in its viewers. The National Geographic added a particularly humanizing background to the story: in September 2008, a female chimpanzee in her late 40s, Dorothy, died of congestive heart failure. She had been rescued by the Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue Center in Cameroon after years as a ‘mascot’ in an amusement park, where she was placed when a hunter killed her mother. Once at the rescue center, according to the article, her health improved and “her deep kindness surfaced.” She mothered an orphaned chimp and became “a close friend” to many others. In the funeral procession, when Dorothy was brought out in front of the other chimpanzees so that they could witness her burial and “understand, in their own capacity, that Dorothy would not return”, the animals reacted in displays of aggression or frustrated barking. What reportedly “stunned” their keepers the most, however, was the silence that periodically hushed the group; it was described as “almost tangible” and, in turn, left the custodians at the rescue center speechless.

In 2004, well before this and other similar cases of mourning animals were making their viral impact, the *Deep Sea Journal* published findings of a whale with a unique, undocumented call. The article, prosaically titled “Twelve years of tracking 52-Hz whale calls from a unique source in the North Pacific”, tells of a pod-less whale traveling the North Pacific basin in a meandering migratory pattern. When the story was picked up by news sources, one website (Kuro5hin) summarized it in the following manner:

For the last 12 years, a single solitary whale whose vocalizations match no known living species has been tracked across the Northeast Pacific. Its wanderings match no known migratory patterns of any living whale species. Its vocalizations have also subtly deepened over the years, indicating that the whale is maturing and

aging. And, during the entire 12 year span that it has been tracked, it has been calling out for contact from others of its own kind. It has received no answer. Nor will it ever.

The New York Times presented the situation with fewer overt appeals to emotion, discussing several theories for the unique sounds; among them, the possibility that the animal may be malformed, or a hybrid of a blue whale and another species (considered to be the most likely scenario). As the story spread, the original researchers began receiving a host of messages and emails from whale lovers “lamenting the notion of a lonely heart of the cetacean world”, while some messages came from deaf people speculating that the whale might share their disability. Dr. Kate Stafford, a researcher at the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle, emphasized the animal’s apparent health in its continued survival in the harsh conditions of the basin for 12 years. But she still concludes somewhat wistfully: “He’s saying, ‘Hey I’m out here.’ Well, nobody is phoning home.”

These stories, if different in their presentation of animal life and its interaction with (and at times collapse into) a perceived humanity, are striking in their underlying similarity. The National Geographic article reads like an obituary for Dorothy the chimpanzee, noting her familial ties, her good deeds done, and her rags-to-riches tale from Dickensian orphanhood in the carnival to matriarchy in the rehabilitation center. Her death is read as affective loss and projected onto the chimpanzees that mourn her in specifically humanizing terms; thus their silence is perceived as reverence before death, cognition of the distinction between living and dying. In an analogous fashion, the ‘lonely whale’ becomes an archetype of loss and solitude that is filtered through human experience, its uniquely-tuned call rendered as the uniqueness and individuality of what it means to be human. There is no doubt that these stories elicit an affective

response, but on what basis? Is it that animal life as we perceive it is far more nuanced than it has been credited with, that a mourning chimpanzee or the grieving call of a lost whale reveal heretofore unrecognized aspects of animality that challenge its distinction with humanity? Or is it, as I suspect it may be, that these animals are read as maps to humanity, anthropomorphized in a continual reification of what it means to be human?

Like these two stories, *Petit Indi* (*Little Indi*, dir. Marc Recha, 2010), addresses the complex relationship between the animal and the human by way of our conceptualizations of life—namely, who or what has life and in what capacity things live. Unlike the stories of Dorothy and the whale, however, in *Petit Indi* the difference between these lives is broken down and reworked in such a way that the categorical distinction between human and animal is itself made suspect. This is to say that the borders separating animal and human life are made more fluid in a way that interrogates the taxonomic assumptions surrounding them. The film tells the story of Arnau Arcs, an awkward adolescent who works as a maintenance boy in the local Damm brewery and collects and trains songbirds. The crux of the film lies in the deep relationships he forms with these songbirds, communicating with them in ways that reveal his disconnect and isolation from the realm of the ‘human’ and putting into play a host of questions that surround our definitions of the human, the animal, youth and age.

With his mother in prison for a crime that she purportedly did not commit, the family struggles to keep itself from imploding economically and emotionally. Sole, Arnau’s older sister and guardian, attempts to keep the memory of the past (and their absent mother) alive by devoting all of her energy to the maintenance of the household despite the continually rising rent and the threat of eviction. It is later revealed that this home—their connection to the past, to better days, to their mother—is in danger of being demolished in order to make way for a block

of apartments. Their lives are thus tenuously balanced on the border of the rural and the urban, between tradition and modernity, and between fields of grass and rivers and the power plants and industrial factories that ominously darken the horizon. It is a space that is at once metaphorically and literally constituted from loss, an island defined by how little of it there is left and how much of it has been taken away, which is further emphasized by several shots of bulldozers clearing the land immediately adjacent to theirs, a reminder of encroaching devastation and always-present outside threat. In an interview, director Marc Recha calls the area in which the family lives “one of those spaces in which all the detritus generated by the city accumulates,” and in doing so he stresses its marginalized relationship with (and primordial dependency on) the city itself. So it is a place made up of lost objects, things of no use, obsolete items—like the tires that float down the river, fished out and used to keep down the broken roof tiles of the Arcs’ home, but also like the family itself, clinging to shifting ways of life that find themselves under threat of extinction. Similar to Recha’s 2006 film *Dies d’agost* before it, *Petit Indi* underscores the connection of the body to the land by removing the borders that force their separation; yet in the latter there is a larger sense of what ‘nature’ means, and the indistinguishability of human lives found in the former is thus traded for fable, for an examination of life that exceeds the bounds of the human from the outset.

Thus the question of the boundaries of ‘life’ enters into the discussion. What is the good life, the life worth living? Or more broadly, what animated state constitutes life? Is it a capacity for mourning? A unique call, made more unique in its metaphorical juxtaposition with the singularities of the human voice? In describing the differing valences of the concept of ‘life’ in Greek thought, Giorgio Agamben explores a similar line of questioning in *Homo Sacer*. He notes that the Greeks “used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are

semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1). He further writes that *zoe* (which is also referred to as ‘bare life’, mere existence itself) has historically functioned outside of the political sphere and in direct contrast with *bios* (referred to as qualified life, political life); yet in that contrast, “bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men” (7). In the separation, distinction, and hierarchization of typologies of life, the end result is that mankind—as qualified life, thinking life—is prized over bare life.

By locating the Arcs household on the threshold of the developing city, existing from and as its refuse while simultaneously resisting its modes of politics, *Petit Indi* explores the distinction between life (*bios*) and life (*zoe*). The family lives within the political framework of the city even as they decry the regulations that delineate the lives of its citizens, a fact that is poignantly underscored in a scene between Arnau and his older brother Sergi in a discussion of their mother’s incarceration. When Arnau quietly asserts: “But Mom hasn’t done anything,” Sergi responds with a sneer: “For you, no. But to the system, she’s guilty.” The younger boy insists, “But they put it in her suitcase...” and Sergi ends the discussion abruptly: “Sure, tell *that* to the judge.”

Even in voicing resistance to the legal system that (wrongfully) imprisons their mother, the siblings are forced to operate within its limits. Early on in the film, we learn that Sole's main job is that of security guard to the Damm brewing factory where her husband and Arnau work. In a few scenes she is presented in the full uniform of the security guard, a visual echo of the female prison workers in the women’s penitentiary, who come to represent the domination of bodies by an unjust legal system. Even the proxy sister-as-mother Sole must be entangled into the system

she actively and bitterly opposes. Similarly, when Arnau learns of a lawyer that may be able to argue his mother's case, he begins to work towards saving the €15,000 he would need to contract the man's services. Consequently, the family finds itself negotiating the politico-legal system they are discomforted and even antagonized by. The songbirds that Arnau trains and enters into competitions are capitalized, becoming significant for their monetary value and the prizes they can win him in light of this new goal rather than as hobby, youthful passion, or understanding and friendship that exceeds the borders of the human. As a result, he also traverses the lines that separate the city from the land, forced to mediate and prize one sort of life over another, if only intermittently.

In this manner, we are meant to see this family—and particularly the titular ‘little Indian’ himself, Arnau—as trapped in a system that utilizes the exclusion of the other in a practice of self-definition. It is thus no surprise that the most prominent visual motif of the film is that of the cell/cage, which restricts and sets apart one type of life from another. In contrast to the wide panoramic shots that comprise most of the film, suffocatingly tight shots focus in on Arnau’s shed, where he keeps his songbirds in little cages behind a padlocked door; these birdcages are also matched to the mother’s cell, impenetrable for Arnau even on visiting days (where he is denied access because of her purported bad behavior); and to the family land, which is divided from the city by dual borders, a muddy river and the recently-constructed AVE train tracks.

Likewise, several scenes emphasize the caging of its characters and highlight the separation and punishment of one life over another. In the scene where Arnau is denied the opportunity to visit his mother, he sees her being led through a hall and runs up to the bars, his fingers wrapped around them. He refrains from calling out, watching with a pained expression as his mother turns her head slowly before being led away. The scene immediately cuts to a shot of

electrical power lines, which slice the frame in a way that mirrors the bars separating Arnau from his mother. The juxtaposition of these scenes implicitly reworks the question of freedom and how lives are bound, organized, and prioritized in the split between nature and modernity (representing, in some ways, the split between bare life and life outside the walls of the polis). That is, the physical barring of the mother and son is comparatively drawn up against the barring of bare life from the political, the split between modern man and his environment.

But even this gulf, loosely traced here in Agamben's writing, is fraught with complexity. Neither *bios* nor *zoe* exist apart from the other in a vacuum, differentiated space; Agamben reaches the conclusion that life will always be at war against life, that both will be dependent on the maintenance of definitional borders that are nonetheless constantly in flux. In the inclusion of bare life only as exception to *bios* (in defining itself as that which it is *not*), he writes, "every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the 'beautiful day' of life will be given citizenship only...through blood and death..." (11). It is something like this that led Hobbes, centuries earlier, to repurpose Plautus and claim "Man is a wolf to man".¹¹ In doing so, both Agamben and Hobbes find sovereignty and democracy to share foundational links in fear, death, and perhaps most importantly, in the delimitations of political life. The two (and Hobbes much more radically so) will hold fast to the belief that civil society is the repetition of the state of nature at a regulated level, that there may be more animalism in the organized political life of the human than is often believed. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Marc Recha completely renegotiates the split, finding the trap door and leading Arnau and his birds through it to safety; he does, however, trouble the perceived gulf between bare and political lives through blending the animal and the human, man and his environment, so that neither is recognizable.

¹¹See Hobbes, Thomas. *De cive*. 1651.

The unintelligible life is, of course, made most evident in Arnau. Caught awkwardly on the threshold of adolescence and adulthood, he occupies neither world fully; if he remains silent before the bitter musings of his sister and casual carelessness of his brother, he is no more forthcoming with his would-be peers, from whom he maintains a tangible distance. His inability to communicate leads him to form a secret world with his songbirds where, locked in his shed, the borders that separate *bios* and *zoe* are wholly reconfigured. In one particularly intriguing scene, Arnau lets his prize goldfinch (the one that wins him the birdsong championships) out of its cage, and the bird pecks at his lips and ears playfully. A profile shot of the boy shows the bird facing away from the camera, close to Arnau's ear. In this moment, a low, indiscernible murmur is faintly heard over the trilling songs of the bird. This is repeated seconds later as the camera pans down from the bird, now perched atop Arnau's head, to eye-level with Arnau, who seems to listen intently. It is no accident that this secret dialogue between a boy and his bird is forever lost to the spectator; in this moment *we* are intruding, *we* do not belong in this space.

What is the importance of this scene? When Agamben writes that “Western politics has not succeeded in constructing the link between *zoe* and *bios*, between voice and language” (11), the solution—if a tenuous one, a fable always deferred—seems to be offered here. As Arnau hears his goldfinch speak, the birdsong commingling with muffled whispers, voice and language are finally linked. The intelligibility of this new birdsong is rendered as a murmur that only Arnau hears, that only he is permitted to hear, in that he also inhabits the liminal state between the animal and the human, bare life and political, voice and language. Our attempts to render it into a recognizable language—we might rewind the film over and over again, turning the volume up and straining our ears—is foiled by the unrecognizable song that is both voice and language, blended. If politics were to succeed in constructing the link between *zoe* and *bios*, it might look

like and sound like this moment, and that is the loss that this brief scene suggests: that this liminality is forever escapable in our current conceptualizations of life and that it passes, and we cannot go back.

The stories of the lonely whale or the funeral mourners at Dorothy's wake, as affectively heart-wrenching as they may be, reframe the split between bare life and the political. Mankind recognizes itself in the call of the whale, a language articulable in human terms as a human capacity for loneliness; similarly, the silence that falls upon the chimpanzees as Dorothy passes by is a giving up of animal chatter, a stillness that speaks as language and elicits a response—a sharing of a “stunned” silence by the rescue center workers, which in turn is interpreted as proximity to humanity. The animal enters into the realm of the human, and in that negotiation man solidifies his language as the only speakable and intelligible one. In the space of the shed though, the bird and the boy speak to each other, and their song crosses the divide between the distinction of life in life.

Yet if the blurring of the distinction between the animal and the human (just one of the lines through which the split between *zoe* and *bios* may be drawn) is discernible in the space of the shed, the film ultimately retreats to familiar definitional territories. When Arnau finds an injured fox on the banks of the river (once again we are reminded of the river as nexus for the cast-offs), he takes it back to his shed and nurses it back to health. The fox refuses his partially eaten bread, his attempts to ‘speak to’ the fox foiled; he later brings it slices of the ham he has won from his latest championship, which the fox devours. Arnau is careful to separate the fox from the birds by an iron pole propped up against the fox’s door until one day, in a rush, he neglects to check the security of the doorstep. Upon returning to the shed, he finds that the birdsongs that greeted him and have served as a constant soundtrack to the film have been

replaced by the ominous buzzing of flies. He enters the shed slowly to find the cages torn open, rips in the fabric that covered them, feathers and the bodies of his birds scattered everywhere. The camera lingers momentarily over his dead goldfinch. In a quiet rage he storms out of the shed and sees the fox blithely sniffing around; he proceeds to throw it against the walls of his shed again and again until it no longer moves. He drags its body to the river, stares for a moment into the dark water, and tosses the fox into it. The camera follows the fox's body drifting down the river before pulling out for a wider shot of Arnau standing on one side, the bustle of the city on the other. The film ends here.

The interjection of death, fear, and irrevocable loss into the narrative is clearly telegraphed in the appearance of the fox, fabled trickster and cunning predator, and reaches a culmination in its killing. What is most striking in this final scene, the slippery moral of the fable's narrative, is found in the annihilation of Arnau's songbirds—innocent, peaceful, and a source of profit¹² in redressing the politico-moral wrongs of an unjust legal system. If we hear the songs of a political menagerie in the figures of the fox and the songbird (a howl, a cooing chirp, or the roar of the leviathan, a different sort of lonely whale), it is with reason. Writing on the politicized figures of the animal, Jacques Derrida opens his collection of seminar lectures, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, with a detailed analysis of the figures of the wolf and the dove. He notes that “one cannot imagine animals more different, even antagonistic, than the dove and the wolf, the one rather allegorizing peace, from Noah's Ark, which ensures the future the safety of humanity and its animals, the other, the wolf, just as much as the falcon, allegorizing hunting and warfare, prey and predation” (4). In this manner, perhaps we can read Recha's employment of the Spanish red fox and the goldfinch as local/regional emblems for the broader political symbols

¹²Following the logic of the film, profit can be read as hope, as potentially problematic as the equation is.

of the wolf and the dove. In marking the fox's brute animality alongside the playful chirp of the bird, Recha sets the allegory and balances bare life against the political cogs of the modern world, with Arnau a sort of innocent dove/goldfinch to the predatory world of the adult. If the goldfinch must be devoured, it is so that Arnau may 'properly' enter into the political and economic spheres of the wolf, so that he can enter into the Law and under his strictures.

But I want to tread lightly here, and remember Derrida's warning: "We should never be content to say, in spite of temptations, something like: the social, the political, and in them the value of exercise of sovereignty, are merely disguised manifestations of animal force, or conflicts of pure force, the truth of which is given to us by zoology, that is to say at bottom bestiality or barbarity or inhuman cruelty" (14). Recha *does* use the fabulated wolf/fox and dove/goldfinch as allegories for power, dominance, and life, and with them sets Arnau the caged bird up against the wolves of adulthood. However, the significance of *Petit Indi* is that it also complicates the easy allegory and provides a space, however transitory, for grasping the shifting movements between *bios* and *zoe*.

If, as the director notes, the animals of the film represent a "fresher, more authentic, more innocent" life, or at least "one that is more in harmony with the land that it comes from", *Petit Indi* suggests the same may be possible for human lives. This is not quite the Marc and David of *Dies d'agost*, who exemplify what is for Recha a problematic split between the human and the land. Arnau and his family signal a type of life that exceeds the borders of political life, spilling into bare life and blurring the borders between bodies and selves. The political potential of this is crucial, if we return to Cohen's *A Body Worth Defending*:

Immunity strangely grafts or inoculates both military and political potentials into human biology as an entangled mode of explanation... Rendering biological

immunity as an organism's active process of defense, scientific medicine deftly fuses a bellicose ideology (which sees environmental challenge as a hostile attack) with a political notion of legal exception (which nevertheless affirms the law's universal applicability). (6)

Through this fusion, the body's immunity, our relationships to our bodies, and the way these inhabit space all come to resemble the military and legal concepts that originate immunity and self-defense in the first place. The body is made a defensible space, bordered by the skin and held in direct contrast to the non-self, biological and environmental. Both *Petit Indi* and *Dies d'agost* resist this skin, exceeding first the human body for a recognition of the body-as-landscape in a reimagining of the sovereign politics of Hobbes; and secondly, through the indistinguishability of animal life and human life.

If this reconstituted body is just a sortie, an incursion into a reconceived biopolitics that is doomed to collapse when pushed up against the walls of the nation-state, this too is prefigured in our concept of immunity: "Instead of evoking the organism's essential connection to the world in which it lives, immunity refigures medicine as a powerful weapon in the body's necessary struggle to defend itself from its life-threatening context" (Cohen 6). So there is the potential of a life out in the expanse of sky and land, in deeper contact with the natural and providing greater possibilities in our interactions with living things, but it constantly rubs up against immunity, the distinction between that which constitutes political life and what is merely alive, and our defensible bodies.

The brutality of the predator in *Petit Indi*, linked to the world of adults, is displayed as another sort of animalism, a capacity for damage and an initiation into loss. Such a blending—of the human into the animal, and the animalization of the human—is a fundamentally political

move. How do we classify what is human when the traits of our political lives (our ability to mourn, for example, or our vocal expressions in language) are found in bodies and organisms who have been marked as incapable of such? If we are to incorporate the mourning silence of the chimpanzee into our understanding of grief, might that radicalize grief itself, and with it our approach to death and life? If language is one prerequisite to humanity, does the song of the goldfinch constitute such, particularly when it is interpreted by a young boy? Recha traces the distinctions between life and life, complicating what is considered to be *real* life—progress, modernity, capitalism—by placing it alongside the brute nature of the wild. In doing so, he takes a step towards redefining the boundaries set up between the self and the non-self, the animal and the human.

And so despite its bleak ending, *Petit Indi* is not without some hope. During one of the film's lighter moments, the family's drunken uncle tells them a story: "Do you know why they call those birds from New Guinea 'birds of paradise'? Because when they sent them to Europe, they had been stuffed, and they lost their feet. The Jesuits, God bless 'em, thought that they didn't have feet and that they were just always flying without ever landing, that they were always in paradise." The family laughs. Sole's husband retorts jokingly: "What about us, with legs but without wings, where are we?" To this the uncle replies: "Here." Off screen, Sole's husband says: "In paradise!" This last line elicits less laughter, and instead a thoughtful silence descends on the group. Can this difficult life, with its cruelty of those that prey upon others, life caged and caging, be a type of paradise? Can there be hope? Perhaps the hope is not to be found in the film's bloody denouement but in the image of Arnau crossing the banks of the river of garbage. Life of all sorts is lost and washes ashore here, but something is created even from such loss, something pulled from the moving currents and retooled to sustain *life*. Even the grieving silence

that descends upon the clan (be they chimpanzee or human), reverence for the loss of something they once had, reveals the faces of life in the stilling of death, a sort of continuity that always promises the renewal of life.

Bardem's Body

What Recha offers his audiences may seem like slim hope. In the hope of hopelessness, however, he returns us yet again to Woolf, to Sontag: back into the night gardens of illness, to those things that flourish in the dark. If illness and violence have the potential to generate and produce states that surpass a simplistic binary opposition,¹³ it is the same with life and death. Recha's characters find themselves defined by loss, but in doing so, the loss becomes constitutive. In its function as chronicle of Ramon Barnil's life and a testament to his work, how would *Dies d'agost* have been filmed were it not for his death? The same is true of the missing mother of *Petit Indi*, who in absentia redefines the family dynamic. To be sure, it requires a shift in the contemplation of these original concepts, an attempt to break them from the holds of these binaries in ways that, perhaps, may not be fully realizable as of yet. And beyond this lurks a more difficult question: what might a state politics based on a necropolitical model look like? "Necropolitics" is a term that I appropriate from Achille Mbembe, who shifts the Foucauldian biopolitical model slightly and coins the term "necropolitics" to describe a political state based on the capacity of the body to be killed. To be clear, the exercise of sovereign control over mortality and life is the definition of biopolitics, but Mbembe questions the efficacy of the model by asking if it is "sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary objective" (12). For Mbembe, the "turn to death" means that we must consider what

¹³See Chapter 2, *Viral Violence*, for a detailed discussion of violence as illness.

place we give to life, death, and the human body – and in particular, the body that is wounded or slain (12).

There may not be an easy answer for such a line of questioning; or, if we could imagine such a possibility, perhaps it would seem too a bleak future, a hopelessness that blankets our relationship to the self, others, and the spaces these inhabit. Yet isn't the productivity of death over life exactly the case for the true story of Ramón Sampedro, played by Javier Bardem in the 2004 film *Mar adentro* by director Alejandro Amenábar? Sampedro's desire for assisted suicide on the basis of an unlivable life may be read as a move towards loss and proximity to death as generative models for the body politic in a similar way to the films of Recha. Or is the body politic affectively able to fend off this proximity, the specter of death that threatens its gardens of life?

As we have seen, political thought has long been tied to some conceptualization of the body, although often that body functions in absentia and as pure metaphor. Adriana Cavarero pursues this idea in *Stately Bodies*, noting that even while “politics rejects the body from the specific categories on which it founds itself, it also retrieves the body as the shaping metaphor of political order” (vii). She also observes how the body as political metaphor has been reimagined across a variety of lines: from the Greeks, for whom the political order is ascribed to the sphere of the logos even while the body is used to illustrate its form, to Hobbes' organic imagery of health and illness in the body of the state (vii). Such metaphorical seesawing has served to press traits of the one into the other, so that now any metaphor of the body in the state opens up the possibility of political infection and of fresh meanings for the language of disease, frailty, and mortality. The body is thus pressed into politics in an even more direct manner, fraught with possibilities that shape the way we consider the physical self. And as has been observed, Ed

Cohen's *A Body Worth Defending* finds the origins of the modern ideation of immunity as system of bodily defense and resistance in political thought. When Hobbes defines self-defense as a “natural right”, he inaugurates the possibility (and subsequent realization) of the transference of immunity-as-defense from the state’s political body to the biomedical self.

This possibility is made particularly evident in the metaphor of the body politic. At its most basic level, Hobbes’ *The Leviathan* is an attempt to legitimate a system of ultimate sovereign dominance over ‘the people’, who are constructed as such through a common pact of fealty to the sovereign’s rule. The natural order of things is violence and chaos, in which “all men are equal to all others not only in fearing death, but also and especially in giving it” (Cavarero 163). The making of this pact, therefore, confers the right to violence (which, for Hobbes, is the right to use power) on a sovereign who accepts it. For Agamben, this pact creates a state of exception in which “the absolute capacity of the subjects’ bodies to be killed forms the new political body of the West” (*Homo Sacer* 125). In other words, the body’s capacity to be killed is the foundation of the natural equality of men. Judith Butler will critique this notion of ‘natural equality’, noting in *Undoing Gender* how the ontological status of human is conferred differently upon non-normative bodies, sexualities, races, or classes. Like Agamben and others, however, she will highlight the vulnerability of bodies (not their capacity to be killed, exactly, but their capacity to grieve and to become undone by loss) as possible avenues for redefining kinship and personhood.¹⁴ The body itself, and how it functions in contemporary politics, takes on meanings that are only barely alluded to in Hobbes’ discussions of sovereignty. Agamben writes that “this is modern democracy’s strength and, at the same time, its inner contradiction: modern

¹⁴ See Chapter 3, *The Future Dead*, for a more in-depth discussion of the possibilities of mourning and death for contemporary humanism.

democracy does not abolish sacred [or bare] life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict” (124).

Following Agamben (and as seen in *Petit Indi*), bare life thus enters into modern democracy through the importance attached to the body, consequently establishing what is termed the “sovereign subject.” “If it is true that law needs a body in order to be in force, and if one can speak, in this sense, of 'law's desire to have a body,' democracy responds to this desire by compelling law to assume the care of this body” (124-5). It is, in part, what Recha responds to in his films, as well, even in the continuum between animalism, humanity, and geography; in binding the body to bare life, it is rendered exceptionally vulnerable. The skeletons submerged in the man-made reservoirs, the shrapnel tucked into trees, the restriction and destruction of life are moments that capture the vulnerability of the body; rather than resist a proximity to death and corporeal dissolution, Recha’s films seem to embrace it.

It is then intriguing that Javier Bardem was chosen to portray Ramón Sampedro in *Mar adentro*, particularly given how intensely Bardem has been embraced as a model of normative male sexuality and, along with it, the perceived invulnerability of masculinity. Sampedro’s story is a familiar one to Spanish audiences: as a young man, he was involved in an accident that left him quadriplegic, only able to move his head. Refusing to recognize his paralytic state as a worthwhile life, Sampedro fought for the right to assisted suicide for over 29 years through a variety of legal venues (the regional courts of Galicia, the high court of Spain, the European Commission for Human Rights) and was denied. In 1998, he devised a method that sidestepped the ‘criminality’ of his actions by dividing the administration of cyanide through a variety of small steps done by different people. In this way, no one person was responsible for any lethal

act in and of itself. Ramón's case drew national and international attention, and at the center of it was the perception of his physicality and his (in)ability to move through the world.

It has been remarked upon many times, including by the film's director, Alejandro Amenábar, that “the casting of Bardem to play a man that renounces his body, his physique, of a different age and tetraplegic, could seem a complete mistake. Everything was against him” (qtd in Fouz-Hernández 99). Highlighting the vulnerability of this particular body, which has been so projected onto a representation of normative Spanish masculinity, is thus an important move in *Mar adentro*. The failure of the individual man to fulfill any of the sexual, physical, economic or political roles that define modern masculinity marks a deficiency in his masculinity, a loss of some mythical “true manhood” that is at once socially constructed and naturalized as an essential trait of the male body. In *Live Flesh: The Male Body in Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Alfredo Martínez-Expósito make a similar claim: that “the conflation of different levels of manhood with different levels of body functionality generates the idea that the diseased male is, somehow, less male—that his masculinity has been diminished” (88).

That the conceptualization of the ideal health of the physical body (and the disfigurement of such) responds to and interacts with the metaphor of the body politic is clear. In the appropriation of Javier Bardem's body as a screen onto which contemporary Spanish masculinity is projected, exemplified, and naturalized, we find something akin to the sovereign's body politic made flesh. Even Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito, consciously examining the variant male bodies of the Spanish screen, find themselves falling into this: not only does the eroticized image of Javier Bardem provide the cover of *Live Flesh*, the book's title itself references his 1997 film with Pedro Almodóvar. In this way their study of “the male body in contemporary Spanish

cinema” is, figuratively and literally, sandwiched between referents to Bardem as *the* exemplary Spanish body; his electrifying flesh seemingly converted into a topographic space that houses national symbols of masculinity, health and illness, and above all, life.

To be clear: if the idea of Javier Bardem’s body occupies a metaphorical space akin to the body politic, the end result of what we may term a “Bardem Politic” may look nothing like Hobbes’ original formulation. I do not wish (or need) to make the political claim to sovereignty on behalf of Javier Bardem or his body; its mediated representation will not neatly match the complexities nor bear the same political weight of the sovereign, nor is it expected to. Nevertheless, somewhere between the embodied physicality of the actor and the cluster of characters and roles that he incarnates, a doubling occurs and something like a body politic is formed out of the multiple onscreen lives he inhabits. It is in this multiplicity, in the characters that accumulate around the *idea* of Javier Bardem, that similarities may be found and take flesh.

One critical difference immediately emerges between the body politic of the sovereign and the mediated image of Javier Bardem’s body politic in contemporary Spain. Hobbes focuses on the metaphor of the body in the state (the “Commonwealth,” to use his terminology); this state is given a metaphysical body that the sovereign embodies. Employing the body as metaphor for the state apparatus renders the latter susceptible to a naturalizing discourse of illness, what Adriana Cavarero terms a “political pathology” (107). Such a pathologization establishes the possibility for a host of metaphorical turns organized around the health and wellness of the body politic—the Commonwealth might contract a fatal disease from a too-promiscuous proximity to other political systems, or its citizens (its parts) may be weakened in a way that affects the entire political body. Nevertheless, the reality of the physical body is kept at bay by projecting an *idea* of the body onto the figuring of the state. This is most clear (and wildly complex) in considering

death—an impossibility, infinitely displaced, yet also a continuity, the death of one monarch usually balanced with the ‘birth’ (literal or figurative) of the successor. The death of the king is also his birth, the body politic survives and is continually replicated within a new physicality. The formulas appear as paradoxically aphoristic: “The King is Dead, Long Live the King!” or “The King Never Dies.”¹⁵

A “Bardem Politic,” an admittedly playful phrase I employ to mark a nationalized politicality with which certain bodies¹⁶ may be imbued, will not function in the same way. If the Hobbesian notion of the body politic finds the metaphorized body in the state, the filmic representation of Bardem sees the state in the body.¹⁷ The state is consequently the metaphor that is projected onto the physicality of the body, so that the fluctuations in health and well-being across a series of films (for example) may be invested with a political import for contemporary Spain. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this is clearly the case for the co-opted and resignified image of Franco in *Tras el cristal*, but the crucial difference is that Javier Bardem incarnates a continuum of bodies that over time have arguably come to signify a more democratic ideal of modern Spain.

In a Bardem Politic, lastly, illness emerges as a capacity for political and legal meaning in the representation of the body. In finding the state within the body’s borders, rather than finding the body in the image of the state, we return to the images of internal, nighttime kingdoms. The landscapes of the body, those shaded cliffs and gardens hosted within its confines, play host to

¹⁵ For a detailed account of death and birth of the sovereign, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.

¹⁶ And which bodies, and who decides? If the mass mediation of the body is taken to be the indicator of its potential for being interpellated as a contemporary body politic, it follows that this must be an ordinary citizen who is exceptionalized and endowed with an extraordinary nationalism. Javier Bardem is neither the first nor the last of these figures—Antonio Banderas, José Luis López Vázquez, Pénélope Cruz, and Sara Montiel all spring to mind as modern incarnations of a body politic that emerges from the specific medium of film.

¹⁷ Agamben’s claim is repeated here: bare life has been shattered and doled out to bodies of its citizens, constituting the modern democratic state.

national metaphors. Of course, for Hobbes “nothing can be immortall which mortals make; yet, if men had the use of reason they pretend to, their Common-wealths might be secured, at least, from perishing by internall diseases” (363), and it is clear that the story of life and death for the political system will not be so firmly attached to the mandates of the flesh. But in a Bardem Politic, if such a thing can be posited, the history of the state is written into the tissue and sinew of the body, its corporeality and flesh telling a story that is altogether unique.

The uniqueness of the story is, paradoxically, also its claim to a universal humanity, as the opening scenes of *Mar adentro* make clear. The film opens with a black screen and a female voice telling its audience to “Relax. You’re feeling calmer and calmer.” There are sounds of deep breathing in the blackness. The spectator finds him or herself addressed as an individual, even while becoming part of the larger, unified body of the audience. The sound of one breath drowns out each individual audience member’s breathing in this communal process. “Now, imagine a movie screen opening before you,” whispers the voice. A small window appears in the black, slowly becoming enlarged, its blurry features eventually distinguishing themselves as a beach. The breathing overlaps with the sound of waves, and is finally taken over entirely. The camera’s gaze, the gaze of the interpellated spectator, takes stock of its surroundings. Thus the address to the unseen character who is beckoned to enter the scene is overlaid with an appeal to a larger body of spectators, those in the theater or at home, who share in this communal body. The voice exhorts us/me to imagine a place where we/I can be at utter peace. “Now...you are there.”

The jouissance of the scene is broken when this imagined communal body actually appears in the shot, flickering on the edges of the screen. It is an incomplete body, sliced and dismembered by the camera’s eye—disembodied legs and feet in the waves, a shadow in the sand, a hand held up in the sun—and as such, it prefigures the rupture of the normative cinematic

body, an ominous sign further emphasized by the low rumbling of a storm mingling with the crash of the waves. In this the spectator is returned to his/her own body, the one that does not exist onscreen, the one that is not visually represented here. The voice makes one more attempt: “The sensation of peace is inf—“, but the scene breaks, the beach flashes into a rainstorm and a window appears, further dividing the experience of nature from the flesh of the body. The infinite promise of peace is thereby interrupted, infinitely delayed by the reality of the body-as-flesh, which is now attended to by a caretaker onscreen. In this manner the film has made claims toward the supposedly universal sensations of tactility and corporeal sensitivity and abruptly crippled them. What happens in this disabled experience of the communal body, promised as whole and mobile yet abruptly fractured? It is a similar question to one that Perriam obliquely addresses in his analysis of Javier Bardem’s masculinity: can the politicized and nationalized body do more than function as exemplary normativity?

Certainly, the Spanish audience would have been intimately aware of the film’s story and outcome as they entered the cinema, thus shaping this corporeal encounter. As Paul Julian Smith writes in *Spanish Screen Fictions*, “Sampedro’s history remains well known in Spain and his moving last will and testament is still posted on a Spanish right-to-die website... Sampedro’s final statement and death from cyanide were filmed and the videotape (which had been sent to a pro-euthanasia society) were broadcast on Spanish television” (106). The experience of the opening scene has dual functions, then; it overlays and negotiates the split between the specific (and culturally valorized) bodies of Sampedro/Bardem in familiar terms for a Spanish public even as it disturbs a perception of common “ability” in light of disability. The filtering of this narrative through television and film is emphasized by the opening scenes, which consciously

mediate the spectator's experience with nature while underscoring and rupturing the taken for granted abilities of touch and uninhibited sight.

It will be a full five minutes into the film, following the introduction of the vast majority of the supporting cast, before Sampedro's body is fully revealed. It is only one minute later, around the six minute mark, that death enters the film. Julia, who has come from Cataluña to work pro-bono on Ramón's court case (and who serves as Ramón's explicit double throughout the film thanks to her own degenerative disease), brings death to bear with the question: "Why choose death?"¹⁸ The sequencing is clear. After calling forth an imagined communal body, able and in movement, the film proceeds to break it down, disable and still its movement through the body of Ramón Sampedro. The introduction of Ramón brings loss, death, and paralysis to the conceptualized body politic—so politicized through adherence to self-defense and immunity, politicized in the opening scenes as *a* body and *every*-body, and politicized through its incarnation of not just *any*-body but *the* body, the one that is read in the present day most explicitly as Spain's masculinity personified, Javier Bardem.

What Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito term the "fleshiness" of the cinema of Alejandro Amenábar is also important in this big reveal of Bardem's stilled body. It is a word they leave undefined, but one which presumably references a certain attention dedicated to the mechanics of the body, in which the flesh is made more apparent as it is mediated and fully revealed in its workings and failures. In this emphasis, they are able to highlight the use of illness, disfigurement, and disability in Amenábar's films, as well as the peripheral ills attached: the make-up sessions of *Abre los ojos* [Open Your Eyes] that physically wounded the principal

¹⁸Here the subtitles betray themselves. Julia has actually asked Ramón "¿Por qué morir?" which might be translated as "Why death?" or, if stretching it, as "Why die?" The introduction of *choice* into the matter, a freedom in choosing between two or more possibilities, is something that the film's logic would seem to critique. Could this reveal a discontinuity in cultural ways of considering death, or a simple glitch in translation?

actor, or the director's own nervous tics that leave his hands covered in sores, to name only two (98-99). What is curious about this example, however, is how *Mar adentro* resists its fleshiness; or, at the very least, how it spends so much effort on hiding and reducing that fleshy quality. Even Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito point out the techniques used to “cancel out the physical” (100) in Javier Bardem as Sampedro: a harness that forced him to arch his back and tuck in his shoulders, a special bed that hid part of his body, and the digital reduction of his shoulders, arms and legs in other scenes (100). Of course, any attention to reducing the ‘flesh of the film’ is an attention to the flesh itself, if only in absentia.

The film's internal dialogue reflects the cancellation of the flesh and its approach to death and loss. In response to Julia's questioning about his insistence on death and whether anyone will eventually help him, Ramón gets his first big speech¹⁹: “It's really no big deal. Death has always been with us and always will be. It catches up with all of us, everyone. It's part of us. So why are they shocked because I choose to die,²⁰ as if it were contagious?” *Mar adentro* spends its first few moments averting its gaze from the disabled body and death, skirting the inevitable issue in order to relay spectatorship into identification, but then it makes Ramón's end game perfectly clear—to cast off the sufferings of the flesh (or here, its numbing) for the release of death. The dramatic irony of this scene is provided by the fact that Julia, on the basis of the degenerative disease she suffers from, will eventually (fleetingly) become that someone who will help Ramón, joining his cause and promising him a spectacularly utopian double suicide, only to renege on the deal; the irony is compounded by the fact that much later, in a deleted scene, Julia's husband

¹⁹He gets a lot of speeches, eventually, in an extraordinary display of what Paul Julian Smith will call the “private emotions of TV melodrama” (105). Smith also notes the film's less-than-favorable reception in English-language countries, wherein critics seem largely to attack the film's reliance on melodrama.

²⁰As in the earlier quote in translation, the concept of choice is raised over a *desire* for death in the translation of the subtitles; in this moment, Ramón has actually said “...porque *quiero* morir [because I *want* to die]”.

uses Ramón's same logic to convince her *not* to kill herself. If death comes to everyone, he'll say, it is because it is a process, a natural part of life, and we must weather it accordingly.²¹

Yet not all of the flesh is completely cancelled out. Certainly, Ramón's insistence on not using a wheelchair (and thus refusing "scraps" of the freedom he lost) effectively reduces him to nothing but a talking head, the body muted. In this reduced physicality, it is unsurprising that he insists on rational thinking (head) over emotional, passionate appeals (the heart). Early in the film, his brother, an embodiment of brute physicality over both reasoning and emotion, emphatically denounces Ramón's "rational" decision to kill himself. In another scene, when Julia records an interview with him, she attempts to calm him by saying "It's easy, just answer with your heart." He immediately quips: "You mean my head." And when his nephew asks to switch the radio off in order to watch the soccer game on television, he demands a logical reasoning to persuade him.²² His continued reliance on rationality above other modes of response, even at the expense of other powerful persuasive tactics (like those that the film itself paradoxically employs in bursts of melodrama), attempts to reground and recoup what flesh is left to him.

In recurring to the metaphor of the head as the site of rationality, and in his embodiment as *all* head²³, Ramón inadvertently incarnates the symbols of sovereign power and the body

²¹It would be interesting to consider the repurposing of this argument and the way it echoes Sara Ahmed's critique of Judith Butler in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), in which Ahmed advocates the distinction between bearable and unbearable lives, rather than what for her is the simplistic divide between the livable and unlivable life (Butler's formulation). The split (seen in the film between Ramón and the counterargument of Julia's husband) seems to ask whether life is a compendium of suffering that, in weathering, creates life itself—or whether this suffering is the limit of life's livability, the marker that distinguishes the "good life" from the "bad".

²²Although it's important to note that here, at least, he gives in to the demands of the heart. When his nephew Javier comically answers, "Uh, the Deportivo [local team] is playing...?", Ramón concedes this 'logical' petition with a smile.

²³This is contrast to his antithetical opposite, the paraplegic Father Francisco de Galdar, who is *all* *mouth*, and following the metaphor, full of hot air. As Ramón's sister-in-law Manuela defiantly tells the priest: "Usted tiene la boca muy grande [Sir, you have a big mouth]."

politic. Cavarero remarks how the body politic “models a political order divided into different parts and functions that are the members or organs of the community...conceived as a collective body, a supraindividual organically and internally divided whole and not the mere sum of the individuals composing it...” (99), which harkens to the film’s opening techniques of establishing what I have referred to as the communal, mediated body. This idea of the body politic, nonetheless, places prime importance on the head, which in turn claims supremacy over the other body parts despite its continued reliance on these. As such, when Hobbes writes in *Leviathan* that “Of things held in propriety, those that are dearest to a man are his own life & limbs” (55) and Cohen responds by noting that this “locates the person in a body constituted as its own property—that is, in a body ‘owned’ by the ‘the self’” (125), we see the beginnings of Ramón’s rationalized discourse of the body.

When he has finally received the coveted request for an audience with the regional courts of Galicia, Ramón’s lawyer pleads on behalf of that reason:

In a country that claims to be secular, which recognizes private property and whose constitution protects the right to not be tortured or degraded, you’d assume that someone who feels degraded by his condition, as does Ramón Sampedro, should control his own life. In fact, people who attempt suicide and fail are never subsequently prosecuted. However, when the help of another person is needed to die with dignity, the government interferes and tramples a man’s right to decide for himself. This act is clearly based on a metaphysical belief..., that is, a religious belief... I request a legal response, but above all, a rational, a human [humane] one.

The equation of reason with humanity (where to be human means to be rational, and vice versa) represents the film's attempts to align the body as property with a larger appeal to concepts of humanity, dignity, and loss. It is an interesting twist to self-defense on the basis of the care of the self. Ramón, as 'owner' of himself (his body), "relates to [himself] from the appropriative violence of others" (Cohen 55), which is the status quo for a great deal of political theory's conceptualization of what "self defense" entails. Yet rather than as physical defense from the harms of others, Ramón invokes defense as the ability to stave off and eradicate the unlivable, bad life, and merges the 'harm' that others can do with these attempts to 'save' him, cure him, or "give him the will to live" (a phrase that is used repeatedly throughout the film). That is to say, any attempt to offer him the "scraps of freedom" of a motorized wheelchair or assisted living is recalibrated as an outside violence, the encroachment of another into Ramón's personalized corporeality. Or perhaps what is resisted is the external refusal of Sampedro's agency, the ability to 'move' his immobile body in the way that he would see fit—in this case, to send it on its journey towards death. When, following the logic of self-defense, immunity, and the body politic, "to be a person means, first and foremost, to have a body, where the 'being' of the person resides (literally) in the 'having' of the body" (Cohen 55), it becomes increasingly obvious that it is the corporeal experience of a purportedly universal humanity that is denied Ramón.

The lack of this allegedly universal experience, this embodiment, has every connection to the perception and embodiment of his masculinity. The attempt to 'cancel' the physicality of Javier Bardem has several immediate effects. The first allows us to note that reducing Bardem's body is, clearly, an impossible task, regardless of the digital effects and camera tricks used. In Ramón's bodily lack, Bardem's hidden body is instead made more apparent; the spectator knows it is there, perceives the shift and *because* of that is able to recognize Ramón's disembodiment as

affective loss. That is to say that the disabling of Bardem's physicality highlights the lack of such in Ramón, which in turn has the potential to draw attention to the digital effects used to reduce Bardem's body. The responses to the creation of the artificial and hybridized body of Ramón (a body that is read as the lack of Bardem) may vary: as dismissal, a distancing from the image of Sampedro in its artificiality, or as a means to access the wholly unfathomable loss of the body, through which the loss of Bardem's body is filtered. The use of Bardem's head as Ramón's avatar may similarly lend a certain complex symbolic weight that cannot be casually dismissed, that is backed up by the filmography of the actor and the roles he has inhabited. I am not suggesting that the audience member sees Bardem's face in Ramón and superimposes it with that of the hypermasculine Raúl from Bigas Luna's *Jamón Jamón*, but that the residue of this character and knowledge of Bardem's past—for a Spanish audience—may serve to highlight the disembodied disability of Ramón.

Finally, the doubling of Ramón with Julia plays on the status of his masculinity and its eventual effacement in disability. Early on he reveals to Julia that one of the reasons he wants to die is because he can no longer have sex, revealing how important tactility is for him and explaining its recurring symbolism in the film. When Julia is looking through his photos, the film becomes a slideshow of Ramón's life, filling the screen with women of all ethnicities and types. This international cast of women is reduced slowly to the three that rotate around him, embodying distinct modes of desire: Manuela, who takes the place of his deceased mother; Julia, whose physicality he is most interested in, for it exceeds the sexual and becomes his mirror image in imperfection; and Rosa, who reveals herself as the most equipped to heal and love him, at least in that these things mean assist him towards death.

Despite Rosa's importance in his death (and his claim that "The person who loves me will be the one who helps me die"), she is ultimately given less screen time and in fact disappears once Ramón dies. This is at least in part for legal reasons, as the statute of limitations for assisting Ramón in his death had yet to run out by the film's release, and the director and his crew were very careful to not provide any evidence or insinuations that would allow lawmakers to reopen the case against Ramona Maneiro, Rosa's real-life counterpart.²⁴ But it is also because Julia—not Rosa—has been clearly written as Ramón's perfect match. She appears well before Ramón, opening and closing the film with her proximity to the sea as a representation of the life that Ramón either has no access to (qualified life, a mobile body) or wants no part of (the pathos of the degenerations of disease and disability, her memory loss and slow descent into death). Smith writes of a key montage sequence that "shows couples eating or making love, but ends with Julia reclining on a plane. Amenábar cuts to Ramón in the same position on his pillow, the graphic match clearly implying that the two characters are to be identified with each other" (112). He concludes by claiming that "Julia is also his other self, his equal in condemnation to living death" (112).

Their love and understanding for the predicament of the other creates a symbiotic relationship whose fulfillment is to be infinitely delayed (and here, we must remember the film's opening, those sensations of pleasure that are interrupted, unfulfilled, infinitely negated). Julia makes clear why she has accepted the job, which is "more than just a job" to her; later it is revealed that Ramón has likewise accepted her on the basis of her disease. As they begin to connect on the basis of disease and disability, their relationship marked by it (if not constituted entirely in its shadow), the impossibility of their situation becomes more apparent. After Julia's

²⁴In 2005, Maneiro confessed on a television talk show that she had handed the cyanide to Sampedro and had videotaped his death (Smith 106).

collapse in Ramón's home, which he hears but is unable to physically attend to (a rewriting of an event that occurred with the real Sampedro's mother), she recounts her situation to another character: "One day, it's my legs. But another, I could go blind. And perhaps never recover. I've been lucky so far. But then, I have another stroke, and another, and another and nobody can prepare you for them. Nobody knows what will be left of you, if anything... I just can't take it anymore." By the time she concludes the forceful statement, "This isn't life," her commitment to death is seemingly fixed. From there, she feverishly proposes to offer Ramón his death alongside hers upon the publishing of his book of poems, the fruit of their impossible relationship. While awaiting the book in Galicia, Ramón sends her a letter, content in the promise of the future: "And you'll appear, Julia, my Juliet. It will be the sweetest death imaginable. Love shared in its purest form. And balance will be restored, finally, balance." Even as he conjures Romeo and Juliet, playing on the Ramón and Julia of their names and their shared deaths, he prefigures the tragedy of their story. And, like Romeo, he dismisses the Rosalind/Rosa as too impossibly dissimilar to him. Unlike Shakespeare's tale, though, Rosa is able to provide the love he seeks in the moment he needs it, rather than the ill-timing and perpetual deferment of Julia's promise.

Julia is unable to bridge the gap, to cross her fear and to meet Ramón in his desire for death, a fact made apparent in their first meeting. As her plaintive "Why death?" still hangs in the air, he looks down at their hands, positioned close to each other. His hand is curled, a loose fist. Hers is slightly open, her fingers vaguely extended but unmoving. "Think about this," he says, "You're sitting there three feet away. And what are three feet? An insignificant distance for any human being. But for me, those three feet that keep me from reaching you... touching you... is an impossible journey." The significance of the impossible journey will reappear in various fantasy sequences, and in her final refusal to accompany him in death. The first, much-discussed

fantasy flight over the hills of Galicia to the operatic swirls of “Nessun Dorma”, finds Ramón alighting behind a limp-less Julia on the beach, where he believes she is taking a stroll. As the sun sets in the background, the camera switches from the smooth steadicam of the helicopter and crane shots to a handheld shakiness, capturing the couple’s embrace and kisses. Of this moment, Amenábar says in the film’s commentary that he asked himself what Ramón’s greatest wish would be: the answer is the tactility of the moment, the return to love and the sensation of feeling for someone to whom this had been forever lost, for whom “it is as impossible...to feel and connect in this way as it is for us to fly”, he concludes.

Thus this journey twins around that of the Recha brothers, a fantastic trip through the (home)land that is at once rooted in reality and forever fantastical. The hills we soar over in first-person point of view with/as Ramón are the actual hills behind the real Sampedro’s house, even though we are afforded a view of them that Sampedro never had. Likewise, the landscape that the brothers move through is their home, yet their distance to it is revealed in its mediation, their disconnect with its history made transparent. Even still, something is accomplished, the crossing from one land to another finally made. By the time Recha ends *Dies d’agost* we have been told that he has “all the information he needs” to complete his story of Barnils, which in turn becomes the film we watch; or Sampedro, who completes his journey towards death, his only real bride, with the aid of the sets of “manos amigas [friendly hands]” who weigh and administer the cyanide in his water. What Amenábar calls “un viaje al descanso [a trip towards rest]” is echoed in *Dies d’agost*, the road trip that is taken to clear Marc’s head and remove the obstacles to remembering and speaking of the past.

And this returns us to animalism, to the lives that are distinguished as less than others, unlivable, unbearable. In attempting to explain what some critics have termed his preoccupation

with death, Amenábar excuses himself by telling a story of a pet rabbit he had as a child. When the animal died, he asked a priest where the rabbit went, if it was in Heaven or Hell. The priest responded by saying that the animal didn't go to either place, that it didn't go anywhere at all. In that moment, according to the director, he began to reassess the meaning of death. What could death really mean, when what we love does not wait for us there? What is allowed to cross that divide, and in what capacity? It is never just the meaning of death that is reconfigured in such a moment, but what life entails as well; in this mortal menagerie of birds and foxes, rabbits and little boys, what is constituted as *life* is reevaluated. In reimaging the figure of death and the body, something both Recha and Amenábar work towards, they reshape the body politic (or, in another way, document its contemporary shape). Casting this body politic, the shape of a modern Spain, from the shadows of darkness and sunset, illness and health, we find new political ventures, new political potential imbued in the proximity of life with life, the body in the land, and the disability that enables.

Chapter 2 Viral Violence

We are often drawn to think of violence as a destructive force: a limb that breaks, a skin torn, a bruising blow. When we make a move to conceptualize violence, it is often to limit it to its most visible effects—the physical impact of bodies aggressively meeting in a shared space. But if the impulse is to think of acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, and international conflict as the most “obvious signals of violence”, as Slavoj Žižek writes in *Violence*, we must instead “learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1). While recognizing the destructive break of the limb or the torn skin as violence’s most visible acts, I want to “step back” from these, as Žižek implores, taking into account “the background which generates such outbursts” (1) and the ways that violence is sustained even by efforts to fight it, even in the most seemingly peaceful of actions.

What is meant by *violence*? It seems fairly easy to conjure images of physical harm and aggressive unrest, but these images in turn flatten the definition of violence into an absolute that is only measured in damages. I want to resist the pull of these obvious signs of violence, which are examples of what Žižek terms “subjective violence”, in order to consider a violence that is much more complex and nuanced. The fact is, violence isn’t only a physical mark or an angry shout—it is used to create law, it props up sexual dominance and communal relationships, it is created by and sustained in language itself. This chapter turns to these types of violence and in instances where they make contact with “sick” bodies. In so doing I want to highlight affective transmission and contagion as examples of the creational and productive powers that violence holds. In considering violence as viral contagion, I hold it to be an infinitely self-replicating condition, a mode of being that surges within us as a capacity for harm. Can we inherit violence,

can it spread? Does violence move through bodies and minds like a germ, transmitted through actions, reactions, and day-to-day mundanities? This chapter understands violence through that virulence; that is, in casual hostility and infectiousness as well as its spread, its continual self-replication.

To that end, Žižek is useful for framing a more nuanced type of violence than that which is solely physical. After claiming subjective violence as the realm of the physical and most visible, he delineates two other forms that he will call examples of ‘objective’ violence:

a ‘symbolic’ violence embodied in language and its forms... This violence is not only at work in the obvious—and extensively studied—cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. Second, there is what I call ‘systemic’ violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. (2)

To expand the purview of violence in this way means that we must recognize how violence is not only inherent in our language, but that it upholds the usage of language itself; and further, that violence is not only part of the world, but that it sustains the day-to-day functioning of our so-called peaceful social systems. When I claim violence to have a viral component, it is in order to stress that point, and to attempt to push against a way of thinking that holds the most visible forms of violence to be the *only* types of violence.

This chapter focuses on two films of one of Spain’s most intriguing contemporary auteurs, Agustí Villaronga. Although the majority of his cinematic production is preoccupied with death and dead bodies, the supernatural, and the direct ways that the historical affects the

contemporary, these two films in particular can be read as something like treatises on viral violence: *Tras el cristal* (*In a Glass Cage*, 1987) and *El mar* (*The Sea*, 2000). Distanced in time, production costs, and perceived quality, they possess several unifying similarities: the use of children or adolescents as principal characters, the employment of symbolic illnesses that are both socially created and physiologically bound, and a geographical and temporal restriction to immediate post-Civil War Spain—or in the case of *Tras el cristal*, an unspecified, ambiguous time and place that has clear contextual links to Spain and its Civil War.²⁵ I argue that Villaronga's articulation of violence expresses a specific political, erotic, and cultural critique of contemporary Spanish society, and that it is based on a consideration of violence as much more than the merely physical. By deploying the infected/infectious nature of a violence that stems from the Spanish Civil War, Villaronga indicts the cultural beliefs, practices, and events of the allegedly peaceful and democratic present.

To understand violence virally is to see it as a germ, in all those myriad connotations, and to contextualize its movements in a larger body politic. If violence is viral, it must spread as a virus does, as a transmission between bodies, and imply a history and chronology that could be infinitely traced backwards and forwards. This is not to be read as a biological or genetic component to violence; that is, I am not positing a specifically Spanish pathology or propensity for violence but attempting to find an apt descriptor to trace the movements of violence through a particular time, space, and sociocultural body. In doing so, I am highlighting a sort of germ theory, which has roots in Foucauldian genealogy and Sarah Ahmed's discussion of the

²⁵ Undoubtedly, a more extensive look at virulence and violence in Villaronga's films could stretch throughout his entire filmography. To cite just two examples: *Pa negre* (2010), based on Emili Teixidor's novel of the stultifying years of hunger and violence in postwar Spain as seen by a child, and *99.9* (2002), a supernatural thriller in which the haunting ghosts of the violent past seek blind revenge, in which the violence of the past is recycled into the present and future.

transmission of affect. In the consideration of the movements of violence, this chapter argues for a refocusing of our general understanding of violence through the examples of its virulence.²⁶

The claim of a virulent violence does not look to reify its status as purely negative effect but to highlight its productive and creational capabilities. Undoubtedly, we *are* drawn to envision violence in its destructivity for a variety of social and cultural forces and strictures, and in very powerful ways. Even now in my efforts to draw out the natalist capabilities of violence²⁷ I find myself sliding into the language of damages, dead-ends, and wrongs, a language that firmly casts violence as a wholly (and only) negative force. It is clear that such a move obviously limits understanding of the complexities of violence's viral nature. The challenge is therefore to think beyond the bounded impulses to which we have contained violence and to allow its originating traits a place in our understanding of the ways violences work in and through institutions, people, and events.

I thus make a modest proposal that will necessarily be unraveled slowly and rewoven into something like a weak ontology²⁸: that violence is viral, that it is at least transmitted relationally, discursively, ontologically, politically and sexually, and that the films of Agustí Villaronga are a clear enunciation of this. The fact is, viral violence *is* violence; if I have chosen to reformulate its metaphors of illness it is because, amongst the reasons discussed above, violence is so often considered in zero-sum terms and not as a germinal possibility. Even when it must be

²⁶ Here I bend “virulence” only slightly. Most commonly used to suggest hostility, severity, or harm, it is also used in medical discourse to denote a pathogen’s “highly infective” state. Making a claim for the virulence of violence, then, is more than wordplay; it highlights both its destructive and infective capacities, even as the exactness of what ‘destruction’ and ‘infection’ entail are problematized.

²⁷ I loosely employ natalism in the most basic sense that Hannah Arendt gives to it—as an unpredictable generativity, a capacity for action. See *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

²⁸ Stephen White coins this term in *Sustaining Affirmation*, noting that weak ontologies have two major concerns: First, “the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable. Second..., the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life.” (8).

denounced, or even in the very real threat that violence poses for so many, it can be so much more than the bloody boot hurtling towards the rib or the words whispered through a crack in the door. This chapter attempts to acknowledge what lies beneath, behind, and before these moments.

In her study on the director, Pilar Pedraza categorizes the films of Villaronga as a type of “sinister cinema” (15), a denomination that she insists is not to be read as pejorative but as a sign of the director’s preoccupation with horror and violence.²⁹ Although I want to push back on titling it a ‘sinister cinema’, which seems to underscore the finalizing and harmful effects of an ‘evil’ violence, Pedraza is right to highlight the emphasis on suffering and pain in Villaronga’s cinema. Released in 1987, *Tras el cristal* revolves around Klaus, a former Nazi doctor who performed vicious experiments on children during and after World War II and who now lies paralyzed in an iron lung, able to move only his head and kept alive by the constant whirring of the machine. This is one of the film’s titular “glass cages”, a phrase that gives primacy to witnessing and suggests the impossibility of disentangling the self from cycles of violence. When Angelo, one of the survivors of his sexual abuse, reappears to torment him and his family, Klaus helplessly watches this former victim renew his own vicious work. Angelo removes all vestiges of femininity from the family circle: he dispatches the maid, kills Klaus’s wife, and takes the young daughter Rena under his wing as his protégé. It quickly becomes apparent that, far from seeking vengeance, Angelo seeks *to become* Klaus, to reanimate the body trapped behind the glass cage and to relive and renew the crimes of the past. In reading Klaus’s war journals and under the paralyzed gaze of Klaus himself, Angelo ultimately succeeds in this goal. The tortured thus becomes the torturer, aggressor becomes victim, and man becomes child. The ultimate

²⁹ “Si hay que caracterizarle como algo o por algo, nosotros somos partidarios de unir a su arte un adjetivo que emana de él y le hace, creemos, auténtica justicia: siniestro. No en el sentido peyorativo de macabro, sino en el freudiano que se refiere a la inquietante extrañeza, al retorno de lo reprimido” (*Agustí Villaronga*, 15).

transformation leaves Angelo lying in the iron lung, having fully disposed of the no longer necessary paternal figure; in the final scene, Rena straddles the glass of the lung, divested of her blue dress and curls in favor of a boyish suit and slicked-back hair. Angelo becomes Klaus, Rena becomes Angelo, and the cycle of viralized violence continues, unbroken.

Fifteen years later, in the spring of 2000, *El mar* opened in theaters. The film tells the story of Manuel Tur, Andreu Ramallo and Francisca Luna, three children living in the town of Argelús, Mallorca in the beginning moments of the Spanish Civil War. Franco is establishing power throughout the country and purges of antifascist resistance in the form of mass killings are being carried out under cover of night. The three children witness one such group assassination and, caught up in the fervor of this moment, set out to exact revenge on the children of one of the murderers. This desire for retribution essentially becomes a reenactment of the assassination of the men of the village, which is itself a symbolic stand-in for the larger events of the Civil War. In the end, two children are killed. Manuel, remembering this event, will offer up the plea to God: “Lord, this is how we started our lives. This was our first land, our roots, and our first consciousness. Hold back your angry justice. Remember, we were children of war” (*El mar*). The film then flashes forward to years later, as the three now adolescent protagonists are reunited in the sanatorium at Caubet. Manuel and Andreu have contracted tuberculosis and Francisca is one of the nuns who cares for the patients. Manuel, believing the sickness to be a manifestation of his (homo)sexual desires, is tortured by his lust for Andreu. Meanwhile, Andreu has been prostituting himself to the town’s illegal goods trafficker, whom he eventually kills in a moment of rage after having sex with the older man. Now reunited in the sanatorium, Andreu and Manuel begin to reconnect over the memories of their childhood together. As Andreu slowly becomes aware of Manuel’s desire for him, he begins teasing and taunting the other boy in increasingly

explicit ways. This eventually culminates with Manuel's brutal rape. In self-defense Manuel is forced to kill Andreu in a bloody reenactment of the original scenes of wartime violence—another recreation of the Spanish Civil War. In the final scenes Manuel commits suicide in the bathtub, and the movie ends as it began, with his impassioned plea to God for mercy. Francisca prepares the bodies of her childhood friends silently, and when she is finished she removes her habit and leaves the sanatorium.

Both *Tras el cristal* and *El mar* propose the contamination of violence to be patrilineal, passing through the suffering male body in a way that destabilizes its purported impenetrability, and framed as generational inheritance. In this manner, the conceptualization of masculinity within these films (indeed, within the whole of Villaronga's work) and the relationships between their male protagonists becomes central in the infecting flows of violence. R.W. Connell's acclaimed study *Masculinities* explains the link between violence and masculinity by positing that "most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men" (83). In *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu makes a similar claim when he writes that "manliness...is an eminently relational notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of fear of the female, firstly in oneself" (53), and that this fear births a very specific potential for violence. While both are careful not to problematically and uncritically link concepts of masculinity with unmitigated violence, Connell and Bourdieu see the relational structures of male homosocial relationships as ones that necessitate a certain amount of casual violence. Connell also states that, based on the existing societal structure of gender inequality, "it is, overwhelmingly, the dominant gender who hold and use the means of violence" (83). Violence thus becomes "a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles" (83) for Connell, and is synonymous with manliness itself for

Bourdieu (53). In *El mar* this is made apparent in Andreu's efforts to sexually and physically dominate Manuel, who is already younger, weaker, and feminized; it is also clear that when Andreu tattoos his last name onto his chest, it is a sort of self-mortification and a way to reclaim the masculinity of his own feminized, emasculated body. Accordingly, the women in Villaronga's films remain passive spectators, obstacles that disrupt the relationships between men, or part of the systemic violence but not its active participants as carriers of the illness. The two exceptions to this, and rather significant ones, are Rena (*Tras el cristal*) and Sor Francisca (*El mar*); both become imbricated in the violence, but the nature of their femininity means that they must be transformed—Rena sexually, from daughter to son, and Sor Francisca spatially, from within the system to her exit from the boundaries of the convent/film. I will return to these points later on in the more detailed discussions of the films.

Within the correlation of violence and masculinity, it is important to question whether the discourse on masculinities in these films, in emphasizing a “sick” or flawed nature, is not merely reproducing dominant discourses of alternative or “deviant” sexualities. On the contrary, Villaronga is clearly working with societal norms and expectations in order to challenge and highlight complacency and heteronormativity. Even though there is much attention paid to Manuel's sexuality, for example, this emphasis works to underscore the role that religion plays in violence. His pathologic response to his homosexual desires stems from his conceptualization of religion—beliefs that do not seem to be shared by the other characters of the film (Sor Francisca, for instance). Thus, the subversive nature of the film comes in part from its sexualization of the masculine body that resists “perversion”; through the violent penetration of the resisting masculine, Villaronga strikes at the seemingly arbitrary aggressions of war and physical illness.

Infecting Memory

In an interview made for the DVD release of his 1987 film *Tras el cristal* [*In a Glass Cage*], Agustí Villaronga calls the film “the story of what’s forgotten, the story of war.” Although he will characterize the film in other ways—as concerned with the “diversity of poetry of terror”, the “tenderness found in the killer”, and the understanding of love through death—the ambiguities he leaves open with this initial remark are particularly powerful. Who do these stories of the forgotten belong to, and how are they woven into the stories of war? Does war anticipate the forgetting, or does it bring it about? Or is war what’s forgotten, the history that can never be fully attained? These initial remarks by Villaronga also help suggest how *Tras el cristal* situates war and violence within structures of memory, framing violence as the germ of an illness that spreads, infects, and reproduces itself continually. Pain and suffering become processes that are at once cyclical, inherited, and inevitable. Further, in his focus on what is forgotten and what is not, Villaronga is able to underscore the invisible movements of violence as more than physical marks and bloody blows. How does violence help uphold the peaceful democracies of the present, and how have we forgotten about the germic origins of our equality? *Tras el cristal* questions not only the types of memory that are produced in violence, but the way these violent memories infect, paralyze, and obliterate our bodies in ways that may also, paradoxically, hold the promise of new life.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Although she is speaking here of the particularly destructive nature of the pain of torture, a “subjective violence” found in abundance in this film, Scarry will use this idea to point to the

power of pain to both create and destroy human “worlds” – these universes of perception that connote reason, affect, and life. The violence found in pain, Scarry acknowledges, is both productive and destructive, if only in that its most basic form permits the destruction of one subjectivity (that of the torture victim) in the formation of an other (the torturer).

Pain, even as it destroys and creates, engages a cyclical process. The body in pain, the tortured body, is pushed backwards through time—its ever-shrinking “perimeter of pleasure” reduced first from movement, to words (the primal importance of the interrogation), sounds (the cries of the tortured body), and then silence, before being brought brutally back and put through the process again. This is part of what Scarry considers the three steps of torture: “First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person’s body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency” (28). This cyclical process, and the cycles of violence and domination that the process contains and implies, define *Tras el cristal*.

The film opens on an extreme close up of an eye, which stares straight ahead at the spectator. After a few seconds it blinks, and we hear the click of a camera taking a photo as it does so. Immediately the film cuts to a matching close up of the lens of a camera. A blue light to the side grows brighter, showing a tiny black dot in the lens that mirrors the iris of the eye. With these two shots, juxtaposed by rapid cuts and only seconds into the film, Villaronga highlights spectatorship and the mediated gaze, blurring the two. The eye blinks, and it clicks as a camera does; the lens of the camera, in turn, is given a dilated iris that matches the biological eye. This opening is suggestive for a number of possible reasons, not the least because it links

spectatorship to the recording gaze of the camera lens. With this opening, and in what will become part of the film's thematic structure, Villaronga intimates that the things that we see are recorded within us, etched into us and constitutive of who we are to become. The camera, in turn, has the power to watch, to gaze back at what we have done and who we are, and transmit us those images. Over the course of the film, the eye will record violent images as participant and collaborator, and Villaronga will make a case for a community of witnesses who are every bit involved in past violences as the characters on the screen.

In the moments following this sequence, a series of quick jumps shows a man (Klaus) photographing an unconscious boy who hangs from the ceiling. The shots are quick, mutilating images: the man's hands and face as he looks into the viewfinder, dirty feet dangling in open air, dusty and bloody hands bound. It is obvious from Klaus's rapt expression as he photographs the scene that he is not here to help, and that more than likely he has done this to the boy. There is no music in these moments, only what sounds like the slow hiss of gas escaping a vent, or of air being pumped.³⁰ Finally a medium shot emerges to show the entire scene from what is more or less the man's vantage point: a dirty brick cellar bathed in a soft blue light, a naked boy dangling from the ceiling. Klaus moves the camera away from his face. In that moment we hear a click. Everything goes silent as the screen freezes.

The click that we hear, the freezing of the frame as if a photograph is being taken, is clearly divorced from the diegetic act of the man taking photos of the tortured boy. What do we hear in that moment except for the click of our own cameras, the eyes that we use to witness this event? As Villaronga will explicitly stress throughout the film, the witness is at once victim and collaborator. This correlation is something like what Scarry notes when she underscores the

³⁰ This is, no doubt, a dual reference. Knowing that Klaus (the man in this opening scene) was a Nazi physician who experimented on children, this seems to be a sonic citation to the gas chamber killings in Nazi concentration camps while also serving as the precognizant hiss of Klaus's own breath once trapped in the iron lung.

subjectivities of violence, and the creation of the torturer through the tortured body. As we watch the bloody young boy hang from the ceiling, we may recognize his objectified and visible pain but, like Klaus, we watch that body in pain and bear witness to the moment. In our witnessing, even if we sympathize with the suffering body, we acknowledge our own subjectivity as bodies that are *not* in pain.

The filmic mediation of pain coupled with collaborative witnessing is explicitly referenced much later by a minor character in the film, a maid who approaches the now-paralyzed Klaus. As she moves toward him, she laughingly explains: “It’s the machine—it makes me so nervous! It’s like being at the movies.” As Marsha Kinder notes in *Blood Cinema*, “The maid is also the one who explicitly comments on the reflexive analogy between the iron lung and cinema, a remark that positions her as spectator, the Spanish mass audience that will be turned off by this movie and that must therefore be banished from the theater” (194). It is not only her confrontation with the iron lung that produces the maid’s nervousness, but the open visibility of pain and the trace of violence done to the body housed in the iron lung. In her encounter with the immobile body, the maid acknowledges Klaus’s mirrored gaze reflected back at her but refuses it, a placeholder for the imagined spectator who will refuse to participate in the collaborative witnessing of violence. If Villaronga is seeking to establish a community bound in cycles of violence, one in which witnessing is akin to experiencing, the maid is a signal of that spectator who will break the gaze and turn away.

After this opening prologue, the film’s credits further establish a preoccupation with the mediated image in uneasy tones: a grainy photograph of an unknown boy’s face that fades to black, a fade in on the man’s face (recognized as Klaus, who we have seen in the film’s prologue) and then the entire image, the boy and the man holding hands. In this respect,

Villaronga is keen to dismember images—from the bodiless, dangling feet and bound hands of the prologue’s tortured boy to the photograph that reveals its subjects as distinct and distanced from each other, when in fact they occupy the same space. On one level, this seems to hint at once to the on screen paralysis of Klaus’s body while also playing on the notion of the mediated image as partial and incomplete, or perhaps the unknowability of another’s pain and trauma. Indeed, this image of the man and the boy in the photograph withholds its story for the bulk of the film, only menacingly hinting at its truth in this moment. If the audience doubts the nature of the relationship between the two in the photo, the film’s opening scenes (which have shown first-hand the pleasure Klaus takes in sexually abusing and killing a young boy) must lead us to a fairly grim conclusion. More photographs float past—concentration camps, gas chambers, dead and emaciated children (always children) and smiling Nazis. It is a grisly photo album of the past, and it implies Klaus’s connection to the specific, real violence of the Holocaust, while also suggesting the return of the remnants of violence, aftereffects of Klaus’s actions. Past, present, and future are thus tied together by threads of violence.

Villaronga has stated in several interviews that he loosely based the character of Klaus on Gilles de Rais, a 15th century French nobleman and serial killer.³¹ The more evident and immediate referent in the film is the Holocaust, which is made explicit in this moment of the credits and through the use of authentic photographs and documents. Referencing (obliquely and explicitly) these two sites of memory creates a sort of cultural ancestry for the film, which, as viral violence does, goes to great lengths to suggest that this violence is both a inherent predisposition or capacity and a learned one; that humans are violent animals, but that we can learn new ways of being violent. Considering violence as both germ of a sociocultural ill and its

³¹ Reading Bataille’s account of the life of Gilles de Rais reveals several similarities, the most notable of which is the similar ways that children are murdered: asphyxiation, decapitation, genital mutilation, etc. For more, see: Bataille, George. *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*. Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1997.

product speaks to the existence of a structural or systemic violence (as Žižek will call it) that lies underneath the explosions of physical violence. *Tras el cristal* makes clear its violent referents by calling forth Gilles de Rais and Nazi experimentation, but it also subverts these referents by locating them within Spain and having them played out by (ostensibly) Spanish characters. That is to note how it is only contextually suggested that the family is in Spain; they are continually referred to as “the foreigners”, and Klaus’s wife Griselda even talks about her hatred for the country and its people in a letter written to her parents. However, all the characters speak fluent Spanish, are played by Spanish actors, and have names that are recognizable to a Spanish audience, including Klaus’s wife and daughter. The notable exception is of course Klaus, who is played by the German actor Gunter Meisner. Consequently, the family is Spanish, but also not; or, a foreign element that is inherently Spanish. The family’s presence in this place can then be read as a violent interruption to (presumably, Spanish) life, even as they come from Spain itself. This shady genealogy allows for a reading of the film as a sort of allegorical retelling of the post Civil War period, bitter exile and bloodshed still vibrant in the minds and lives of its citizens. In obliquely addressing the wounds of the past, Villaronga marks the present effects and future inevitabilities that these have on Spain; the wounds, psychic ills, and memories produced in the aftereffects of war.

Consequently, the film would have the viewer recognize the ways that violence doesn’t look how we most often imagine—as impact and damages, as bodies colliding in aggression. Instead, it implicates the (Spanish) citizen in the structural formation of violence itself, even within the creation of peace and law and even in modern Spain’s democracy. Žižek writes of the difference between subjective violence and this structural, “objective” kind: “Subjective violence...is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things. However, objective

violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence” (2).

How does this systemic violence emerge? Years after the opening prologue, a boy named Angelo works his way into Klaus’s household and reveals himself to be a surviving victim of the latter’s abuse (as we are to assume, Angelo is one of many victims but the only surviving one). He arrives in a violent outburst, breaking in and locking himself in the room alone with Klaus. As the maid hysterically screams to Klaus’s wife Griselda: “He came in like the devil himself!” He uses his knowledge of Klaus’s past to blackmail his way into a position as a nurse, over time eliminating everyone but Klaus and his daughter Rena, and killing Griselda and dismissing the maid in the process.

Before he has begun to pare down the household, however, he makes explicit his plans to Klaus. Shortly after his hiring, he sneaks into Klaus’s room and produces the older man’s Nazi war journal, which details torturous medical experiments on children through photographs, drawings, and scribbled notes (another example of the film’s insistence on the violence of the mediated image). Reading the journal aloud to the paralyzed Klaus, who moans in discomfort, makes Angelo begin to cry—a reaction initially perceived as pain, but soon revealed to be an odd sort of pleasure. He reads Klaus’s words: “Horror, like sin, can become fascinating.” As he continues to read, dual meanings of this phrase begin to emerge, and it is at once a description of Klaus’s initiation into serialized killing and Angelo’s fascination with it. Klaus’s voice is fractured in two—in fact, here it is made more evident than ever that he can no longer speak in the same way, that he must rely on the air that the iron lung pumps into him. The journal, the

voice of Klaus from another age, speaks of his dawning fascination with the killings; but Angelo speaks these words, too, echoing the meanings ascribed by Klaus and adding his own emphasis. So it is no longer only the voice of Klaus who says something like “the horrors *I have committed* are becoming fascinating” but Angelo as well, superimposed over this moment: “the horrors *done to me, those that I witnessed, and those that I may now commit* are becoming fascinating.” When Klaus admits that he has never told anyone about his past and his roles as concentration camp doctor or serial killer of children, Angelo quickly replies: “Wouldn’t you like to do it again?... I could do it for you. I’m not in a glass cage. I could be what you used to be. I *like* what you were.” What Klaus was, in contrast with what he now is, reveals a shift in the power dynamic between the former torturer and his victim. Klaus feebly attempts to stop Angelo, who is now quoting the war journal from memory, by reminding Angelo that he is no longer a child. In return, Angelo answers: “No, *you’re* the child now.”

As this scene makes most explicit, violence is posited not as a finite act but as an infinitely-replicating illness, a virus that can be passed down through “generations” as a hereditary trait or mutating gene. The focus on the boys that Klaus has killed, Angelo’s horrific childhood, and the psychic scarring of Klaus’s daughter Rena suggests that this viral violence, whatever its incarnation, is formative—that it takes root, that it damages, and that it will always contain the promise of a future violence. By referencing World War II in Klaus’s Nazi crimes, the loss of innocence, and the terrible events in war that are forgotten or pushed, *Tras el cristal* maps out a specific connection to the Spanish Civil War, the 30 years of dictatorship that followed, and the transition to democracy. To be clear, it calls forth the dictatorship and the transition to democracy by employing its symbols out of time and space. That is, by not geographically locating itself in Spain and only temporally placing itself in some period after

World War II, the film is able to allude to particular local traumas while also making a larger claim for the cyclical flows of violence through time and bodies. Klaus's convalescence and disabling make overt references to Franco, whose death of natural causes was far less violent than the life he lived or the legacy he left behind. Writing of the imprints left by Franco's body in *Cultura Herida [Wound Culture]*, Cristina Moreiras Menor says:

The body of the dictator resisted death. His long agonizing, during which Franco's body clung to life only through its connection to breathing machines and the like, is exactly what creates this silence. Not his death, not his life, but the transformation of this body (loaded with tremendous symbolic and affective meanings for the body of the nation) into a ghostly trace, a there but already gone, that continually imposes, in its ghostliness, the particular structures of fantasy that still dominate the cultural imaginary of the country. (56)

This phantasmatic body is clearly reflected in Klaus's slow decay. As his wife Griselda remarks, he hardly speaks after the accident and when he does, it is tortured and slow. The omnipresent whirring of the iron lung fills the house and forces breath into Klaus's inert body, an oppressive and constant soundtrack to the film. Even in paralysis Klaus's presence is felt throughout the house.

Griselda is slowly revealed to be the character most affected by this oppressive presence. In an explosion with Klaus early on in the film, she leans over his iron lung and angrily tells him: "I'm sick and tired of this life—isolated here, never seeing anyone, alone. And for you! All for you. I can't stand it!" She has come to tell him that she wants to fire Angelo, whose blatant lack of nursing skills causes her to mistrust his intentions and doubt her husband's reasons for wanting the younger man to stay. When Klaus denies Griselda the right to fire Angelo, he does

so as the head of the household, and literally so—just a head. She is positioned over him, clutching at the iron lung and leaning into his face. When the camera cuts to him so that he can wheeze “I want him to stay, is that clear?”, the metal of the lung blocks half of his face. Even in sickness and illness, even as little more than a talking head, Klaus exercises power over Griselda. With a grim look of resignation, she yields to him and begins to walk off. As she does, she trips over the cord that powers the iron lung, disconnecting it. The whirring of the machine stops. Klaus is reduced to wordless gagging as he chokes on his body’s inability to fill his lungs with air. Griselda turns quietly, an unreadable expression on her face. The rhythmic mechanics of the iron lung are in this moment replaced with birdsong, the chirping of what sounds like a flock of birds that builds steadily. Griselda reaches down to connect the power cord, and hesitates. The birdsong is the promise of an outside, an escape from her angry isolation, and the release from the control of the iron lung. As she clutches the cables and breathes heavily and nervously, she weighs whether to save him or to allow him to die. In one quick move she saves him, plugging the cables back into each other. The birdsong is reduced to a low murmur as the iron lung’s motor resumes its operation. Klaus breathes again, and Griselda goes back to holding her breath. As Angelo and Rena run in to check on Klaus, she moves to the head of the iron lung and kisses him coolly on the forehead.

When Moreiras Menor stresses how the transformation of Franco’s body in illness exercises cultural dominance over Spain’s population by leaving a ghostly trace, that dynamic is recreated here between Klaus and Griselda. Klaus is nothing more than a head, yet he still controls his household and his wife. Griselda is tethered to the iron lung and, even when presented with freedom, binds herself back to the structures which ensure her domination. In doing so, Villaronga allows Klaus to become a stand in for the body of the dying dictator, a body

that is just a ghost of itself, paralyzed yet still offered the means with which to dominate. The recreation of the dead and dying dictator who is obeyed even in death references not only the power of the dictator in the recent past, but contemporary Spain's silent acquiescence to the memory of that dictator. When Griselda plugs the cables back in and denies herself freedom, it is an acknowledgement of that systemic violence that allows the smooth functioning of the world, the violence that is done every day against a backdrop of peace. It should by now be clear that any reference to the "smooth functioning of the world" is relative: Griselda is clearly unhappy and experiences a very real sort of violence in her isolation and frustration. Nevertheless, her acquiescence is offered up faithfully so that those in power (here, Klaus) may experience the smoothness of peace. This faithful compliance has echoes in the Spanish transition to democracy and in the ghostly traces of the dictatorship that haunt it.

When Walter Benjamin writes in "Critique of Violence" that "in the exercise of violence over life and death more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself" (286), it is possible to recognize the ways that Villaronga frames the dictatorship and also indicts the Post-Franco democracy. In the lawmaking capabilities of violence and in the law's affirmation of the law through violence, the image of the Franco dictatorship emerges from under the symbolic use of the Nazi as stand-in for fascism. After all, Klaus is a leftover of the Holocaust and World War II, its *product*; establishing an analogy between Klaus and the dictator, Villaronga similarly leaves us to wonder what violence is committed, hidden, and left intact within the establishment of new law—even the welcomed democracy that emerged after Franco.

For Benjamin, any critique of violence must be tasked with "expounding its relation to law and justice" (277). The implication is two-fold: that a full consideration of violence must take into account its intimate relation to law, justice, and morality; and that violence as such does

not exist outside of the relations it maintains with these. It is a similar move to Žižek, who has counseled that we “step back” from a fixation on the most visible strains of subjective violence and turn to that violence which remains hidden despite our best attempts, the systemic violence found in the creation and upholding of law. These concepts are similarly invoked in Benjamin’s writing—when he alternately deems violence “a physical force *intended* to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something” and “the *unlawful* exercise of physical force or intimidation by the exhibition of such force” (277, emphasis mine), it is contextualized and fortified with clear notions on what is legal, what is moral, and what methods can and should be used to obtain what is wanted.

Violence is shown not to be entirely terminal and static but potentially productive: “If violence were, as first appears, merely the means to secure directly whatever happens to be sought, it could fulfill its end as predatory violence. It would be entirely unsuitable as a basis for, or a modification to, relatively stable conditions. The strike shows, however, that it can be so, that it is able to found and modify legal conditions, however offended the sense of justice may find itself thereby” (282-3). The legal conditions founded or modified under a labor strike show that certain types of violence, beyond being simply a matter of means, create ends that are able to shape, recreate, and produce new political landscapes. In this moment Benjamin brackets consideration of the ostensibly positive or negative aspects of these ends by placing the importance not on the just or unjustness of the new legal conditions, but on the fact that these are produced at all, and that they have been produced *through violence*. To revisit violence in this manner highlights the potentiality of its products, which may continually create and establish law even destructively, and even in pain and suffering. This is precisely the message behind *Tras el*

crystal—that violence creates law, that it upholds it, and that new forms of violence is birthed in its lawmaking and law-upholding capacities.

Rightly identifying law and violence as mutually imbricated, Benjamin flips the most simplistic notions of violence to reveal a dialectic that holds violence and law in tight orbit. This has clear repercussions when considering the infectious nature of violence in *Tras el cristal* and *El mar*. Writing on the dual function of violence in the creation of the law, Benjamin notes:

The function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extend, an immediate manifestation of violence. (295)

In accentuating the creational aspects of violence—its ability to infect, to uninterruptedly engender itself anew from within its host—and pairing these with the function of law in society, violence is revealed to be highly politicized and even foundational to the State.³² Following Benjamin’s logic, the creation of laws necessarily enacts a coeval violence that echoes down through society and its subjects, something that has clear implications for unraveling the nature of dictatorial violence in Villaronga’s work. But critiquing the brutal transition to dictatorship through Civil War would almost be too easy, too obvious a target for Villaronga, as violence does not stop at a dictator’s end or at the shift from an ostensibly ‘good’ regime (the Second Republic) to a ‘bad’ one (Franco). For Villaronga, the establishment of democracy is another

³² This is by no means a novel claim, and we may hear echoes of Chapter One’s discussion of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, which finds civil society to be founded primary on fear of violence and thus necessitating a sovereign to (even violently) assert Law.

such violent interaction of law and its subjects, another infecting moment that ties the effects of the past into future generations.

It is for this reason that Angelo becomes such an important figure in *Tras el cristal*. Marked by a past violence brought about by Klaus and in war, he sets about recreating those structures of wartime—specifically, the atmosphere of the Holocaust. He begins to transform the house into the simulacrum of a concentration camp by ringing the stairwells with barbed wire, setting pigeons loose within the house (another reference to the titular cage), and setting a bonfire in the center of the house to fill it up with smoke and ash. If he entered like the devil himself, as the maid says of him, it would seem that he is now intent on recreating hell. But here it must be noted that the diabolical, at least in the films of Villaronga, is a role that is learned, crafted and passed generationally. Kinder seems to affirm this when she writes that Angelo is not presented as a deviant individual but as a “violent subject...constructed by a perverted culture” (*Blood Cinema* 196), which is presumably not a reference to the perversion of Spain’s culture but to its general culture of violence, however we may distinguish between these.

If the film ended in this manner, a revenge film in which the tortured hero comes back and rights the wrongs of war, it would be little more than an exercise in scopophilia and the sadistic pull of violence (a reading that many of its critics attribute to it). To view the film as a critique of subjective violence at once fails to answer Villaronga’s initial correlation of witnessing and participation while simultaneously ignoring the systemic structures that uphold Klaus’s dominance and power even in his paralysis. A more discerning reading of the film begs the spectator to understand that even while Angelo takes pleasure in torturing Klaus, he doesn’t seek revenge but to continue the man’s work. When Angelo begins to bring children in for Klaus, the older man is resistant but ultimately succumbs, and he teaches Angelo just how to kill

the young boys. Eventually Angelo kills his mentor in order to take his place in the iron lung, literally reenacting the cycle of violence. Klaus's daughter Rena will become the new Angelo, a traumatized child who forges an uncomfortable connection with her torturer. In the film's final scenes she is stripped of her nascent femininity, now wearing a suit and pants in place of the little blue dresses she has worn throughout the film. She is a reflection of any of the young male victims of Klaus & Angelo, or of the young Angelo himself, staring blankly back at the audience from the photograph that opened the film.

In this final scene, the house is reduced to the room where the iron lung is kept, the only room that has ever mattered anyway, and the characters are but two: the torturer and the victim, shifting back and forth in their roles. Here it is worth noting what Scarry writes of the torture room:

While the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. Although its walls, for example, mimic the body's attempt to secure the individual a stable internal space..., [they] are also, throughout all this, independent objects, objects which stand apart from and free of the body, objects which realize the human being's impulse to project himself out into a space beyond the boundaries of the body in acts of making, either physical or verbal, that once multiplied, collected, and shared are called civilization. (39)

The reduction of the space of the film into this one room, the site where the traumatic indicators of the past, present, and future (or Klaus, Angelo and Rena) have been collected and imprisoned, seems to be a gloomy pronouncement on the aftereffects of violence in memory and life. But it is also a Benjaminian move, in some ways, one that underscores the role of violence in establishing

and upholding even more violent systems—a creational act of violence, even if deadly, destructive, ‘negative’. If we are to read *Tras el cristal* as more than the sum of negativity and subjective violence, it must be as an analogy for the effects of the past in the present and the ways that we are shaped through violence.

On Infirm Ground

In *El mar*, Villaronga abandons the nebulous geographical and temporal localization of *Tras el cristal* for a decidedly fixed point in time and space, an isolated sanatorium on Villaronga’s native island of Mallorca in 1939. Although the shift may be for any number of reasons, it is interesting that in the intervening decade that separates the two films, a wave of films and novels emerged that specifically addressed the Spanish Civil War (albeit with varying success and to varying degrees). It may consequently be that Villaronga found himself allegorizing in *Tras el cristal* what he could then state openly in *El mar*, distanced from the fresh wounds of the dictatorship and transition. *El mar* displaces the normative masculine ideals of robust health and wellness for an exploration of the sexualized and sickly male body, and highlights the rise of violence as a gendered product of a society coming out from a traumatic past. Consequently, Villaronga’s depictions of sick masculinities as subversive text in *El mar* serves to destabilize popular discourses of masculinity, violence, war, and the way that these are remembered and enacted.

As we have seen, the dark content of *El mar* is not unfamiliar to Villaronga, and the thematic content of his filmography is as surprisingly cohesive as the source materials for his feature-length films are diverse. *El mar*, for example, is adapted from a 1958 novel of the same name by Mallorcan author Blai Bonet. The adaptation of a text that was written some forty years earlier is intriguing on several levels, not the least that it links the historical preoccupations of the

text with the modern-day concerns of the film and particularly because it lends another valence to the understanding of how violence and trauma are never confined to just the past or the present. As noted earlier, *Tras el cristal* similarly finds its source text in earlier historical accounts (the Holocaust and the story of Gilles de Rais), at once making a claim for a cultural specificity to violence as well as its universal destructivity. In *El mar*, the impact of the Civil War and the confluence of sexuality, illness, and gender become critical concerns for both Bonet and Villaronga; particularly for the latter, who uses this to make a case for a general Spanish malaise that has roots in the aftermath of the Civil War and the dictatorship that it birthed.³³

In the introduction, I wrote how Susan Sontag's *Illness as metaphor* critiques the metaphorical connotations and meanings of illness, specifically of tuberculosis and cancer. Sontag asks how and why metaphor and meaning gather around illnesses (tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS in particular), and how social and cultural notions of a sickness/health binary have been affected by such metaphors. The characters of *El mar* do not escape this binary. In fact, Villaronga goes to great lengths to make the physical symptoms of tuberculosis ever present in the fevers and bloody coughs of his dying protagonists. A few memorable scenes are shot so as to allow no other color than white in the frame until a sudden, violent splash of blood erupts and mars the *mise-en-scène*. The film directly references the shocking abundance of blood after Andreu witnesses his first death in the sanatorium. Manuel looks at him for a moment and says, "Blood is always scandalous, but you'll get used to it. Once you've been here a while, you'll see that it's all the same" (*El mar*). This indifference to the violent physicality of illness, or at the very least the acceptance of its inevitability, allows Villaronga to compare the exterior

³³ Adaptation is a frequent source of inspiration for Villaronga. In addition to *El mar*'s origins as a novel and the historical and biographical data that serves as the basis for *Tras el cristal*, he has attempted (unsuccessfully) to adapt Mercè Rodoreda's novella *El mort i la primavera* and has (quite successfully) presented an adaptation of Emili Teixidor's novel *Pa negre* to Spanish audiences. This last film brought him a fair bit of acclaim, garnering nine Goyas at the 2010 awards ceremony.

manifestations of illness to the unseen damages and psychic wounds of his characters. As important, devastating and life-altering as the physical effects of violence are, the film is even more intent on portraying its subjective characteristics, the systemic violence exemplified in metaphors of illness.

Much of that metaphoric pain stems from the way tuberculosis was understood and treated in the 19th and 20th centuries. *Illness as metaphor* suggests that tuberculosis was an illness unlike any other in that romantic notions attached themselves to it, transforming the patient. The social metaphors attributed to tuberculosis meant that the tubercular was never solely physically sick; the illness itself was infected with a whole host of symbolic meanings that were passed on to the ill body. This symbolism made a direct relation between the emotional, mental, and physical states of the patient. According to Sontag,

In 1881... a standard medical textbook gave as the causes of tuberculosis: hereditary disposition, unfavorable climate, sedentary indoor life, defective ventilation, deficiency of lights, and ‘depressing emotions’. Though the entry had to be changed for the next edition, it took a long time for these notions to lose credibility... Applied to TB, the theory that emotions cause diseases survived well into this century—until, finally, it was discovered how to cure the disease. (54)

Such a clear association with the supposed emotional state of the infected was a significant factor in the misinterpretation of tuberculosis, and it formed a stigma that would turn out to be nearly inseparable from the illness itself. From that moment, and “for more than a century and a half, tuberculosis provided a metaphoric equivalent for delicacy, sensitivity, sadness, powerlessness” (Sontag 61). Thus, by nature of societal interpretations of the sickness, the tubercular was transformed into a melancholy, romantic figure. The sick body was rewritten with a variety of

meanings that had little to nothing to do with the actual physicality of the illness. Sontag points out that the disease was alternately interpreted as springing from emotional excess, being caused by the flaws of the inner character (46) or, in a more modern interpretation, as punishment for some hidden, secret evil (81).

Though the truth of the disease's communicable origins had most likely been impressed upon the educated in 1950's Spain, it can be argued that tuberculosis still retained many of these metaphoric meanings for the population. Perhaps the idea of the tubercular as romantic, fevered artist had given way to a more realistic association with hunger and scarcity of sustenance; nonetheless, Margalida Pons affirms that those sick with tuberculosis suffered in more ways than the physical when she calls tuberculosis an "authentic psychological agony".³⁴ As with Villarronga, it is notable that what Pons stresses is not the physical, bodily effects of illness, but the psychological pains that it causes.

Tuberculosis is just one of the many ills of *El mar*. The characters suffer in physical and emotional ways, but almost as an afterthought. Fits of coughing give way to impassioned speeches on the nature of religion and sexuality, violent splashes of blood contrast the even more violent search for a clear identity in the confusion and divisions of war. Villarronga prizes social ills over physical ones, intent that the former are recognized to be as equally arbitrary and deadly as any bodily effect of illness.

Although Sontag begins her essay by relating illness to a dark geography, in the film it is not just a space (Mallorca as sick, Spain as sick) but an infector of space – a contagion. *El mar* posits violence as an infection, a germ that lodges itself in the children and is buried deep, its insemination the witnessing of the mass murder of the village men. This is made explicit in the film: Pau, one of the boys who accompanies Manuel and Andreu and whose father had been the

³⁴ Pons: "Alongside the physical torture, the tubercular suffers a real psychological agony" (86).

victim of an earlier attack that morning, looks out at the men with their guns aimed and whispers, “they’re going to kill my dad again” (*El mar*). This line comes directly from Bonet’s novel and is a clear reference to the cycle of violence and suffering that stems from war, a point emphasized continually in the film. This silent witnessing, coupled with the earlier killing and metaphoric re-killing of Pau’s father initiates a desire for revenge that ends in the murder of Julià, the son of his father’s killer. Immediately after the murder, Pau commits suicide by jumping down into one of Mallorca’s many caves. This is the violence that begets violence, the infection of a contagious, contaminating illness; because if the violence that stems from this original trauma truly is cyclical and communicable, if these “children of war” are destined to relive war throughout their lives, then it must be considered a type of illness. What’s more, *El mar* goes to great lengths to show how this violence inhabits bodies in an even more deadly fashion than that of tuberculosis. It is no accident that out of all the deaths in the film (and there are many), only two of these are from tuberculosis.

The children will never be the same. Years later, when Francisca and Manuel are forced to return to the cave where Pau committed suicide, they are confronted with this fact. Francisca is reluctant to enter fully into the cave, whereas Manuel immediately walks to the place where Pau died. As he looks up the well that Pau fell through, the light shines down on him. He says to her, “I think when Pau’s soul flew through this hole, God abandoned us to this hell” (*El mar*). He looks at Francisca suddenly, the light beaming on him. They are two pale specters, Villaronga suggests, but unlike Pau they are still haunting the island. “We stopped being children here” (*El mar*), Manuel finally says.

If the violence that stems from this original act truly is cyclical and communicable, if these “children of war” are destined to relive war throughout their lives, then it becomes easier to

consider this violence another illness. Both Bonet and Villaronga go to lengths to show the ways that violence operates not only as contagion but as a force that has real bodily effects that echo the damages done by illness. In fact, Bonet points to this idea as one of the driving forces behind the novel; making explicit his viewpoints on youth in postwar Spain, he notes how war creates a yearning for more life rather than an understanding of it, how the effects of the Civil War in Spain led to a type of adolescent that was at once sad, tender, and cruel (87).³⁵ He also underscores the creation of a new type of humanity, one that passes through the trials of war and emerges psychically ill. By comparing the obvious physical sickness of the protagonists to their past and present traumas, both author and director are able to capitalize on and compare social metaphors of illness (here, tuberculosis) to the effects of war. Violence, in effect, thus becomes a psychic illness with physical symptoms rooted in war and its aftermath.

As with exposure to a virus, the violence that infects the children acts in unforeseen ways. Francisca joins a convent and becomes a nun who is seemingly more interested in humanity than in traditional religious morality; Andreu lives a life of petty thievery and violence, financially taken care of by the black marketeer Mr. Morell in exchange for sexual favors; Manuel immerses himself in religious meditation and prayer in an attempt to silence the “devil inside,” the homosexual desire he feels towards the other boys of the sanatorium. Each child suppresses a traumatic memory, attempting to escape through devotion to a cause, through sex, or through prayer; these attempts are unsuccessful, as that moment always haunts and always resurfaces. Manuel voices this most clearly: “After having seen such horror and shame, evil began to burn deep within me” (Bonet 41). The ambiguity of this phrase is spectacular: which is

³⁵ Says Bonet: “In *El mar* I wanted to describe the most secret corner of the adolescents of the postwar ... because the world, with its wars, created a kind of a grim adolescent with an unusual human capacity, a yearning, for more vitality rather than an understanding of life; a kind of sad youth, tender, cruel and hedonistic” (Pons, 87).

the worse evil that burns deep within him, tuberculosis or this supposedly aberrant sexuality? Drawing a concrete link between the two, Manuel sees this moment of childhood violence (indeed, the whole of the Civil War) as the tainted root that has infected him. Sontag notes that this linkage is a common one: “A disease of the lungs is, metaphorically, a disease of the soul” (18).

If the traumatic memory of war is the first root of the various ills of the characters of *El mar*, the specific locale of Mallorca is its incubator. In his unpublished study on memory in the opening scenes of *El mar*, Jacques Terrasa compares Mallorca’s geography to a slice of gruyère, riddled with holes (9). Indeed, the caves, wells, and catacombs that the children traipse through in the first fifteen minutes of the film are vital to Villaronga’s cinematic narrative. The cave where Pau murders Julià, the well he throws himself down, and the catacombs the children hide in while they witness the murders all serve as settings for some of the film’s most brutal acts. Villaronga uses Mallorca’s inner geography to suggest secretive and hidden, nighttime acts; the importance of Andreu choosing to hide his stolen contraband in the same cave where Pau committed suicide reflects that. Rather than a slice of gruyère cheese, as Terrasa humorously puts it, the island itself seems to be rotting from the inside out with black holes that attest to some pervasive, inner malady.

The Mallorcan setting is also used to isolate the characters from each other and from the world at large. In his suicide scene, Pau stands alone on a hill while a slow 360° camera pan shows the empty landscape in which he stands, the town far off in the distance; while the camera makes its agonizing return to the place where Pau is, we hear a rustle and a dull thud. When the camera has finally returned to its original spot, Pau’s body is gone, plunged into the darkness of the well. Later in the film, another shot shows the isolated sanatorium in Caubet high atop a hill,

physically separated from its surroundings. This separation and emphasis on isolated spaces is echoed throughout the entire film and most clearly in the use of the island of Mallorca, itself an isolated geography. A sense of claustrophobia permeates the film, which sets Andreu on edge. “What the hell can I do to get out of this place?” he sputters to one of his friends in the sanatorium. “I’ve had enough of being here. Do you ever escape?” (*El mar*). But there is no escape in the film – not from the sanatorium, where medicine is so scarce that treating the tuberculosis is often difficult and instead extends illness, nor from the cycles of violence that the characters struggle in and out of.

One final note regarding the social landscape of the film comes from Terrasa, who observes that the opening prologue of the film includes certain Mallorcan celebrities in small cameos. These are, as Terrasa lists,

María del Mar Bonet, the famous Nova Cançó singer, who plays Manuel’s mother; or in the role of the falangist, a pop singer who had some success in Spain, Llorenç Santamaría... The prolific writer Biel Mesquida, author and one of the screenwriters of the film, plays one of the victims [of the mass killing]... One of the soldiers is the photographer and graphic designer Toni Socías... (13-14)

The reasoning for including such figures is surely multifaceted, but must include a desire to represent the unchanging social life of the island and implicate the whole of its inhabitants in its recent past. The idea of the isolated island returns here by way of its own genealogy, in a sense making its people participants in the suffering and violence of the war. As Terrasa explains, by inviting certain Mallorcan celebrities to participate in a film with roots in the most difficult moments of the Civil War and its aftereffects, Vilaronga is calling for a political awakening of the entire island (24).

The Spanish Civil War hollowed out dark spaces of violent memory in the lives of the island's inhabitants; memories that were suppressed in a variety of ways once the war was over and the hard years of dictatorship begun. What Villaronga seems to impress upon the viewer is the importance of that memory and the violence that it is steeped in. By framing Mallorca as island sanatorium, as a case study for the effects of violence and war in isolation, he also draws immediate links between space, illness, and sexuality. In fact, in many ways the 'flawed' masculinities in the film are treated as telltale symptoms of the social and physical illnesses that plague its protagonists. *El mar* proposes that those who have been infected with the violent memories of war, carrying and incubating them deep within as a virus, become flawed humans and, ultimately, flawed men. Manuel frames his flawed condition in a similar fashion in the film's opening monologue: "This obsession for the blood of Christ, for his Passion, for the devil; speaking quickly as if burning up, living yet gazing with the eyes of one dead, all began that year, that August" (*El mar*).³⁶ Tying his 'warped' desires to this memory of violence, Manuel pathologizes his condition and classifies himself as intrinsically faulty, as a haunting/haunted specter.

Andreu faces a similar struggle, though his attempts to sublimate his damage ultimately produce an even more fractured character than that of Manuel. In the sanatorium, he is twice visited by Mr. Morell, the black market trafficker he sleeps with in exchange for money, social status, and protection. These visits reveal Andreu's conflicted, destructive nature. In the first visit, Morell slips his hand under Andreu's shirt, creeping lower and lower down the chest; breaking into a sweat, he suggests they go to the woods together for sex. Andreu refuses and, a result of that meeting, has his surname tattooed onto his chest, "to remind myself that it's the only thing in life I can count on" (*El mar*). But the tattoo serves to both cover up and highlight

³⁶ This line is taken nearly verbatim from Bonet's novel (pg. 29).

dual locations of shame – the burning imprint of Mr. Morell’s touch and his own faulty physiology, the tubercular lungs that betray him. Unable to fend off the shame produced by the explicit sexualization and implicit feminization of Mr. Morell’s advances, Andreu brutally lashes out at all signs of weakness and femininity in an attempt to reestablish this “failed” masculinity.

This sexualization, and the intense cinematic gaze directed at the overt physicality of the male body, is not arbitrarily placed. From the beginning of the film, Villaronga establishes an often uneasy relationship with the uncovered male body. When young Manuel hears the news of the murder of Pau’s father, he runs over to his friend’s house. He arrives to see them stripping the pants off the dead body and, as we learn from Bonet’s novel, he thinks: “I then understood the power of death, seeing how Pau Inglada’s father didn’t cover his privates when they removed his pants” (32). Similarly, the young patients at the sanatorium boast of having hair on their chests; in fact, it is one of the first questions posed to Andreu upon his arrival, as a way of testing his manhood. In another nod to the crude sexuality of the sanatorium, one of the boys laughs at Andreu upon first meeting him, pointing at the open fly of his trousers.

This physicality is emphasized by placing these bodies in close proximity to each other, creating uncomfortable juxtapositions of desire and power. One of the most interesting examples of this takes place between Andreu and Manuel, just after Andreu has had his tattoo done. He shows it off to Manuel, who leans in to examine it. “There’s blood,” Manuel says, barely touching the fresh tattoo. “Does it hurt?” (*El mar*). His face tantalizingly close to Andreu’s chest, he looks up. The camera, leveled with Manuel’s gaze, focuses in on Andreu, who in turn looks down at Manuel and responds in the negative. The positioning of the two bodies evokes clear notions of submission and dominance. The camera then cuts to Manuel, whose finger rests lightly on Andreu’s chest. “You sweat a lot, Ramallo,” he says. Andreu lifts up his arm and

sniffs himself, revealing a patch of underarm hair. “Do I smell bad?” Manuel responds in the negative and the scene ends abruptly, uneasily, with the two deciding that it is time to get dinner. What is interesting in this scene is Villaronga’s willingness to subvert cultural concepts of masculinity and bestow erotic meaning upon the male body. The fixation on sweat and body odor and the unflinching focus of the camera’s eye on body hair and genitals, even as this gaze and this fixation slide between the homoerotic and the homosocial, aim at uncovering the male body and interpreting it as a sexual object.

The eroticization of and fixation on the male body are concepts that are woven into the entire film, and they have very negative consequences for both the masculine subject who feels his “manhood” compromised as well as the subject who sexualizes the masculine body. In the scenes following the exhibition of the tattoo we see the boys react to their sexualized proximity. Manuel, praying in front of a crucifix, begins to stare at the body on the cross intently. Brief jump cuts focus on the stigmata and physical body of the wooden Jesus. Still staring intently at the body, Manuel sniffs his fingers, smelling Andreu’s scent with obvious sexual pleasure. The next scene opens with a frustrated Andreu, who decides he wants to go to a brothel and, naked and dripping from his bath, approaches another patient about escaping the sanatorium.

The violence plaguing the male body in *El mar* is intimately tied to the sexualization of the masculine, although the sexualization imposed on them by another man will be actively resisted as a feminization, a penetrative violence that seeks to establish sexual and physical dominance and to disrupt normative manhood. Even when resistance emerges in varied ways—Andreu physically, through oppressive sexual domination and violence, and Manuel spiritually, through a desexualized religion—these men will be, effectively, penetrated time and time again. Such occurrences lead to an upsurge in frustrated rage and an eruption of bloody violence

directed at what is perceived as weaker, as feminine, or as vulnerable. It should be clear that the sexualization and penetration of the male body is only read as a violence under very specific terms and within a normative system of sexuality and masculinity, and the resistance of both Manuel and Andreu to being sexualized comes at the cost of their ability to escape normativity and, perhaps, find a sort of happiness outside of it. Andreu *is* cared for, and many scenes make explicit the love that Mr. Morell feels for him; likewise, Manuel is not only sexually aroused but deeply attached to Andreu, and the former's rape at the hands of the other boy is a violence done primarily out of fear of that love and desire.³⁷

Villaronga does not spare the viewer the consequences of the rage of the frustrated masculine subject, either; the whole of the film is literally dripping in blood, and in its center stands Andreu. Just after his visit with Mr. Morell and prior to his tattooing, Andreu encounters Manuel's cat and kicks it repeatedly. When he is finished, the cat lies in a bloody heap in the pristine white of the sanatorium's halls. Manuel witnesses this and later places the dying cat on Andreu's bed, explaining "I didn't have the stomach to kill it. I thought you might. You've always been an animal" (*El mar*). It is even more interesting to note that there are two additional scenes of cat killing in Bonet's novel, one by Manuel's father and the other by a group of children in the protagonists' hometown. In doing this, both Villaronga and Bonet juxtapose the violence of masculinity with the weakness and destruction of a feminized other. The penetrated characters of *El mar* will oscillate between these two poles continually, never settling comfortably in either position and equally disturbed by both.

³⁷ It could be said that one of the flaws of Villaronga's films, and this is patently blatant in 2010's *Pa Negre* as well, is that there is often little room for the expression of any sexuality that deviates from the norm, or that such sexuality is constantly presented as deviant. I still hold that this in itself is a statement against sociocultural mores and prejudices, and that depicting sexuality in this manner may be little more than a very grim but realistic demonstration of the limited possibilities open to non-normative sexualities of the recent past.

Andreu particularly swings between being the penetrated and the penetrator, attacked and attacking. Both he and Manuel are raped in the film, feminized by a “more masculine” other. For Andreu, this other is Mr. Morell. Little doubt is left as to Andreu’s submissive position in the physical relationship when, during a confrontation, the groundskeeper of the sanatorium tells him “I’m not going to harm that rent-boy face of yours, because Mr. Morell wants you to be beautiful when he fucks you” (*El mar*). Mr. Morell is even called “La Verónica” in the village, perhaps an allusion to the bullfighting move that forces the bull to charge forward when the cape is waved in front of it. In this way, Morell can be envisioned as the bullfighter that manipulates Andreu, the dumb bull. Manuel is assaulted by Andreu, whose threats of assault eventually become promises of a sexual encounter that is both desired and feared. In the final, most violent encounter, and as Manuel fearfully questions the sexual advances, Andreu tells him “you’ll enjoy this until the day you die” (*Ibid*). They kiss roughly, and Manuel confesses his love for Andreu, who only responds by saying “I’m not going to leave until I’ve cum all over your face” (*Ibid*). It is important that Andreu threatens/promises this specific sex act, as it reinforces already clear boundaries of dominant and submissive sexual roles.

Here it may be useful to return briefly to Francisca’s position in the story. It has been noted that Villaronga (following the example set forth by Blai Bonet) relegates her to an ambiguous space of silent watching. If the feminine is linked to suffering in *El mar*, what is to be made of Francisca’s apparent liberation at the end of the film? As I have suggested earlier, it is easy to see that her scenes reflect another view of the illness that taints the movie. As a child, and on the day of the village massacre, Francisca serves as an outsider who is forced into a position of silent complicity. When she says she wants to accompany the children she is quickly rebuffed by Andreu, who sneers “You’re a girl!” (*El mar*). Nonetheless, she will appear briefly in the

cemetery, again in the cave where Juliá is killed, and finally, as a little face peering over the well where Pau kills himself. As these scenes unfold she, like Manuel, is made a stunned voyeur, separated from the anger of the boys by her femininity.

Her position in the sanatorium is of equal interest, specifically in regards to Manuel and Andreu. Although she explains to Andreu that she is simply there to do “what nuns do”, she becomes a sort of confessor for the two and in turn confesses secrets to them. She serves as the only voice of reason to Andreu, telling him that “Nothing is solved by violence. Not kicking cats. Nor throwing stones at little girls. You always let out what hurts you and throw it onto others.” She also listens to Manuel’s fevered confession one night, although she becomes uneasy as it takes a few unexpected loops. In the end she attempts to send him back to his room with a sleeping pill, a twisted communion wafer after his strange confession. But it is as she tells Andreu: “I like understanding people, the things they do and why they do them. Even the worst of crimes. For me, religion is people” (*El mar*).

Ultimately, it may seem that this belief is her liberation. The ill violence takes both Andreu and Manuel, leaving Francisca alone in the sanatorium. In the final scene, she pauses for the second time in the movie to listen to the sounds of children playing through the open window outside. She removes her habit and leaves the sanatorium. The feminine as suffering has been released, with Francisca having served her penance as accomplice to the crimes of the past. Has she escaped the violent illness, or was she immune? Villaronga leaves that to the viewer’s imagination. What is shown is that, unlike Manuel, she is at her happiest and purest when

surrounded by people; thusly, it could be posited that in the end she regains her faith, releasing herself from the purgatory of the shadowed, haunted caves of her youth.³⁸

Although Francisca's view of religion may ultimately be her salvation from the past, it is evident that Manuel becomes trapped in his. During a late-night talk early on in the film, Andreu and Manuel discuss their sickness. Andreu rails against his illness, saying that "dying like this isn't fair, secretly, from within", while Manuel tries to maintain an optimistic outlook through his faith. Eventually, he deflates a little, and when Andreu asks him what he's thinking about says "I'm trying to imagine which door I'd have to take to die with enthusiasm." Andreu responds, "Like the martyrs? The lions and the circus?" (*El mar*). Both boys laugh, but the question hangs in the air: how do you die with enthusiasm? Again, the idea of dual illnesses, physical and moral, surface in Manuel's question; the unanswered question asks how to resign oneself to an impending physical death but, similarly, how to knowingly give up the tantalizing sexual desires of the flesh.

This crack in the armor of Manuel's faith becomes wider and wider as Andreu's casual sexuality takes on new forms. In a particularly explicit show of Manuel's conflicted emotions and desires, he takes Andreu's sweaty clothes and lays them out on the bed, undulating on top of them and sobbing. He stops when he sees himself reflected in the mirror on his wall. Later he kneels to pray, hugging tightly to the bed. Such a physical positioning, clutching fiercely to the space of sexual interaction, suggests that he is tied to these desires even as he seeks to rise above them. Villaronga will further develop this idea in a later scene, when Manuel is read a passage from the Bible about a demon that had possessed a young boy from birth. Although it is never directly stated, it is understood that Manuel believes himself to be like that boy, cursed with a

³⁸ Here, I mark my disagreement with Pilar Pedraza's interpretation of the film's ending scene. She writes, of this final scene: "Aunque se quita la toca frente a un tragaluz, no lo hace como gesto de liberación, sino para tomar aire antes de seguir luchando contra los demonios de la cotidianidad" (23).

naturally evil spirit that only a miracle could exorcise. If he can explain his desires through an inherent wrongness in human nature, he can hope to transcend these desires and to pray himself into the purity he lacks.

This divine exorcism seems to come to him one night. As he tells Francisca:

I was praying, and suddenly I felt the flesh split inside, and there was a big dark bruise on my skin. But there was no bruise. The more I felt I was overcoming [Andreu] Ramallo, the stronger the pain. Then finally the skin tore completely... I was possessed, Francisca. Ramallo was my friend, and I loved him. Satan abused that. He changed the friendship into forbidden love... Ramallo wanted to destroy my innocence, don't you see? Ramallo wanted to crucify God again. But I crucified Satan. God thanks me by this manifestation of Him in me. (*El mar*)

Although categorizing homosexual desire as illness is by no means a novel idea, it is one that has clear benefits to Manuel, as it places the origins of his "deviant" desire in an uncontrollable, faulty body. The appearance of the stigmata frees Manuel, however momentarily, from these dark sins; if he bears the physical marks of purity, then he must not be the impure sexual thing he believes himself to be, or at the very least he has overcome the impurity.

But this is, unfortunately, just a momentary solution. Manuel finds that his desires are not overcome so easily nor is the specter of desire exorcised so fully. In one of the film's final scenes, Andreu sees the blood soaking through the other boy's bandages. "Why are your hands bandaged?" he asks. Manuel, head low, replies: "I hurt myself" (*El mar*). The symbolism of the purifying marks of God gives way to recognition of the truth: that there will be no miracle or exorcism of his "evil" nature, nor can there be any resolution or change as long as Andreu is there to instill fresh desire in him. Perhaps it is this realization that in part leads Manuel to stab

Ramallo in the neck and kill him, to violently penetrate the body of the other even as he himself is being penetrated. At the end of this scene, both boys will be dead and the cycle will be completed; the pattern of violence laid out for them since childhood will finally be brought to its conclusion. Manuel plunges himself into the water of the bathtub, baptizing himself in his own blood, and makes a final prayer to God for mercy.

This final scene reinforces a recurring aquatic theme for Bonet and Villaronga. In the opening epigraph of Bonet's novel he writes that "Man is like the sea, he penetrates and is penetrated, he reflects and is moved by the heavens above. In man, God illuminates creation as the moon illuminates the earth" (9). Bonet significantly equates man with the sea, feminizing the male body and subverting popular discourse of contemporary masculinities. Here, man penetrates but is also penetrated; he shines not like the sun but the moon, which has a long history of being related to femininity. Margalida Pons will underscore these opening lines as well, noting that this double nature "impregnates all of the characters, who are at once sinful animals, beastly assassins and mediums transfigured by the divine word: guardians and possessors of goodness and evil" (91). The dual nature of man and his capacity for both good and evil is reinforced here, a notion that is traditionally lost in the essentializing nature of popular discourse.

Both Villaronga and Sontag will similarly emphasize the duality of the penetrated man, though mainly through the infecting nature of illness, which enters the body in another fashion. Sontag writes that "TB is disintegration, febrilization, dematerialization; it is a disease of liquids—the body turning to phlegm and mucus and sputum and, finally, blood—and of air, of the need for better air" (13). While Bonet says man is *like* the sea, Sontag takes it one step further, predicting the sick man's transformation into sea. Tuberculosis loosens an inner sea of

blood and phlegm, the penetration of the feminine into the masculine as part of a deep, interior process.

What Andreu, arguably the most violent character in the story, says about the sea is significant in light of this viewpoint. While confessing his desire to escape from the sanatorium, he reveals to Francisca that he wants go to the sea. He tells the story of a visit to the sea with his father when he was younger.

I put on my mask and put my head under the water. Suddenly there was silence...
I tried to dive in... it was as if I could breathe under water. As if all of me had become water. Water and sea... That's what the sea is for me... That silence, that purity, that breathing. (*El mar*)

The fact that Andreu mentions *purity*, a key word in Villaronga's film, is far from arbitrary. Just as Manuel seeks to transcend the taint of his childhood through religious prayer and devotion, Andreu searches for purity in the cleansing waters of the sea. He is infected by the twin illnesses of *El mar*, tuberculosis and violence, and bears their communicable stains. Evoking the idea of a purifying baptism in nature, Andreu reveals a desire to be cleansed of the sicknesses of body and soul that plague him.

Water will return again and again after this confession, sometimes where least expected. In one scene, and at Francisca's request, the boys are shown a silent film at the sanatorium. Underwater images of the sea are projected on the wall, although this tranquil paradise is interrupted when, ironically, the film overheats and burns. In another scene, and immediately following the murder of Mr. Morell, Andreu plunges his face into the aquarium he received as a gift from the dead man. The images of that same silent film slowly overtake the screen as Andreu immerses himself fully in the fantasy of a silent, pure world. Eventually, the shot goes black as

Andreu begins to lose consciousness. He pulls his head out of the aquarium, sputtering. In both of these scenes, as with the religious fire that Manuel works so hard to keep lit, Villaronga subtly implies that these attempts at purity are quixotic and unsustainable. The film melts, Andreu begins to drown, Manuel is unable to suppress his natural desires, and the escape to the sea is at an impossible, unreachable distance.

It is this last point, that of the unattainable cleansing, that Villaronga seems to push more than all others. Can there be a remedy to this ill? If the body and the land are diseased and rotting, what hope can there be for cure? Other than the eventual death of those who are coinfecting with societal and physical ills, one possible solution may be found in the last liberating moments of the film. In one of the few scenes that acknowledge the existence of a world beyond the sphere of its principal characters, Francisca steps out of the sanatorium, out from the kino eye of the camera and escaping the isolating effects of the illnesses that surrounds her. I return to Sontag: “TB was understood as a disease that isolates one from the community. However steep its incidence in a population, TB... always seemed to be a mysterious disease of individuals, a deadly arrow that could strike anyone, that singled out its victims one by one” (38). By apparently rejoining society and resisting that isolation, Francisca exchanges the dead end possibilities of the film for a life where the violent past has been put to rest. This also reinforces Villaronga’s decision to include famous Mallorcans as extras in his film—by making this a history of the past using the faces of the present, he underscores the suffering of the whole community and makes the story one of *all people*. *El mar* is attempting to combat the isolated, silent suffering that the Civil War has produced in popular culture by reuniting some of Mallorca’s most famous sons and daughters with its history. Like *Tras el cristal*, this film

ultimately deals witnessing and culpability in equal measures, banding the community together in a way that war and communicable disease seek to divide it.

Closely linking violence and illness to issues of masculinity and illness as metaphor holds gender in tandem with issues of well-being and, ultimately, underscores the health of the body and the external violence enacted upon it as a marker for our complicated relationships with the violent past. The masculinity that is produced in the possession by illness and violence are changed, scarred in ways that go deeper than the bodily effects of physical illness. In seeking to give voice to these subjects and their memories, Villaronga undertakes an important and difficult task that is shown to necessitate a community effort. The cure, if one could even be suggested, seems to be in the telling and retelling of these stories, the recuperation of the memories that were lost and forever corrupted by the violent times of war. Or perhaps to search for a cure is to head in the wrong direction, dismissing the transformative potential of violence and loss. Villaronga calls forth a reimagined (albeit fragile) sense of community that by including modern-day Mallorcans into the memories of a dead past, and the resulting imperative is to live with the violence of the past and present, understand that it flows through us, and that we are its carriers, we are responsible for it, we take it up, and we allow it to be reborn. If we could do this, “tarry with” the violence (to borrow a phrase from Butler) as we must tarry with the inevitability of mortality, it awakens something new in us that is something like an ontology of life in death. The possibilities, like those found in violence itself, are infinite. Perhaps they can be recast as infinitely optimistic, if such a word is even appropriate in the bogs of war, torture, and blood.

Chapter 3 The Future Dead

If violence is often used to invoke a destructive ending, it is so much more so with death. Generally held to be the ultimate finality, the complete and terminal cessation of a thing or person or event, death has come to signify the end that erases life and nullifies existence. In writing about death, then, the challenge lies in how to approach something thought of as the completion of an illness, a bad outcome of a bad germ. If illness has powerful viral capabilities and through contagion may affect life, gender, and sexuality, perhaps death can be thought of in the same way. This chapter attempts to go beyond the idea of the bad and terminal death, and to challenge the limits of what is held to be *death* and *life*. In other words, can there be something vivifying about death, or even something creational? To explore the spaces where death is not *death*—that end of production, the stopping up of life—is to rethink its metaphors and to seek out the place they might occupy on a political and cultural level.

In *Almodóvar on Almodóvar*, Frédéric Strauss writes that “visual pleasure is only one aspect of the sensual stimulation Almodóvar’s films embody. They are films of the flesh, or immaterial feelings made flesh by the actors” (x). By grounding Almodóvar’s films in the flesh, Strauss highlights the confrontation between desire and the body in the director’s work.³⁹ This chapter attempts to understand the fleshiness of this cinema, but more importantly, the outcome of a film made flesh. There is certainly a reimagined sort of body politic struck in these films, one that surges from the particularly “transgressive” cinema that Almodóvar makes. That being so, what happens when the flesh fails, as it must? It is in reaching the limits of the flesh, of

³⁹An echo of Fouz Hernández and Martínez Expósito, who make the same claim for the cinema of Amenábar in Chapter One. I do not want to declare one director as more thematically concerned with life and the other death, which would run counter to the argument that the borders between life and death are much more porous than we often allow. In fact, most of the directors included in this dissertation could be considered in some way or another “filmmakers of the flesh.”

sexuality, and of life that Almodóvar offers a radical revisioning of the categories themselves, and for that reason I want to consider the way that these films might actually revitalize death and encourage the spectator to think beyond its parameters. Highlighting the movements of life in death by way of three films, *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002), and *Volver* (2006), this chapter contends that Almodóvar offers a commingling of life and death, a view of the interactions between the two that give way to reformulations of gender, history, and the wellbeing of the nation.

There is much at stake in reimagining the metaphors of death, life, and gender in this manner, and it may well be too tall an order for Almodóvar's filmography to fill. This chapter therefore does not attempt to put forth a definitive account of the politics of death in Almodóvar, but to tease out the interplay between queer temporalities of gender and wellbeing. In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the director's usage of creational and viral masculinities (what I will term 'pathogenic masculinities') sets up possibilities for new ways of imagining gender. That is, in recasting the paternal archetype as a contagious nexus for sickness and death, the good health of the ideal male body is shaded with an illness that reproduces and gives birth to itself. In *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar highlights the vulnerability of the body, its susceptibility to death and loss, and how masculinity both complies with and contributes to this process. In distorting masculine gender norms and linking these to mortality and vulnerability, the film advocates an understanding of gender's relationship to death, and how this colors human experiences of the world.

The second half of this chapter considers the queer disruptions of time in *Volver* and links these to *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*. In the focus on the movements of death in life, or in the use of narratives which vivify death and vulnerability, these films tamper with normative temporalities of life and mortality. In *Volver*, where the past physically returns to

haunt the present, Almodóvar unsettles normative family structures through incest and a queer restructuring of time. *Volver* utilizes the product(s) of incest and pedophilia to carry the promise of futurity, even one born of the mortal marks of pathogenic masculinities. Borrowing from Elizabeth Freeman's compelling arguments for a queerness that inherently unbinds time, this chapter holds that Almodóvar's focus on masculinity reimagines a future for gender politics, one that is borne out of the dis-ease of living with, among, and alongside the ghosts of the past.

Almodóvar's bending of normative roles works to similarly alter those normative, forward-moving time lines that promote futurity and the creation of the new generation. As death is held to be an inevitable futurity with ties to the present (both in knowledge of its inevitability and through these mortality-tinged masculinities), this chapter asserts that Almodóvar repurposes the forward motion of time to asynchronously connect the past, present, and future. Rethinking the "bad" outcome of death as productive, as a pathogen that creates (even in creating *more death*) allows for a queer unbinding of time, a type of release from the temporal holds placed on us. That is to say, death is no longer an end, but another sort of beginning—or that beginnings and endings no longer hold the same sort of meaning in these films.

Pathogens

Throughout Almodóvar's cinema, men and masculinity are insistently linked to illness, pathology, and death—a long list of fathers, lovers, and brothers who are killed and incapacitated, or who exceed the bounds of normative masculinity in transgressive ways. The relations between death and masculinity are many, as just a small cross-section reveals: David (Javier Bardem) in *Carne trémula*, whose disability is intimately connected to his masculinity and inability to please his wife sexually; Antonio (Antonio Banderas) in *La ley del deseo*, who murders a rival love interest so that the man he desires will love him; Ricky (Banderas) in *Átame*,

who kidnaps and forces himself on the girl he adores; the deadbeat Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López) in *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*, who is accidentally killed during a fight with his wife (Carmen Maura); Nicholas (Peter Coyote) and Paul Bazzo (Santiago Lajusticia) from *Kika*, who both physically abuse the women who refuse to comply with their demands, despite their seemingly disparate dispositions; the priests of *La mala educación* and Juan/Ángel, who surpasses them in the urge to obtain whatever he desires; the men who put their women on the verge of nervous breakdowns.

Over the years, Almodóvar has developed a reputation for being a “women’s director”, an admittedly simplistic tag that does a disservice to the nuances of Almodóvar’s filmography as much as it marks a problematic adherence to expectations of gender norms. The fact that it has been picked up and utilized, however, does lend a certain heft to the (albeit incorrect) idea of Almodóvar as a director who is only focused on femininity and simple melodrama. In a 1987 interview with Marsha Kinder, Almodóvar comments: “Fathers are not very present in my films... This is something I just feel. When I’m writing about relatives, I just put in mothers, but I try not to put in fathers. I avoid it. I don’t know why. I guess I’m very Spanish.” Alluding to Almodóvar’s earlier and much cited comments that he ignored the existence of Spain’s former dictator in his films,⁴⁰ Kinder remarks: “I guess you treat fathers like Franco, as if they never existed...” (143, qtd in D’Lugo 2006). Although this exchange would almost certainly be read differently now, over 20 years and a few father-centric films later,⁴¹ what is most striking about this comment is that it seems to correlate the absence of the father figure with his ineffectuality.

⁴⁰ A well-worn quote at this point, and oft-repeated by the director himself. In an interview with Strauss, he says: “My films were never anti-Franco. I simply didn’t even recognize his existence. In a way, it’s my revenge against Francoism. I want there to be no shadow or memory of him” (19).

⁴¹ Of these, perhaps *Mala educación* is the film most blatantly centered around the figure of the father. I would also place *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and, after a fashion, *Abrazos rotos* in this category.

But the lingering ghost of the dictator on life support still compels, still haunts. The proximity of death, its alternating delay and inevitability, and the smothering presence of a moribund masculinity—made even more oppressive in its illnesses and absences, a discernible shadow of lack—are found throughout Almodóvar’s filmography.

Almodóvar links masculinity and death by disabling the former’s normative strengths and portraying it as perpetually affiliated with death. Masculinity seems to engender mortality in his films, pathogenically giving birth to death in a sort of motherly (read: creational) birth of bad blood. Seeing masculinity in this manner places it in sharp contrast to the visions of nurturing mothers in his films, those women who restructure life through new formations of kinship structures (the reconfigured family structures of *Todo sobre mi madre*, for example) or even in negativity, as flawed mothers who sacrifice for the good of their children, as in *Tacones lejanos* or *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*. In Almodóvar’s films, the father figure similarly restructures the family through reconfigured lines of kinship—a family unit forced together under the threat of damages, violence, rape, and incest. Like death itself, it is easy to write the representation of these actions off as only detrimental, only harmful, but there is more to it than this; in reconvening family along the lines of violence, and placing masculinity and death in tandem, Almodóvar envisions new possibilities for both.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes that a father’s demise is “the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man’s life” (xxvi). When Almodóvar speaks of the absence of fathers in his films, he seems to discredit the impact that loss and death have. How might recognition of the ghost of the father—that is, lack, absence, elision of masculinity in his narratives—comply with the pervasiveness of masculine domination? In an interview with

Frédéric Strauss, Almodóvar tells of a scene in *Tacones Lejanos* in which Becky del Páramo (Marisa Paredes), the main character, comes home to die.

It's one of the rare scenes in my films which has to do with my father. He died of cancer twelve years ago. At the time, my family lived in Extremadura. When my father felt the end was near he asked my mother to take him back to the village of his birth. He was very ill. We all went back to the village, but obviously we no longer owned our family house. So my father moved into his sister's house which, in fact, happened to be his exact place of birth. His sister had the tact to give him my grandmother's bedroom and the very bed where he was born. When he arrived my father only had a dozen hours left to live, but the pain had entirely disappeared. It's amazing to see that death waited for him to return to his birthplace in order to take him away." (54)

It is not my intent to psychoanalyze Almodóvar or to find hidden instances of the/his dying father in all of his films, but to highlight the resonating powers of death, loss, and illness. What Freud only intimates in his quote is, for this chapter, the most important point: that death, and the emotional responses it is capable of producing, will always barrel forth from the past and bleed into the present.

An echo of the father's loss occurs in *Todo sobre mi madre*, in which a young man grieves over the absence of a father he has never known, and lives marked by that loss. Despite his mother's reluctance to reveal any information at all, the teenage Esteban begs to know more. His mother Manuela promises to reveal more to him as a sort of birthday present, only to be ultimately stopped short by the son's accidental death. As with Esteban, who felt the lack of a paternal relationship so keenly that he grieves for it, Manuela is deeply marked in this moment

and by the death of her son. Just as Esteban had once represented freedom from her unhappy past, his loss tethers her back to that past and to the boy's father (who, we soon find out, is indeed still alive).

Todo sobre mi madre is explicitly concerned with death and the liminal spaces where it seeps into life. The film opens with a slow pan down a drip bag, fading into life support machines with colorful buttons, and up to Manuela (played by Cecilia Roth). She studies the body laid before her, listening to the intermittent blips of the life support. She goes to make a call. Manuela's work in the hospital is soon after established—the camera focuses on a door sign that reads “Transplant Coordinator [Coordinación de transplantes]”. She explains to the woman on the other end of the line that, after the results of the EEG (which has presumably confirmed that the patient is brain dead), they have a “possible donor”. She gives a few vital details of the patient, and her colleague begins to look up a list of possible recipients for the man's liver.

The scene immediately cuts to Manuela at her home, the clinical shades of white in the hospital replaced by the vibrant splashes of color in her kitchen. She prepares dinner while Esteban watches television in the living room and writes in a notebook. The mechanical whirrs and ambient muffle of the hospital are replaced by the sounds emanating from the television of children laughing and playing. Esteban looks up from his writing to see a commercial for diapers, toddlers laughing and doing mock-exercises to the sounds of a cherubic jingle that promises no diaper leakage. The sharp break in tone, in which decisions of life and death gives way to children dancing and singing, shows Almodóvar's intentions very early on. The omnipresence of death and illness in the hospital is set up against the exuberance of life represented in children (including Manuela's own child) and the warmth of the home, and scenes of mortality and life are thus woven together tightly into a spectrum of life in death. Leo Bersani

and Ulysse Dutoit's contribution to the anthology *All About Almodóvar* will make a similar note of these early scenes, although with a slight shift in focus. Writing of the symbolism of life-liquids which are restricted, processed, or excreted (or, from the intravenous bag to the never-leaking diapers), they note that the film "begins with appealingly light reminders of the beauty of liquidity, its life-saving virtues, and the relative ease with which an undisciplined flowing can nonetheless be contained and absorbed" (254). What Bersani and Dutoit see in the flow and harnessing of life-liquids is the film's preoccupation with life and death, the borders of life that are always clearly marked by mortality.

In a similar manner, the first few moments of the film present an amplified view of death: the physical transplant of the organ of a (dead or brain-dead) donor into a new body, one that is debilitated but stands to be renewed by this transplant, recalibrates death in such a way that it is no longer just an unambiguous ending of life. In turn, Manuela's position as transplant coordinator prefigures her role as mother not only to Esteban, but perhaps even to the orphaned organs of the hospital, her responsibility for the safe care and delivery of her charges into a new home. The slide between scenes of death in the hospital and life in the home do not emphasize the difference between the two, but the ways that death and life always cross and mingle.

Shortly after these opening scenes, Esteban asks to come visit his mother at work during one of the mock transplant counseling sessions she takes part in. Set up as a training session for physicians, Manuela plays a grieving widow who is being informed of her husband's death. The physicians explain to her that through organ donation, and with her consent, her husband "could save other patient's lives". Esteban watches his mother and writes in his notebook. More than simply supporting the 'good act' of organ donation, this scene actually transforms death and mourning into a communitarian process. Even in the fiction of the training session, the linkages

between lives are made more evident while the division between life and death is made more porous. When Manuela's character misunderstands the concept of organ donation, responding to the physicians with "You mean you could give him a transplant?", they in turn stress that her husband's heart can help *another* person to live even though he will die, and that these acts (her act of signing off on the donation, his posthumous act of the donation itself) show proper concern for the lives of others. The physician's response is actually "Bueno, pero supongo que él era solidario con la vida de los demás" which frames organ donation as a decidedly political act,⁴² one that ties human lives together in life and death and, importantly, suggests that failure to follow suit means that one is therefore 'against life' or even 'pro-death'. Marking death and life in these ways clearly oversteps bounded concepts of living and dying so that what occurs in *Todo sobre mi madre* is never just a simple renewal of life, or a pure life carried out.⁴³

The interjection of life in death is made most pointed when Manuela's son Esteban is accidentally run over and killed. In an echo of the opening scenes of the liver transplant and the mock counseling session, Manuela is forced to deal with the loss of her son and approve the donation of his heart. When the two physicians arrive to inform her of her son's death, the same two who led the mock counseling session alongside Manuela, they inadvertently recreate the training scene. Rather than play the stunned widow who meekly signs off on her husband's donation, Manuela begins to sob at the physician's first words. Weeks later, still in shock, she locates the records of the transplant, goes "after her son's heart" (as she will later tell her supervisor), and arrives in A Coruña to witness the recipient emerge from the hospital. The man

⁴² In "The Rights of the Corpse", John Baglow notes that this is one of the more common approaches to positively describing the transplantation of organs; other discourses see it as a type of immortality and "a better fate than worms" (228).

⁴³ This scene has a very clear referent in an earlier film by Almodóvar, *The Flower of My Secret*. Not only does this film contain another donation training scene, but the woman playing the grieving relative is also named Manuela. See Marsha Kinder's analysis of these scenes in "Reinventing the Motherland: Almodóvar's Brain-Dead Trilogy." *Film Quarterly* 58.2 (Winter 2004-2005): 9-25.

exclaims “I feel like I can breathe like before!” and his wife happily replies, “Yes, with an 18-year-old’s heart!” The camera stays fixed on the man’s chest as he walks toward the audience until finally it closes in on the space where the heart lies. The screen goes dark.

Holding life and death as fixed binaries means that Esteban’s death will only ever be read as *death*; in turn, the continuation of life where life already is, or the curing of the specters of death (the old, bad heart) by the renewal of life (the heart of an 18-year-old), is supposed to circumvent death by promoting life. But fixing life and death in this manner refuses to take into account the vulnerability of the human body and how a capacity to be harmed can mark our social interactions with others and constitute, in part, a sense of self. The middle-aged man who emerges from the hospital with Esteban’s heart does so at the expense of the death of the teenager, a death that he admittedly did not cause or bring about but one that now thoroughly marks his living. This man now lives and breathes because of the boy’s death. Where could the line be drawn between death and life in this moment? Does Esteban live, in a fashion, if his heart still beats? If we consider the symbolic importance of the heart as affective center of the body or seat of the soul, the line is further blurred by this sequence, with the implication that some critical essence of Manuela’s dead son is now incorporated into another’s life. The point is clearly made: death is at work in life. Maybe we breathe easier at the death of another, or maybe we reconsider our places in the world after a death scare, or maybe the death of another shakes the very core of self-perception, but loss and mortality reveal the vulnerability of our social selves.

In staging human encounters with death in this fashion, Almodóvar seems to frame death in much the same way as Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender*, which gives an account of a politics based on loss, mourning, and the social constitution of our bodies. Butler writes that “we are, as

a community, subjected to violence, even if some of us individually have not been. And this means that we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable” (18). In *Precarious Life*, she reformulates this quote and adds: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20).⁴⁴ Following Butler, our proximity to loss and death as social beings must be read as humanizing and constitutive of a sense of one’s self. That is, rather than reading loss and death as privatizing or as finalities from which there is no return, Butler rethinks the potential of mourning to reveal our affective binds to others and to expose how constitutive sociality is to the formulation of the self. Therefore, grief “displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (19).

So when Esteban claims his life to be “missing its other half,” it is not only to say that his father defines his very core, but that he is also defined by the *loss* of the father—that poignant, powerful loss that dwells at the heart of every man, according to Freud. Butler (or perhaps even Almodóvar, after a fashion) might shift Freud by saying that loss always already dwells at the heart of everyone, by nature of our socially constituted selves. In focusing on mortality, mourning, and the interpenetrability of the human body by another, then, *Todo sobre mi madre* stamps vulnerability as a state of being that is at once physical, social, and political. Underscoring a politics of vulnerability sees the man’s emergence from the hospital as an emphasis on the ways that death inflects even the most joyful celebration of life. Similarly, when

⁴⁴ *Precarious Life* also expressly defines the named “community” as women and sexual minorities.

Manuela runs after her son's heart and finds it still beating, still alive in the body of the other, it is to emphasize humanity's interconnectedness on the basis of death and loss. As physical bodies that inhabit shared social spaces, our skin and flesh "expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 21), which is part of Manuela's pain in that moment: the healing powers of the transplant means that there must be a violence committed somewhere else, the invasive touch to her son's heart.

In her professional position as advocate of this interconnectedness, the "solidarity" with the well-being and mortality of the other, Manuela is faced with a very real and personalized loss in the wake of her son's death. This grief leads her on two journeys: the first in search of her son's heart, the second, in search of her son's father, abandoned years ago in Barcelona. Thus she abdicates the role of spokesperson for human interconnectivity and begins to *enact* it, through her grief. It is the opposite of what is expected of grief, a resistance of its paralysis. When her hospital supervisor shows up at her home only to learn that Manuela has recently returned from A Coruña and is now headed to Barcelona, the woman worriedly notes: "Manuela, you're in no shape to travel alone. You're ill. You have to rest up and get better." The solution is posited: resist the 'ill' effects of grief, rest, recuperate, move forward. But Manuela, mirroring Butler's line of questioning in *Undoing Gender*, refuses to let go of the grief. Butler's probing line is clear, rhetorically asking if there is something to be gained from "tarrying with grief, remaining exposes to its apparent tolerability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence?" (23). The answer is apparent even as the question is posed. Rather than the passivity and powerlessness of grief, Butler asks, might we be "returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?" (23). To tarry in this manner foils time lines, resists the move forward that is thought to mean the move

towards something better, and instead pauses and turns to face the past. It is much the same for Manuela, when the loss of her son aids the reconnection to her husband and old friends, while also allowing her to establish new friendships and kinships.

To “tarry in grief”, more so than being solely an affective response to a situation of loss, may also serve to reveal the physical bonds and the vulnerability that we are exposed to as social beings. Through grief and mortality we experience vulnerability, the laying bare of one’s death in the mortal reflection of the other, and the encounter with our own physical fragility in our interactions with the world. The body therefore has a public dimension and social dimension that must not be resisted. Butler will cite the physical exposure of the subway as a dimension of sociality, the “others I do not choose to have in proximity to myself” (21). Social experiences might largely be defined as vulnerability to others, and “staying with” the effects of grief can amplify (or simply reveal) this. Instead of following her supervisor’s exhortation to rest and recuperate so that she may be healed of her grief, Manuela embraces vulnerability and consequently finds herself thrust back into the social—exposed to physical violence and sadness, but also to love and the healing of wounds both new and old.

That death is overwhelmingly figured as masculine and paternal in many of Almodóvar’s films is no accident, then, particularly when seen alongside Manuela’s maternal characterization in *Todo sobre mi madre*. While the film uses the metaphor of organ donation and Butler uses the analogy of war, both posit that our “very survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control” (*UG* 13), which in turn highlights a precariousness of life that is rendered most dramatically within gender and sex. Surely, opening the self up to vulnerability can be a radical disruption to normative masculinity, which for so long has been held as that which is the most stable, the most unchanging, the most impermeable. Making

masculinity vulnerable and lingering within that vulnerability allows any set of assumptions about manhood and men to be challenged and allows for new possibilities of what masculinity might come to mean.

In this manner, perhaps the simplified reading of *Todo sobre mi madre* would locate Manuela on one side as the good mother, rendering her capacities as bearer of children and nurse who promotes life's extension as equivalent forces—while also viewing her pre-op transsexual husband Lola, a prostitute dying with AIDS, as the oppositional bad father, the omnipresent promise of death. But the lines aren't so clearly delineated. If Manuela is both biological mother and affective father to Esteban, Lola is matched as Esteban's biological father and, post surgery, a mother. In blurring the distinctive markers of life and death and subsequently pinning these to a gender system that only intermittently obeys normative rules via a masculinity that is made vulnerable and mortal, *Todo sobre mi madre* continually breaks down and complicates concepts of mortality, gender, and well-being. It would thus stand to reason that if Manuela is highlighted as the film's good mother-to-all, it is only by way of her contact with and reconstitution of the parameters of mortality. This capacity for reworking life in death is measured not simply in a feminine proximity to natality, but in masculine mortality. That is, it is not simply through Manuela's efforts as a woman or the curative powers of her femininity that the differences between death and life are rendered unclear, but also through the debilitating (when not wholly deadly) effects of certain types of masculinities. Or, to simplify further, it's not just that all of the women of the film are good and healthy and all of the men bad and sick, but that these boundaries are constantly being crossed. What is further intriguing about this film is the generative aspects of its sick masculinities, destabilized as they are from healthy ideals of manhood and paternity. In this regard, Almodóvar's reworking of masculinity in *Todo sobre mi*

madre reads fatherhood as a sort of viral pathogen, the spreading of a sometimes social, sometimes physical sickness that destroys and creates with equal measure.

For this reason, and in many ways justifiably so, Lola⁴⁵ receives the brunt of the film's ill will. When the grief-stricken Manuela returns to Barcelona to inform Lola of the death of their son, she meets Rosa (played by Penelope Cruz), a young nun who has a similarly complex relationship with Lola. Rosa's relationship with Lola is slowly revealed to be much more physical than initially suggested, and the audience soon learns that she is now carrying two of Lola's legacies: her unborn son, and the HIV virus. When she learns of Rosa's interactions with Lola, Manuela coolly notes that "Lola's got the worst of a man and the worst of a woman." By way of a third-person story that is obviously about herself, Manuela explains that after marrying Lola at a very young age, she was left behind in their native Argentina while her husband went to secure a job and save some money. After two years, she came to Barcelona to find that her husband had 'changed.' As she explains to Rosa, "The change was more physical. He'd gotten a pair of tits that were bigger than hers. My friend was very young. She was in a foreign land. She had no one. Apart from the tits, the husband hadn't changed that much, so she ended up accepting him." When Lola's controlling behavior and misogyny become too much, a pregnant Manuela abandons her husband in Barcelona for Madrid.⁴⁶ With the memory of Lola's betrayal

⁴⁵ A form of Lola's complex resistance of gender makes itself most apparent through language, and most specifically, in the choice of a pronoun. I have chosen to explicitly reference her masculinity (as the film most often does) while maintaining the usage of the feminine pronoun for her. In that way, I recognize the transgressive and pathogenic nature of her masculinity while also acknowledging her somewhat conventional physical presentation of femininity.

⁴⁶ One of the ways that the film further highlights the creational possibilities of loss is in its intertextual references to Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The story of Manuela and her husband Lola is to explicitly read as a reformulation of Stella and Stanley Kowalski, paralleled in violent misogyny and emotional abuse. Unlike any previous telling of the story, however, Manuela/Stella runs away from her husband in order to seek a new, better life; in that flight to Madrid and away from Lola, the loss of her husband and the giving up of a past, Manuela becomes defined by this past.

still sharp, she humorously remarks: “How could someone act so macho with a pair of tits like that?”

When Lola finally reveals herself at the end of the film, Manuela angrily tells her: “You aren’t a human being, Lola. You are an epidemic!” Lola, who has ghosted through the entire movie by rumors of her whereabouts and stories of her misdeeds, has appeared in the only place that makes sense—a cemetery. It is the only place she could appear, as the embodiment of a masculinity on life support, a proximity to death that is correlated in the narrative to her bad and dangerously viral masculinity. Using a cane to support herself, she sees Manuela and smiles: “I’m happy to see you. What a pity it has to be here.” Manuela is implacable: “It couldn’t be anywhere else.” If the location of this encounter further ties Lola to death and its processes, a bad specter haunting the cemetery, it does so by referencing her masculinity—even while physically demonstrating a sex that goes beyond masculinity’s normative boundaries.

Framing Lola as epidemic casts her as infecting pathogen, one that slips into the emotional and physical well-being of the film’s characters. Here it is useful to consider the Greek roots of *pathogen*, which can be translated as “I give birth to suffering” (*pathos* + *gen*). Indeed, when he holds her infant son and says: “My son, I’m sorry to leave you such an awful inheritance”, that legacy is meant to be both emotional and physical. That is, not only the real possibility of the child developing HIV in utero (which he does), but also the death of his mother from the same disease; and ‘disease’, at this point in the film, may well be read as Lola herself. Her pathogenic masculinity, presented to the audience through a body made vulnerable from illness and unintelligible to a normative sexual system, impregnates Rosa’s well-being. This is not to suggest that a pathogenic masculinity must be only ever read as “bad”, or that its effects may only be thought of as negative, but that it may have creational capacities. If suffering is

birthed, it does so at the expense of one and the gain of another. The Galician man who leaves the hospital breathing new life does so with the implant of Esteban's heart, a beating symbol of death and loss. The incubation of life in the man's chest and the child that Rosa carries are born out of suffering, death, and illness—twin pregnancies that emerge out of proximity to mortality and through loss. The results of suffering, that which is birthed in this moment, is something like a life (a dead man's heart allows one to live, a terminally-ill baby is conceived) that must always be rooted in its own mortality.

In the film's final scenes, we are told that the baby has in fact developed HIV, but that he has subsequently "neutralized the virus in record time." Manuela thus returns to Barcelona, some two years later, so doctors can study the child's medical records. In a tearful reunion with friends she explains that the virus has disappeared "practically overnight" in the child, and that his case "proves that the virus can disappear." Manuela is beaming: "They're still trying to figure out why, but it's a miracle." In a film filled with the shades of death always at work in life, what place does this utopic neutralization have here? Is it that Esteban is born from death, the sickness of his biological parents bringing about a curative fantasy of life? It does seem, after a fashion, to be a fairly orthodox ending for a film that challenges the bounded nature of life and death; firmly settling on the side of more life, eradicating the specters of mortality. Or perhaps it can be read differently: in short-circuiting a normative idea of masculinity within the film's male characters, *Todo sobre mi madre* highlights the feminine while at the same time stressing its intimate connection with masculinity, and vice versa. In doing so, in building a world that is bolstered by death just as it is by life, one that finds femininity and masculinity similarly in flux, this child "miraculously" escapes from the bad legacies of the past even while it must live within and because of them.

To visualize the ending of *Todo sobre mi madre* in this manner means that we must go beyond the prevailing ideas of what *death* entail; or to be more accurate, what these prevailing ideas entail at this moment in time. As John Sutton Baglow makes clear in “The Rights of the Corpse”, “When it comes to life and death, we are not really dealing with boundaries at all, but with a shifting liminal space whose outlines depend upon culture, time, and circumstance” (231). Indeed, reactions to death and the dead body have varied throughout history and societies. There is no modern *Ars moriendi*, for example, no commonly-held tradition of artful dying complete with rules of conduct for giving up one’s soul in imitation of a Christly death. It is therefore not my intention to claim that death means one precise thing across time and space, but to find the trace of its modern metaphors in the films of Almodóvar.

Films like *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and *Volver* seek to dwell in that liminal space that exists between death and life, a porous field full of ghosts and corpses. Writing of this space, Baglow claims that

...between life and death there lies not a boundary but a space, differing, certainly, from culture to culture and from historical period to historical period, populated by ghosts and near-ghosts, the prematurely buried with no discernible pulse or breath, ‘neo-morts,’ that is, breathing corpses with beating hearts, cryonic ‘corpsicles’ awaiting revivication, restless, ‘unusually spirited’ corpses who do not go gentle into the good night, and others who do so relatively tamely. (225)

Whether as bordered kingdoms, as Sontag’s opening remarks to *Illness as Metaphor* intimate, or existing in a boundless liminality, the contemporary distinctions between death and life or corpse and body have been rendered unstable in popular thought. This may be from the advancement of medical procedures that allow the body’s functions to be extended even when the mind has

ceased activity, which in turn creates a medial category that is in reality neither qualified life nor actual death (the so-called “neo-mort”). Even in Esteban’s “death” his body has not died, which is what allows for the transplantation of his heart to another. This not-dead body that holds the image of Esteban is no longer him, setting Manuela out for Galicia to find the trace of her son, that which for her is still alive. This is to say, as Baglow writes, that “the boundaries between individuals, between the living and the dead, and between the living embodied person and the corpse, are loose and flowing, porous, and are comprised in fact of leaky spaces, not clear lines of demarcation” (236).

Todo sobre mi madre marks the viral effects of pathogenic masculinities on the body—which is both the physical body, localized and represented through individual organ donation, and the larger social body, the connections forged between individuals on the basis of their vulnerability. In doing so, it exemplifies the slippage between representations of the vivified corpse (the “neo-morts” like Esteban), the body pathogenic, alive but symbolically propped up on the proximity of its death, and the healthy body, affected not by physical illness or death but by its affective ties to those bodies that are. Something similar occurs in Almodóvar’s *Hable con ella* (2002), where the vulnerability of the inert body also underscores the crumbling lines between life and death and masculinity and femininity. Unlike *Todo sobre mi madre*, however, *Hable con ella* makes masculinity porous in other ways—in proximity to the inert feminine body, in an emphasis on its seeping fluids, in the varied changes wrought by death. If the

masculine body (an undoubtedly vexed term)⁴⁷ is affecting pathogen in *Todo sobre mi madre*, it is affected/infected host in *Hable con ella*.

From its initial sequence, *Hable con ella* emphasizes the creational potential of mortality and illness, as well as the ways that our bodily vulnerability corresponds to personal interconnectedness. A theater curtain opens on a Pina Bausch production, *Café Müller*. The stage is filled with chairs. Two women dance with their eyes closed; sometimes moving quickly across the stage, sometimes falling, sometimes bumping into walls. A man scatters the chairs in front of them so they do not fall. The camera cuts to two men, Benigno and Marco, seated next to each other and enthralled by the production. When Marco begins to weep, Benigno steals glances at him. Benigno, a nurse, will later recount the production of *Café Müller* while caring for his comatose charge Alicia. Telling her that he has brought her a gift, he presents her with a signed photograph of Pina Bausch. The female dancers were “like two sleepwalkers,” he tells Alicia, and the man scattering chairs did so “with such a sad face. The saddest I’ve ever seen.”

Reading this moment out of its linearity, his care for Alicia’s prone body, the unnamed man’s care for the two ‘sleepwalking’ women of *Café Müller*, and Marco’s attending to his girlfriend Lydia (who will be gored by a bull during the film) are thus presented as commensurate acts. In all three scenarios the female body is debilitated or disabled and subsequently placed under the care of a man. This is not to be read as a misogynous act on the part of Almodóvar; if anything, the physical disabling of the women directly corresponds to the dependency their caretakers feel

⁴⁷ This may be a distinction that only works if one holds tight to the categories of masculinity/femininity or death/life and overlooks the deft reworking of mortality and gender that Almodóvar proffers. If masculinity and femininity are indeed made porous, if death and life go beyond issues of finite temporalities and physical mortality, then to make a claim for a distinct masculinity may seem somewhat crude. It is, nevertheless, a necessary crudeness, given that we have yet to find a system that has escaped such categorization. If I hold that Almodóvar slips his characters out of the constraints of normative gender roles by way of death, which I do, it may be an escape route that, for now, lies only in metaphor.

towards them. The man who runs after the women, flinging chairs to keep them from falling or harming themselves, is tethered to their vulnerability at the expense of his own well-being or happiness. Marco and Benigno (much more so the latter) are similarly tied to the demands of the deposited flesh, sublimating themselves to comatose lovers. The vulnerability of the comatose body underscores a larger vulnerability, that of the social body within the formation of interpersonal ties. In their one-sided interactions with Alicia and Lydia, who breathe but do not wake, who live but are not alive, Almodóvar emphasizes masculinity's interaction with the liminal space that divides life from death. Masculinity brushes up against grief and death, altering and altered in that meeting.

In "Reinventing the Motherland", Marsha Kinder groups *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella* with 1995's *The Flower of My Secret* in a 'brain-dead' trilogy, arguing that such a trope "enables names, plots, words, viruses and other vital organs to pass fluidly from one body or text or nation to another, a process introduced through the recurring figure of the brain-dead youth" (14). As I have done, Kinder reads loss and grief against the grain, highlighting the repeated images of comatose and brain-dead bodies as catalysts for a "trans-subjective intertextuality" (14) that "can potentially turn vengeful patriarchal nations into nurturing motherlands" (22). Kinder's analysis of the intertextuality of the three films emphasizes how Almodóvar dismantles the border space between life and death, which by her account results in the creation of a supra-feminine, destabilized subject. However, in emphasizing the creational aspects of the (biological or sociocultural) transplant and linking them to a clearly-marked maternity, I would suggest that we lose the potential of a masculinity vivified in death. It is not that Lola or Benigno or Marco are simply incorporated into an ever-expansive femininity, but that the bounded concepts of femininity and masculinity themselves are melted down into something entirely different.

The end result is a queer amalgamation of gender that seems to ebb and flow freely amongst the characters of these films. *Hable con ella* first hints at such a recalibrated masculinity through the character of Benigno, who continually evades an easily categorized sexuality. His sidelong glance at Marco in the audience of *Café Müller* is veiled, and may potentially hint at an erotic subtext that is further bolstered when he describes Marco as “handsome [guapo]” to Alicia. In the moment that he says this, he is very carefully attending to her hands and nails. Despite his clearly coded effeminacy and these vaguely sexual remarks, it soon becomes clear that he is deeply devoted to Alicia. But even the nature of this attachment is probed: as the storyline progresses, the audience learns that he lived with his mother for 15 years before she died, caring for her as he will care for Alicia. Upon the death of his mother, he is free to actively pursue Alicia, whom he has watched from his window across from the dance studio where she rehearses. In doing so he finds out where she lives, and visits her psychiatrist father in an attempt to get closer to her. “I just wanted to see Alicia again,” he admits in voiceover, “but I was there and her father was a psychiatrist, so I decided to tell him I missed my mother.” The father comes to the same conclusion the audience may have, prodding Benigno to reveal his “problem” and reading Benigno’s uncommon affection for his mother as a stamp of a “special” masculinity. Rummaging through her things after his meeting with Dr. Roncero, Benigno startles a towel-clad Alicia emerging from the shower and flees the house. Soon after she is hit by a car and left in a coma.

The father eventually confronts Benigno in the hospital, pointedly asking him about his sexual orientation. While massaging Alicia’s inner thigh, Benigno confesses to Dr. Roncero that he is “oriented more towards men.” He is quick to insist that he is fine now, though, and that he is no longer alone. Thus, even in admitting a theoretical attraction towards men, he implicitly

cites Alicia as his new partner and throws doubt on the entire exchange. Indeed, in recounting the conversation to a co-worker he explains that he lied, and notes Dr. Roncero's employment of the word 'orientation': "He used the American expression, it's more subtle." The potential of this scene is that it provides a resistance to a specific mode of sexual categorization, one that describes desire and love in terms of orientation towards a fixed gender. Benigno dismisses 'orientation' as foreign, and in admitting the lie ("I like men") he nevertheless does not explicitly embrace heterosexuality, even in his relationship with Alicia. That is, the correlative truth to the lie may not be "I like women" but "I talk to Alicia and I am no longer alone." If the division itself is foreign to him, it would stand that his love for Alicia is not based on a generic system of normative sexuality but on a queered desire towards a specific love-object.

Kevin Ohi's interpretation of *Hable con ella* takes the suggestion of Benigno's queerness even further. In "Voyeurism and Annunciation in Almodóvar's *Hable con ella*", Ohi tackles the thorny issue of Alicia's impregnation by suggesting that what is most often framed as rape may be a sort of immaculate conception of words. "In lieu of a rape, the film shows Benigno's retelling (to Alicia) of a film, his rendering, in narrative, of his experience of visual absorption. The narration seems in turn to bring into being Alicia's pregnancy (525). This analysis is particularly suggestive, for rather than read orientation and sexuality in terms of the psychiatrist who is quick to seize upon Benigno's relationship with his mother as telling mark of repressed (homo)sexuality, it opens up the possibility for grids of desire to flow between the characters. That is, Benigno's love for Alicia is manifested in words, in storytelling, in speech, rather than as an easily categorizable sexuality; and in this, we hear the echo of Almodóvar's aphorism in the DVD's commentary track: "Whoever speaks, loves." In this way, conception is less about the domination and penetration of one by another and more about speech, about mutual absorption

or barring this possibility, the giving up one's self through the basis of shared vulnerability, the melding of one into the other. Benigno finishes recounting the plot of the silent film, which ends with the shrinking man entering into his beloved's vagina in an act of complete and final absorption. There is a quick cut to a close up of the lava lamp besides Alicia's bed. The camera is zoomed in tight as the audience watches the globules stretch towards each other, absorb one another, separate, form new connections; suggesting not only the biological process of conception but the final act of the lover, his becoming one with his sleeping beauty.

To speak of absorption in these terms is another sort of pathogenesis, another creative act that is produced in death, illness, and loss. In an earlier scene, Alicia's dance teacher Katerina visits the hospital. She describes a dance that she is choreographing, set in World War I and called *Trenches*. She needs a lot of male dancers, she explains, because the piece is mainly about soldiers. But "there are also ballerinas, because in the ballet, when a soldier dies, from his body emerges his soul, his ghost, and that's a ballerina. Long tutu...but with blood stain, red." In her vision of *Trenches*, "from death emerges life, from the masculine emerges the feminine, and from the earth emerges...the ethereal." *Trenches* emphasizes this absorption of one into the other, but (as Katerina herself notes) it is never so one-sided, that the feminine that emerges does so stained with the blood of the soldier, and that life is made possible through death. The dynamic relational flows that characterize the bonds between Benigno, Alicia, Marco, and Lydia are born out of illness and mortality. Benigno's connection to Alicia is formed out of her convalescence and his pathologized masculinity—read as deviant, subnormal, pathetic. In a similar way, Marco and Benigno kindle a deep friendship with openly homoerotic notes out of their care for their comatose female lovers.

This is addressed most explicitly in the pair's meetings during Benigno's imprisonment. Seated across from the other and divided by a glass, they are doubled up on each other, the mirror image of one superimposed on the other by the angle of the camera lens. Benigno says that their time apart has not felt so distant because he has been thinking about Marco at night while reading the other's travel guides. "It was like traveling for months with you at my side," he says to his friend. Later, in their final meeting, Marco reaches out to touch the glass separating them. Benigno smiles and says, "I'd like to be able to hug you. But I I'd have to ask for a vis-à-vis. I checked it out, you know? They asked if you were my boyfriend. I didn't dare to say yes, in case it bothered you." Marco openly cries at this. He responds: "It doesn't bother me at all. You can say what you want." Benigno quietly states, by way of ending the conversation, "I've hugged very few people in my life." In the intimacy of this moment, the pair dismiss and dismantle the word 'boyfriend' [pareja] together, as Benigno has done earlier with 'orientation.' It is tossed aside, a word that imperfectly expresses devotion and desire for the presence of the other. What place does that word have in this moment, between these two men? The following scene cuts to Marco sleeping in Benigno's bed, as he is now renting the other man's apartment. Atop the sheets is the monogrammed handkerchief that Benigno embroidered for Alicia, and on the bedside table a photo of Lydia and a copy of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*.⁴⁸ The elaborate mise en scène connects the film's cast intimately: Marco sharing Benigno's bed, the unoccupied side marked by the absence of the other man yet flush with his symbolic remainder, the delicate

⁴⁸ A placement that I do not believe casual, given that Cunningham's story shares many narrative similarities. The most salient is that of the three primary characters, who are separated by time and space and yet interact, share experiences, and affect each other, after a fashion. That is, and as example: the book follows Virginia Woolf as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923, a woman who reads the novel in 1949 as she plans her husband's birthday party, and a third woman who relives a version of the story in 1998 while planning a party for a good friend and ex-lover who is dying of AIDS. The placement of this novel also suggests the emphasis on time in this and other films of Almodóvar—the nebulous time of the coma, the lost time between Benigno and Marco, and the time of and leading to death.

white cloth of Alicia's handkerchief lying on the bed, and Lydia's silent gaze in the photo all speak to the unbounded couplings produced in absence, loss, and the disabling of the body.

The pathogenic masculinity that marks *Todo sobre mi madre* is taken further in *Hable con ella*, to the liminal space where communication with the brain-dead is not a fantasy but a necessity, where the trappings of everyday language become meaningless, and where gender and sexuality move fluidly. Seen as a larger comment on mortality and loss, these films deal with death squarely, in all its rawness and with all the ugly outcomes that it can produce. In doing so, in tarrying with loss and mourning, the characters of these films find themselves transformed and shaped. Redefining masculinity through the lens of death means that Almodóvar can recast gender and sexuality with a fluidity that they lack, in fantasy worlds that still have no correlative. In the creational birth and liberation from illness of the third Esteban at the end of *Todo sobre mi madre*, Almodóvar underscores the wonders that can be wrought even in death; it is paralleled with the loss of a child in *Hable con ella*, the miscarriage of the son that revives Alicia. There is something productive about reimagining death this way, something that scatters the shadows of loss and allows us to dwell in the dark.

Timing Out

It is, granted, a 'dark' that is at times most cheerily portrayed in Almodóvar's filmography. The initial sequence of *Volver*, for example, foregoes the presentation of death as always coupled with mourning or through a grief-stricken character in favor of seeing it as a function of life, a job that forms part of the work of living. The film opens with a long, slow tracking shot of older women cleaning graves with rags, scrubbing what is presumably their loved ones' tombstones until they shine. While the camera continues its slow pan, "Las espigadoras [The gleaners]", a cheery zarzuela tune, plays in the background. While the song's

lead voice (Conchita Panadés) tells of the women who glean the harvest behind the men who reap, these women form a chorus behind her, echoing her words. In the juxtaposition of song and image, the women scrubbing tombstones are transformed into a united chorus of “gleaners.” The performance of menial tasks—concurrently, gleaning the leftovers from a harvest and scrubbing gravestones—is made integral to daily life, as necessary as the men who have gone before them. The care for the dead is thus written as a feminine task, its grim associations with mortality emptied in the mundanity of the cleaning process and invested with a history of feminine supervision of the household and its traditions. For this reason the teenage Paula, who is visiting her grandparents’ graves with her mother Raimunda and her aunt Sole, is initially shown ill at ease and out of place amongst the old women of the village. When their neighbor Agustina arrives to clean her own grave, she looks at her mother incredulously: “That freaks me out.” Her Aunt Sole smiles and says, “It’s tradition here.”

In contrast with the contemporaneity of Paula, Agustina is marked by her difference from both the battalion of older women who scrub the headstones and the sisters who have come to tend to their parents’ graves; of age with the siblings, more or less, but seemingly more linked with the older women, who salute her affectionately. Her head is shaved, a foreshadowing announcement of terminal illness, and her links to death are self-evident as she tends to her grave, lovingly gazing upon it. “I want to give my grave a once-over,” she tells Raimunda and Sole. “Cleaning it relaxes me. I often come here and sit on my own, and time goes by.” Her words as translated in the film’s subtitles strike a chord with the essence of the scene, which has stressed the passing of time in its juxtaposition of age with youth and death with life, and which utilizes a song from 1930 within the modern media of film to further highlight the passage of time. This emphasis is no less evident in Agustina’s actual words, “...se me pasan las horas

muertas”, highlighting the ‘dead hours’ that fly by as she sits at her grave. In the first few minutes of the film, then, Agustina has been designated as something like what Carla Freccero terms a “future dead person”, a turn of phrase that emerges out of a roundtable in which Freccero discusses her writing on death⁴⁹ and its ramification for her ruminations on her own mortality. As Freccero explains, “I began to calibrate time; it became something to have or not to have, and something that could run out, something I could not watch pass, but that passed anyway. I keep trying to return, but...I keep getting blown backward, away from or toward. This is my experience of the limit (a limit) to thinking through temporality” (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities”, 184).

Agustina’s quiet/dead hours spent at her grave overturn “modern” preoccupations with outliving or prolonging death and propel her into a time where she is not, a time that exists in and because of (her) death. In her proximity to that death, which is first rendered affectively and only later made manifest in a terminal and malignant cancer, time is not something that Agustina watches pass but that she *experiences*. The asynchronicity of her life, framed as both eventual lack of future (time will stop) and a future in and of itself (time leads me there), is intimately tied to the impossible experience of her death. It is not that Agustina can imagine her death in the abstract, as it tends to be conceptualized and which ultimately put one no closer to the absoluteness of mortality; rather, she embraces the reality and inevitability of her own physical demise, and imagines herself as a future dead person that lives, but only momentarily so, and amongst hours that are already dead and flying by. Steven Marsh will similarly underscore Agustina’s illness as a framework for understanding her anticipation of a future death in “Missing a Beat: Syncopated Rhythms and Subterranean Subjects in the Spectral Economy of *Volver*.” As Marsh writes:

⁴⁹ For an example, see: Freccero, Carla. *Queer/Early/Modern*. Raleigh: Duke UP, 2006.

In keeping with local tradition, Agustina cares for her tomb as the anticipated home of her body after death, but in her case, the traditional act is shot through with something more particular, more personal. She knows, without of course quite knowing, that her body ‘houses’ the lurking alien, the intimate enemy, of cancer. Her body a home to cancer, the tomb a home to her body, Agustina is enmeshed in a circuit in which discrete time lines and stories are twisted into an almost indistinguishable mess. (346)

To inhabit the no-space of the ‘future dead’ is to disrupt a time line that favors linearity and homogeneity, although such a disruption does not come without great difficulty. Freccero herself notes how she is thwarted from imagining herself as a future dead person, blown back like Benjamin’s angel, by history and by a normative time line. She will thus note how crucial teleology is to our imaginings of time: “We’re born and then at the end, yup, we die. In between we seem to go from ‘prematuration’ to maturation to aging and decay; concepts like growing, then growing up, then aging, getting old, and dying sketch a predictable, inevitable, irrevocable time line” (193). It is in the shuffling of this linearity, at the almost impossible task of projecting oneself outside of time, that we may be able to find and inhabit new possibilities of personhood. Agustina’s nearness to mortality in *Volver* serves to vivify her connections to community and family and allows her to see ‘ghosts’, or to reconnect with the bad past in a way that resolves it for good, making explicit the film’s linkage of death and time.

The ties to death and loss grow ever more evident as *Volver* unfolds. After the death of their mother and father in a fire, Raimunda and her sister Sole attempt to cope with their loss even though Raimunda has been estranged from her parents since her father raped and impregnated her (one of the film’s third-act revelations). When their mother begins to “appear”

to Sole, she does so as a very corporeal ghost who exercises, dyes her hair, and still walks around the house farting. It soon becomes clear to the spectator that she is not actually dead, and it is later revealed that she set the fire that killed her husband upon learning what he had done to Raimunda and finding him in bed with Agustina's mother. She returns "from the dead" in order to set things right with Raimunda and to care for the family. Agustina, who remains unaware of any of these developments, holds tight to the belief that the ghost of Raimunda and Sole's mother will also "come back" to her, to explain to her the mystery of her own mother's disappearance and to comfort her as she draws closer to death. When Irene finally does appear in order to care for her, the now very ill Agustina heaves a relieved sigh. "I've longed to see you," she tells the older woman. In a film where the past comes back to haunt its characters, literally and figuratively, *Volver* emphasizes non-linear accounts of life: the dead may return, the living may exist outside of life, and the generational time of family can be folded in on itself through incest. The film posits a queer relationship to time that is both tradition-based and pre-modern, and in this it forges an intimate connection to death and mortality.

Understanding this coupling of death and time, in turn, has the potential to radically subvert normative sexualities, as previously seen with the characters of Lola in *Todo sobre mi madre* and Benigno in *Hable con ella*. Lola's generative potential, exemplified through the fertility of her illness and her sex, is linked to her (lack of) time and her otherworldly apparition at the cemetery. She impregnates Rosa with a child and with HIV, just as she has been impregnated with the illness, and it is by way of that proximity to death that Almodóvar is able to rewrite gender and sexual norms.⁵⁰ In a somewhat similar fashion, Benigno operates 'out of time' in his role as caretaker of Alicia and Lydia (the latter by proxy, as he instructs Marco how

⁵⁰ This is not to employ the standard discourse that says that HIV or AIDS is equivalent to death, but to simply note her advanced state of illness in the film. When she finally turns up in the film, it is only to "say goodbye" to her loved ones and, in fact, she dies soon after.

to care for her). His utter absorption into Alicia, emphasized by the symbolic imagery of the silent film he recounts to her, is a giving up of the time of life to dwell in death (or to dwell in the near-death of the neo-mort); and not simply metaphorically so, for he actually gives up his life so that he can return to Alicia in death. From this absorption and immaculate conception of words, if we hold to Ohi's account, Alicia is revived in death, through death, and because of death, brought back from an unknown world that only exists outside of linear time. With regard to Alicia's recently-awakened state, Ohi writes: "[Almodóvar] wanted to intimate a world within her body and eyes that is nevertheless not legible there—or, if legible, legible only as inaccessible. Her eyes, [Almodóvar] remarks, were to convey that she had been (and was, partly, still) in a place 'very far away'" (549). Brought out of non-linearity but still belonging to it, some part of her left behind in that little death, Alicia can be read as a counterpart to Agustina or Lola or even Benigno in the experience of life as a "dead person" walking.

The embrace of an ontological status as the "future dead" thus echoes Butler's call to "tarry with" with loss, mourning, and grief, with an important shift. Whereas Butler advocates embracing the loss of the other as that which alternately propels one to grieve and revives a sense of shared humanity, the imperative of the future dead is to dwell in the (perhaps unfathomable) loss of self through death as basis for experiencing one's own mortality and highlighting interpersonal connectivity. To "tarry with death," as this latter imperative urges, is to experience oneself outside of time. Or, if not so radical a rupture, then it is to experience time's limits pressing into the body, and to give way to the germic potential of one's proximity to death. By definition, to "tarry" means "to stay longer than intended" or to "delay leaving a place" (New Oxford American Dictionary). Thus the invitation to "tarry" with death as a future dead person similarly highlights a pausing moment, an attempt to resist the linear grip of time, in whatever

way that may be possible. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman theorizes the potential of thinking against “the dominant arrangement of time and history..., in which historical narrative organizes various temporal schemae into consequential sequence” (xi). Her argument for a “queer time,” in turn, tracks “the ways that nonsequential forms of time can also fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye” and proposes a “counterpolitics of encounter in which bodies...meet one another by chance, forging—in the sense of both making and counterfeiting—history differently” (xi).

Freeman’s concept of “queer time” has direct links to the “future dead” of Freccero. Both argue that the body’s subjection to linear time lines is a normativizing force, one that produces “discursive regimes” constructed out of a belief in the seamless, homogenous, and forward-moving flow of time (Freeman xxii). To argue for a queer temporality, as Freeman explicitly does, is an attempt to fashion “points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others” (xxii). As with the “future dead person,” this active disavowal of the linearity of time makes a conscious invocation of those ‘horas muertas,’ the dead hours and liminal spaces that a character like Agustina finds in the contemplation of her grave. And to be clear, if “queer time” is to be a radical refashioning of linear time that proposes humanistic possibility in the futurity of death, it is also one that looks backwards in time to those long dead and gone. It is a complex refashioning of time, and one that Almodóvar himself works through in *Volver*. In the richness of the film’s initial scene, which asynchronously stacks modernity and tradition on top of each other, we see the teenaged Paula’s horror that Agustina would visit her own grave. Her Aunt Sole’s insistence that it is the custom of the village does nothing to assuage Paula. As a representative of urbanity and modernity, Paula becomes a stand-in for any member of the

audience who would read this act as similarly unfathomable, as old-fashioned, or superstitious; Agustina represents both tradition and future possibility, paradoxically, by embodying a traditional ideal that breaks from the modern linearity of time lines.

This follows what Freeman says of the lost (or misplaced, perhaps) potential of queerness, which is often framed only as future possibility that must first “dissolve forms, disintegrate identities, level taxonomies, scorn the social, and even repudiate politics altogether” (xiii). What if this were not the only position available? In a shift in the valuation of queerness, Freeman formulates the potential of the ‘pastness’ of queer time: “I think the point may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (xiii). After a fashion, this chapter has attempted to reclaim some of that dead space, the tail ends of time, and imagine them extended, paused, or looped back around to vivify the present. The generative nature of Lola’s illness and the miracle baby Esteban of *Todo sobre mi madre* may serve as one such example, wherein the dead past becomes the means to live in the present and imagine a future; the virulence of violence, the bloodied children of the Civil War returned and reframed as self-replicating cells of war, may present another. By taking refuge in the past, in the pre-modern traditions that have been discarded in favor of increasing urbanity and globalization, Agustina queers time. The fact that she does so by a turn to the past, rather than the forward-motion of linear time, might be the more radical move and may consequently embody the film’s ultimate imperative. The title *Volver*, most logically read as the simple infinite “to return”, is also used as the impersonal command form “return” in Spanish: “Return!” To what, exactly? For it seems more than a simple urge from Almodóvar to return to roots, to tradition, but to understand how the past continues to etch itself in the present and anticipate the future. Agustina’s turn to future

inevitability through the lens of past traditions is the exemplary figure of the imperative to return, and in her illness and mortality she embodies a queerness that is rarely understood as such.

Paula, in this reading of the film, is in this manner made an implicit double for Agustina, while also serving as her obverse. The differences are immediately obvious: she is framed as a sort of avatar of modernity in her youth, her distaste for and lack of knowledge of past traditions and family history, and in her apparent inability to separate herself from her mobile phone. She does not actively embrace a status as the “future dead,” as Agustina does, yet she is still thoroughly identified as an embodiment of the actions of the past filtered through the symbol of youth and futurity; that is, by being set apart as a modern teenager who is distanced from the traditions of the village and thoroughly incorporated into urbanity, the revelation of her lineage and her actual identity as product of incest pulls her back into the past, into violent actions that have left an indelible mark.

When confronting her mother Raimunda about her heritage, she hesitantly asks: “Who was my father?” Raimunda succinctly answers, “A guy from the village... He’s dead. I’ll tell you everything, I swear.” She delays revealing her daughter’s past to her in this moment for a party that is being thrown, and (in the temporal confines of the film, at least) they never return to the discussion. In this infinite delay there are echoes of Esteban confronting Manuela about his own paternity, and her promise to discuss the truth of his origins to a future moment that is forever deferred after his death. The intertextual connections between these two children of violence, those that have been born from bad fathers and pathogenic masculinities, seems to reveal a concern on Almodóvar’s behalf for the future rooted in the violence of the past. Unlike the bleakness of Villaronga’s circular histories and the inevitable return of a viralized violence, however, Almodóvar imagines a future that is queered by such temporal shifting in much

brighter terms. This is not to seek a hopeful or happy ending, a good out of the bad of death, but Almodóvar's films do seem to proffer something like the promise of a hope born out of the queer time of tarrying with death.

If Paula may serve to represent a queer folding in of generational time and the subsequent possibilities for imagining a futurity that emerges out of the bleakness of past violence (but one that, importantly, will not be able to escape its violence), she only does so after the disturbing truth surrounding her paternity is revealed. Up unto that point she is a clear stand-in for an audience disconnected from village superstitions and traditions, and her murky origins are not even put into question. The revelation of incest occurs relatively late in the film and only between Raimunda and her mother; although there is the strong sense that she will eventually be told at some point beyond the film's end, Paula is not privy to this information. What might this suggest about origin stories, or about the bad events that we have unknowingly—and yet thoroughly—been shaped by? It is another moment where Esteban seems to haunt the narrative in the sensation of incompleteness, of missing an origin that he has never been privy to. It is classified information, and both Paula and Esteban ultimately remain ignorant of who their fathers really are, even though they are marked by this loss.

Although the audience is not initially made aware of its causes, this produces a sharp tension between Paula and Paco, who has raised her as his daughter and who she consequently believes to be her biological father. When Paula and Raimunda return from the visit to the cemetery that opens the film, the young girl immediately flops down in a chair next to Paco. Wearing a short skirt and pink tights, she places one leg on the arm of the chair while distractedly playing with her mobile phone. Paco turns and looks down at her splayed legs, his gaze wandering up her body. The camera follows his gaze back down towards her exposed

crotch, lingering momentarily. The bright shock of suggestive pink underneath her short denim skirt is revealed to the camera, to Paco. “Did you have fun?” he asks her quietly. Paula looks up from the mobile phone incredulously: “In the cemetery? Are you kidding me?” Raimunda walks in and unsuspectingly interrupts the awkwardness of the interaction, picking up Paco’s empty beer cans and ordering Paula to sit properly. Without the disclosure that is to come, that Paula is not his biological daughter, the audience is left to read Paco’s leering gaze as predatory, ominously menacing, and above all, incestuous. And this assumption doesn’t miss the mark, really, for despite his later insistence that his sexual interest isn’t “wrong” because she isn’t his biological daughter, Paco has raised Paula as his own.

The next scene only further solidifies any doubts of Paco’s sexual interest in his daughter. As he emerges from the living room and walks down the hall, unbuttoning his pants to get ready for bed, he finds her door cracked open. As he walks towards it he sees a bare-breasted Paula changing clothes. He stands in the dark of the hall momentarily, the camera over his shoulder and gazing in with him. He shuffles off before she turns around, presumably hearing a sound out in the hall. The film quickly cuts to the bed he shares with Raimunda, where he is now so sexually excited (and given the amount of beer cans Raimunda has picked up, probably drunk) that he begs her for sex. When she rebuffs him, he begins to masturbate energetically. The furtiveness of his peeping into Paula’s room and his subsequent immediate arousal confirms the illicit nature of this sexual desire. The family unit is thus doubly fettered to incest: Raimunda’s molestation produces Paula, who escapes one incestuous father only to be subject to one who is just as monstrous and predatory. *Almódovar* loops the normative generational time of the family back in on itself, and in doing so he clearly indicts bad figures of paternity while also highlighting the transformative potential of reimagined familial bonds. The removal of the bad

father through murder emphasizes sorority and redirects the generational time of the family so that it is no longer forward-moving but returning backwards—through time, tradition, and death.

In order to redirect towards a family time that lies outside the binds of normative patriarchy, Paco must die. This occurs quite by accident, when he drunkenly attacks Paula one day. Returning home from work in the rain, Raimunda finds her daughter soaked and waiting for her at the bus stop. When she asks how long Paula has been standing there, the young girl blankly replies, “I don’t know. A while.” Raimunda brushes this answer off with a quizzical look, and then demands to know why her daughter has not been answering her phone all day. “Where were you? With your pals?”, she asks, annoyed. In a flat tone, Paula answers, “No. I wasn’t anywhere.” These answers are given out of shock, out of the trauma of what has just occurred with her father, yet they also highlight a shift for Paula, who has been the film’s prime example of the forwardness of modernity. Paco’s death/murder dislocates her temporally, and she is separated from the normative time of family, youth and maturation, and sexuality. Her answers to Raimunda’s confused questioning reveal the split. She has lost time, figuratively and literally—the time from the accidental murder to the present moment, but a different sort of experiential time as well, one that isn’t measured in hours or minutes but by the expectation of a normative sequencing of events for developing sexuality. If Agustina embraces disjointed time, Paula is forced into it. It is an ugly sort of genesis, true, but the trauma of her assault generates a new experience of time and the world that Almodóvar seems to highlight as more desirable, authentic (in its proximity to traditional origins), and liberating. This new experience of time, for Paula, is intimately connected to frictional contact with pathogenic masculinity.

If this is the case for Paula, it is also so for her mother Raimunda, who has undergone a similar (if far worse) experience with her own father. Abandoning home and family after her

assault and subsequent impregnation, Raimunda has maintained ties only with her sister Sole and her Aunt Paula.⁵¹ Her mother, oblivious to Raimunda's molestation, experienced the actions of her suddenly distant daughter as wild and unfathomable rebellion. *Volver's* emphasis on the queer flows of time and its subsequent imperative to return will therefore largely be directed towards Raimunda, who is stymied in her continual flight away from the past. This fantasy of happy heteronormativity is broken down in the murder of Paco, who falls on the knife Paula uses to defend herself. When she arrives in her kitchen to find Paco lying in a pool of his own blood, she is stunned but immediately sets about clearing the evidence. In a sequence of quick cuts that emphasize the domestic humor of the moment, Raimunda throws down paper towels to sop up her husband's blood and brings out a mop to clean the floor. It is a scene reminiscent of Almodóvar's earlier film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, in which the protagonist Pepa (Carmen Maura) stars in a commercial for "Ecce Homo", a laundry detergent that is also used for cleaning traces of criminal evidence.⁵² She eventually rids herself of the body, burying it beside a river near her village that Paco was fond of. The masculinities embodied by these men are marked as both constraining and creational in many of the same ways that we have seen in Almodóvar's previous films: Manuela decries the misogyny of Lola, Benigno's desire for Alicia results in what is often considered to be a rape. Likewise, Raimunda's father is marked as the ghost that she flees from (that she will never escape, as long as Paula is with her) and Paco is

⁵¹Naming Raimunda's daughter after her elderly Aunt is another clear example of the way that the generational time of the family is doubled, where names are repeated and carried through into the future. It is a similar trick to the thrice-named baby Esteban at the end of *Todo sobre mi madre*, a child who has inherited the names of both the father (Lola) and the teenage Esteban who dies at the beginning of the film, which suggests both intimate connection and queerly formed patrilineal ties.

⁵² Playing the mother of "the famous Cuatro Caminos killer", Maura's character in the commercial humorously bemoans the state of her son's bloody clothes after he returns from his crimes. The solution is to use Ecce Homo, which is remarked to leave "not a trace of blood! Or guts!" The intertextual play is rather fascinating here, for Penélope Cruz's Raimunda diegetically recreates the murder and cover up of her husband, as her mother (played by Carmen Maura) has done; this is at once a nod to Maura's earlier role as the mother of the Cuatro Caminos Killer, and a point to the future, where Penélope Cruz will be recast as Maura's character Pepa in select sequences from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in Almodóvar's 2009 film *Broken Embraces*.

unable to be her passage to safety, to linear generational time and the heteronormative family life of father, wife, and daughter. As examples of violent and retrograde masculinities, they are obstacles to realizing a turn to queer time even while both are, after a fashion, forgiven for what they have done. Only in her slow liberation from these men and her turn back to the traditions of the past will Raimunda be able to see the “ghost” of her mother materialize before her. It is worth noting that, up to this point, Irene has only appeared to the dying Aunt Paula and to Sole—two of the characters most rooted in family and the past, the former in her proximity to death and the latter in the solitude that is her namesake.

The most tender example of the loss that Raimunda feels for her family and for the time of the past comes in a later scene, when she decides to sing for her daughter and sister. Paula has been having problems coping with her accidental murder of Paco, and Raimunda has promised to reveal the truth of her paternity to her as soon as they have the time. This occurs during a film crew’s wrap party at the restaurant that Raimunda has assumed control of, so she wants to delay the potentially explosive revelation until afterwards. As they take a break at the bar, a group of musicians starts strumming the opening chords of a song Raimunda knows from her childhood. “I can see the twinkling / of the lights in the distance / that are marking my return” she softly sings, surprising Paula and Sole. The latter emotionally remarks how long it’s been since she heard Raimunda sing, and Paula remains open-mouthed before saying that she has never heard her mother sing. The opening song lyric explicitly invokes the language of the film’s title to express a yearning to travel backwards, through memory and loss, while also marking Raimunda’s surrender to the call of the past.

Steven Marsh dissects the structure of Raimunda’s song, noting how its twists and turns mirror the film itself:

As in tango or flamenco, the film's rhythm...is syncopated; its syntax is irregular and incomplete, full of skipped beats and surprises, disturbed as in *Volver's* deceptive narrative claims to chronological exposition, or in the gaps in Aunt Paula's faulty memory, or, in fact, in the unfinished business that Irene—an unseen witness to her daughter's performance—has returned to finish, which in turn reflects the repeated game of concealment and revelation, of veiling and unveiling, that the film plays upon the spectator. (349)

Repurposing an old Argentinian tango with the beat and cadence of flamenco, the song also thoroughly expresses Raimunda's uneasiness at the confrontation with the past: "I'm afraid of the encounter / with the past that's coming back / to confront my life. / I'm afraid of the nights / that, filled with memories, / enchain my dreams." This confrontation is inherent in her performance of the song itself, which was taught to her as a child by her estranged mother. As Irene listens to the song in the backseat of Sole's car, she is overcome with emotion and begins to cry, a single tear that mirrors the one that falls from Raimunda's eye in cross-cut.

The song makes clear that Raimunda is not Agustina, who embraces and lives in tradition, or even Sole, who is an echo of her mother's loneliness and as such finds comfort in the ghost that visits her. Raimunda, analogous to the "fleeing traveler" she sings of, realizes that her flight from the past must end and is determined to "return", even though the destination is not established, and even though she will return with "a wrinkled forehead / and the snows of time / silvering my brow." When she finally sings that "life is an instant, / that twenty years is nothing," it is as a long gaze backwards through time, to the past. In referencing old age and the instantaneous feel of the passing of decades, the song highlights feeling "out of time" in different ways—as being at the end of one's allotted time and having no time remaining, or as someone

who finds him or herself in the wrong time and period. Consequently, Raimunda suddenly finds herself recognizing that she is “out of time” in ways that do connect to Agustina’s acceptance of her status as a future dead person and Paula’s dead hours after her father’s murder, disjointed from the “where” and “when” of linear time.

To be clear, this disjointedness from linearity does not exist simply within the film’s narrative. There are multiple lines to be stretched out between characters like Paula, Esteban, and Alicia’s baby or Lola, Benigno, and Agustina, and there are many ways that Almodóvar’s films have become more frequently self-referential and labyrinthine. In “All About the Brothers: Retroseriality in Almodóvar’s Cinema”, Marsha Kinder coins the term “retroseriality” to discuss the overlapping of themes, scenes, and characters in the director’s filmography. For Kinder, “retroseriality” describes “both an aspect of Almodóvar’s films and a method of reading them” but importantly does not prescribe sentiments of nostalgia or reference the recurring thematic of the “return”; rather, she argues “that his films increasingly perform an evocation of earlier works (both his own and intertexts of others) that lead us to read them as on ongoing saga and to regroup them into networked clusters” (269). In this chapter I have highlighted a few moments where characters and scenes are doubled up and can be read as narrative units: from the domestic removal of the traces of bad and criminal masculinity to the repetition of names across films. Kinder’s own example of the “brain dead trope” in *The Flower of My Secret*, *Todo sobre mi madre*, and *Volver* leads to a revised reading of the ways that these films address both literal and metaphorical brain death.

Reading the retroseriality of Almodóvar’s films, by Kinder’s account, allows for a greater understanding of the director’s relationship to history and the past; that is to say, he “dramatizes the masochistic and murderous dimensions of a culturally specific fraternity” (292) despite his

1980s disavowal of the past and the Francoist era of “two Spains.” But might retroseriality also be a way to complicate the totalizing narratives of History, and in so doing to ‘queer’ the linear flows of time? By suggesting that Almodóvar queers time, it is not because it necessarily carries a sexual component or because the verb ‘to queer’ itself has become so flexible that it implies a simple anarchic disruption (although, in true queer fashion, I cannot dismiss that these may *additionally* hold true). Instead, Almodóvar’s films queer time by allowing for the subversion of a normative teleology that seeks to reproduce in a fixed, flat manner. The concept of reproduction—of time, of sex, of film—is split from heteronormative and forward-facing ideals and connected to the past and to ghosts, or to death and disease, or to violence and loss. The “way out” of the grand narrative of History seems to be in its destabilization and reinvestment with a radical sense of the fluidity of the past, present, and future. By intertextually revisiting select scenes within his films, Almodóvar changes the ways that these scenes have been interpreted, which in turn distorts the “completeness” of these images and creates a sensation of continual flux to what has come before. There is no solid or whole truth to ever be found, only that which may continually be recontextualized, rewritten, or reversed at any given point in the future.

In this sense, the way that the time lines of death and the past are opened up and dislocated in *Volver* is highly emblematic of Almodóvar’s queer time and can be seen from early on in the film. After visiting the cemetery in the opening scene, Sole and Raimunda return to their home village in order to visit with their elderly Aunt Paula. Played by Chus Lampreave (perhaps the prime example of an actress who reprises roles and functions throughout the director’s filmography), Aunt Paula’s sense of the present is dementedly tenuous at best. She fumbles around her home complaining about her joints and fails to recognize her namesake

Paula; she does, however, lucidly remark that the young girl has the same eyes as the sisters' father, something that Agustina will also later note and which will become devastatingly self-explanatory in the revelation of the girl's parentage. Aunt Paula insists that Raimunda and Sole's mother has been caring for her, despite the fact that Irene has been dead for over three years. The sisters thus become increasingly uncomfortable while hearing their aunt speak and determine that she obviously no longer recognizes the present, living in a past that they clearly cannot access. Irene will later explain to Raimunda just how easy it was to appear before Paula: "I came from the past, where she was living. She greeted me as if I had just gone out the door."

Unaware that her mother is still alive and has indeed been taking care of Aunt Paula, Raimunda is particularly upset over the condition of her aunt's mental state and promises to take her back to Madrid when she next visits the village. The Aunt seems vaguely dubious of the promise but says, "What matters is that you come back, Raimunda." The sentence seems strangely out of place, suddenly, invested with heaviness and a clarity that Aunt Paula seems incapable of. It is an obvious reference to Raimunda's distance from her parents and from the traditions of village life, but it also speaks to her general reluctance to return to the past and her painful family memories. When Aunt Paula tells her that she must come back, she says it from the position of one who dwells in the past through a proximity to death, as corporeal a ghost as Agustina and Irene are; the imperative to come back, then, is to return to the past and its traditions in a way that radically restructures time lines. To be clear, "to return" in the context that I posit is not a simple taking up of tradition and old ways or a restoration of the halcyon days of the better past, but a move through death and aberrant sexuality that forges a new perception of the past. This type of return, what I believe Almodóvar to be powerfully suggesting here, is a way of remaking the world, after a fashion, or at least of reshaping the perception of it.

By collapsing the generational time of the family in on itself and eradicating its bad specters of masculinity, *Volver* urges a return to a past that is no longer the image of what it was but what it *could* be. This refashioned history is not a utopia, in that part of its roots are loss, grief, and death, but it does promise new possibilities. What is shown to be the solitude and emptiness of modernity, for example—and here we might think of Paula’s obsession with her phone or the false fraternity of the reality television show Agustina visits—is replaced with the circularity of family and community. Solitude is, in fact, one of the film’s key points. When Irene first appears to Sole, she asks if anyone is in the house. “I’m alone, as always,” Sole says, and in this moment the meaning of her name (“solitude, loneliness”) seems to ring out. Irene calmly states, “Not anymore” and enters into her daughter’s home. Later, when Paula asks her grandmother why she has come back, Irene, who has been looking through photo albums with her, states: “Because I was very lonely.” It is only partly untrue: she has also come back to ask forgiveness from Raimunda, but hints at how desperately she wished to return to some semblance of a whole and united family.

In the final scenes of the film, the family has returned to Aunt Paula’s home together. In the cover of night, Irene sneaks across the street to Agustina’s home. She enters the house and finds the woman there. “Irene!”, she breathes through her pain, “I’ve longed to see you.” Irene tells her maternally, “Here I am. I heard about your problem, and I can imagine how lonely you are.” She explains that she is there to look after Agustina and to give her an injection. Steven Marsh writes of it as “the” injection, a final, euthanizing blow to Agustina’s cancer-riddled body (346). This moment would then mean that Irene’s “ghost” has returned to deliver Agustina to death peacefully, to put the body to rest and complete the return home. As Agustina tells Irene,

now drifting dreamily in near-sleep (or near death, if Marsh is correct),⁵³ “I was born in this bed. My mother slept here. And in this bed we held your sister Paula’s wake.”

The site of the bed thus connects birth with death and sex with pain, and reimagines the women as one family bound in the crossing over from life into death. This moment takes on a suggestive intertextuality when considering Almodóvar’s account of his own father’s death—the return back to his hometown, the bed he was born in, his cancer, and his death. In *Volver*, this scene crystallizes queer time as one of reconstituted family lines that do not obey a forward-moving flow of time or blood ties; that is, Agustina and Irene are intimately connected through messy bodily corporeality, generations of the women in their two families meeting in and across life and death. This also seems to allow Almodóvar his own sort of goodbye as his ghostly, directing hand revisits and recreates his father’s death with infinite tenderness, his own return to the past and to blood ties that have long since passed. This is something akin to the counterpolitics of encounter that Freeman writes of, in which bodies meet by chance and (re)make history (xi). Or Marsh’s claim that “such elemental connections also enable, it seems, a restoration of origins, the curing process of reconciliation and forgiveness, a genuine return (radical, in its etymological sense) beyond the glare of television...and new technology” (351). Perhaps it is through technology, however, that Almodóvar is able to effectuate his own return home, the recreation of a great loss that is bandaged, rewritten, and given a merciful send-off. The return that is effectuated, occurring disjointedly in a space within the dead hours of time, unites the two women, their families, their director and his father, who sit and gaze as death unfolds before them.

⁵³ I only note Marsh’s interpretation of this injection because I find it slightly more ambiguous: a shot of morphine for the pain. That said, the difference is minimal, for it is either a shot to help calm death throes or one to induce them.

Conclusion Mutations

In the initial stages of writing this dissertation, I was drawn to the use of illness as symbolic trope, as a means of expressing some idea about the human condition or the fragility of the body and its vulnerability in social space. There is, clearly, still much of that original impression in the resulting product, but over time I have grown to see illness in different terms and in differing ways. The more I consider it, the more it seems that illness is not simply something that we possess or harness as a way of promoting another thought or idea, as Sontag's musings on the metaphorization of illness may suggest, but something that thoroughly possesses us, that we are at once constituted of and undone by, something that hurts and brands but also heals and creates. Once I began to write, I seemed to get sick much more frequently, so I joked that it was from really taking the dissertation to heart. In reality, my seemingly sudden illnesses sprung from a newfound and keen awareness of the way that my body was thoroughly overtaken with illness and health from the outset. Without realizing it, I had always sustained some sense of self upon ideas of well-being and contagion—as HIV negative, as having a congenital skin disease or poor vision, as physically unfit. Illness is too often reduced to a lack of health, the bad obverse of the good standard, and therein lies the problem. But if we define ourselves through our relationship to states of well-being, at least in part and as I have put forth in this dissertation, illness is therefore not lack but a constitutive element in that process of self-recognition.

What subsequently emerged in my writing (rather than as studies on specific illnesses or localized metaphors) were precisely those moments where illness intersected life: through the conceptualization of the body and the body politic, in violence and war, and in our relationships with death, which is often only metaphor and never looked at head on. In each case, I have attempted to show the work of illness in forming the self, particular instances of employment of

its metaphors in a Spanish context, and some concluding ideas of what these metaphors may mean in contemporary setting. The films in Chapter 1 are bound by a consideration of the body as it moves through the land, and the movements of the land in the body politic. In other instances, as in Chapter 2, the films are diagnostic—locating a propensity for violence, noting its spread through bodies and generations, and calling upon community to rethink the intersection of law, violence, and illness. Almodóvar, as studied in Chapter 3, pushes against the common ways that we envision death, grief, and illness.

In writing about possession by illness, I also became possessed with the notion of time: how it can be drained from the body, how certain illnesses are read as inevitable death sentences, how others stretch pains into moments that feel like an eternity, and how death is often read as the ultimate end of time. For this reason, Almodóvar's visions of death and masculinity seemed the most radical for me. His films, unlike *The Sea Inside* (which could almost be considered a sort of paean to life, to be a bit reductive of my argument), refuse to fix death and life as oppositional forces. With such a refusal, Almodóvar imagines death in a way that obliterates normative time lines and offers a queer time that, while looking backwards at tradition, also looks forward. In my explication of viral violence in Chapter 2, I pushed for a similar shift in the vision of a continual regeneration of violence through bodies and time. And finally, to continue to read these moments out of sync, in the introduction I wanted to read all of these films as germs: those seeds that have sprung from other moments, other illnesses, and carry within them a future.

This last word, “future”, has recently begun to concern me the most, and it is consequently the one word that I have most worried over. How is a body politic to sustain itself if framed as sick or sickening? What is the end result of a viral violence? And most pressing,

how could I reclaim the productive nature of death when its outcomes are so final? Most of the films in these pages actively disavow the utopic and promising potential of the future in favor of dead ends, disappearances, and more illness. Future, it seems, is a word that this dissertation may have imperiled somewhat.

In thinking briefly on where the future lies in these metaphors of illness, small commonalities between the films and their directors begin to emerge. The first of these is that most of these films work to “queer” or destabilize normative gender and sexual roles, and the second is that the majority of these films heavily feature children—as protagonists or as pivotal characters to the plotlines. These two similarities may seem inconsequential, almost banal, or they may even smack embarrassingly of identity politics. Whatever the case, I do not think it is an accident that these films use children as conduits and symbols of the future. In her introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on “Queer Time”, Elizabeth Freeman writes that “one of the most obvious ways that sex meets temporality is in the persistent description of queers as temporally backward, though paradoxically dislocated from any specific historical moment... Since sexual identity emerged as a concept, gays and lesbians have been figured as having no past: no childhood, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and crucially, no history as a distinct people” (162). Freeman carefully unpacks the link between temporality and the queer, noting that the latter has always been cast alongside some nebulous idea of the future, but in opposition, as antithesis.⁵⁴ Such a move not only posits the queer as “out of sync” in a normative time line, it also polarizes the health of heterosexual reproduction and

⁵⁴In Carolyn Dinshaw’s roundtable (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities”), Christopher Nealon considers other ways that queerness and temporality dovetail: “We can still think of the ‘time’ of the epidemic in productive ways, following on important work in the 1980s and 1990s; what is the texture of the time bought by the AIDS cocktail? What is the racial and national time of the shifting geopolitical profile of AIDS? Or we could think of the reverberation-time of mini-outbreaks, like the recent, resistant strains of staph in New York and San Francisco, which excite old fears and produce new practices (more flip-flops in the locker room!). We could think of the “time” of monogamy, its up times and its down times; or the slow, wormhole-time of fisting or getting fisted; or the time of the “quickie” in the men’s bathroom...” (192).

infinite generational futurity to the pathology of the queer, whose nonreproductivity is equated with illness and death.

In queer theory and politics, one of the primary responses to pathologization has been to capitalize on the figure of the queer as already intimately tied to the future—either through an insistence upon radically envisioned futures where queers are the/a norm, or through the recent years’ political campaigns advocating gay marriage and adoption. In the fight for marriage and adoption rights, however, the biopolitical framework of heterosexual reproduction is chosen over any sort of reimagined possibilities that may better suit a queer family structure (whatever shape that may hold). I note these specific convergences of queerness and futurity because I want to see the children and families in these films – Recha’s brother and sister in *Dies d’agost*, Arnau in *Petit Indi*, Ramon’s nephew Javier in *Mar adentro*, the casts of Villaronga’s films, Esteban in *Todo sobre mi madre*, the unnamed baby of *Hable con ella*, and Paula in *Volver* – not only as symbolic representatives for the figure of the child and futurity, but also as “real” children, and as such more than their symbolic references. Why is childhood so important when we think of illness, its marks, and its outcomes?

As a means of thinking against futurity, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* takes up this use of the figure of the child in popular discourse. Such discourse “embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed” (11). He continues by noting that “the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself” (11). Thus the identification of and with the Child becomes a motivating telos for the social order itself, and an endlessly-delayed perfect future is established and called forth, even when done so through a prescriptive lack. The figure of the

Child is utilized daily as a process of delimiting the boundaries of the perfect citizen, Edelman writes, in subtle ways that serve up heteronormativity and reproduction as the repository of hope and future.

The opposite, the destruction or infection of youth and childhood, may be also read as an account of the historical processes that affect the nation-state. To offer specific examples from the films analyzed in the dissertation, we may consider the subjection of the figure of the child to a viralized violence in Villaronga's films, a move that at once indicts the nation while demonstrating a profound preoccupation for its future and the communities into which the child will be incorporated; or how Arnau in *Petit Indi* is figured as the future of one particular family yet also representative of that generation that is threatened by encroaching urban sprawl and disconnectedness from nature and the land. For Edelman, the Child figured as permanently endangered shuts out any possibility for non-normative gender or sexual identities, which are seen as those that endanger, prey upon, and bring about death and the impossibility of any sort of normative procreation. Queerness, or whatever does not produce more children, becomes that which "brings children and childhood to an end" (19), and is tightly bound to atemporality, rendered as out of sync with more 'productive' time lines. Edelman will go on to advocate that the queer embrace this assignation, fully embodying the death drive and the negative charge of being the antithesis of reproductive futurity. His end game is that we cease looking to the future.

Much has been said of Edelman's provocative call to end reproductive futurism, which for many has seemed drastic and unfathomable. His statements in Carolyn Dinshaw's roundtable ("Theorizing Queer Temporalities") echo his persistence in ceasing to rely on the potential futurity of queerness, which for him will always be a move towards occupying a heteronormative

reproductive dynamic. In response to Freccero's notion of herself as a "future dead person," he remarks:

If queerness marks the excess of something always unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity, we should expect it to refuse not only the consolations of reproductive futurism but also the purposive, productive uses that would turn it into a 'good.' We're never at one with our queerness; neither its time nor its subject is ours. But to try to think that tension, to try to resist the refuge of the 'good,' to try to move, as Carla suggests, into the space where 'we' are not: that is a project whose time never comes and therefore is always now. (189)

In this same roundtable, Judith Halberstam notes that for certain subjects in certain places, such a move amounts to "epistemological self-destruction" (194). Is there a way to embrace that destruction while still holding for a radically envisioned future, one that may not adhere to reproduction or creation in the same strictly normative capacities? It is my hope that the films I've analyzed in the dissertation do, in some ways, radically reconstitute—yet not obliterate—life, death, and gender.

This is to say that Recha, Amenábar, Villaronga, and Almodóvar (and many others not found in these pages) resist reproductive futurism in novel ways without embracing Edelman's claim for total annihilation of the social order. While it is true that *Petit Indi's* Arnau serves as a stand-in for a type of disenfranchised citizen and the loss of potential that is to be read as loss of innocence and youth, he is also intimately connected to a mode of being that has no established correlative—a revisioned type of citizenship that is connected from the outset to nature, to its animal senses, to death and violence in generative ways. Even Villaronga's usage of childhood

refuses to establish ‘no future’ as the end goal. Indeed, although the tone of his films is bleak, the director is clearly not without hope of *some* futurity. If we are to think of the virulence of violence, we must recognize that there is always a futurity, even when it is one that is ostensibly worse or more bleak than the present. In rewriting Rena as the new torturer of *Tras el cristal*, Villaronga directly capitalizes on the figure of her childhood as a placemaker for a symbolic future. Even if children and childhood are destroyed in the violence of the Civil War (or by the haunting father figure of Franco himself, never named in any of Villaronga’s films), the promise of a future is left in place. Perhaps it is nothing more than the continued generation of more violence, but this is an important distinction from Edelman’s ultimate aim. The world is never obliterated, but recycled.

Perhaps *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and *Volver* strike the closest at obliterating futurity in the figure of the dead child. The teenage Esteban’s death, baby Esteban’s contraction of HIV, and Paula’s dark origins all threaten and underwrite their status as guardians and repositories of the future. But, as emphasized in Chapter 3, each child also intimately frames the working of death in life, and in so doing rewrites a chronological and normative time line of birth, maturation, and death. Esteban’s death is not made out to be a simple ceasing of life when his heart continues in the body of another; the baby neutralizes the virus but is still completely tied to it as exceptional health in exceptional illness; Paula is conceived in incest, represented as the object of illicit desire twice over (in her father *and* her adoptive father), and forcibly brought “out of time” by sexual assault but is still incorporated into and made an example of the reworked generational time of tradition and family.

It is the possibility of the world-making potential of death and violence that characterizes an interview between Paul Rabinow and Judith Butler, published in 2001 in *Talk, Talk, Talk*.

While discussing the adoption of children by gay couples, Rabinow mocks certain acquaintances “who are very adamant that gay couples must be raising psychotic children” (45). Butler seizes on this moment:

What would it mean for the psychotic to speak and to make a claim, and to go to school[?].... I think that when you hold that view that such kids would be psychotic, and then the putatively psychotic kid comes over to your house—and wants a cookie, wants to play with your kitten, tells you about his feelings about balloons—there’s a certain kind of insistent mundaneness that, I think, undermines that highly phobic relationship, maybe even lives in some kind of tension with it until it breaks open to something else, until it becomes unsustainable in some way. (45)

So perhaps what I hope to do here is to extend this argument to the films of these directors—the defeated, dead children in *El mar* or the apparent psychosis of the de-feminized Rena mounting the iron lung in *Tras el cristal*, and the incorporation of death and future in Almodóvar. What happens when violence, illness, or death are not ‘dead ends’, what happens when we refashion the darkness into something generative, not a *No Future* but a new future? What if the psychotic child asking for the cookie can be recast as the damaged child of the Spanish Civil War, insisting that we understand him? Or, so as not to problematically read the Civil War into every text and pathologize so completely—what if damaging futurity is a necessary move, one that helps to release the grip of health and heteronormativity as impossible, sweeping standards for humanity? Not all bodies are healthy and not all genders and sexualities are considered equal. In engaging the figure of the child and marking her with illness, perhaps we begin to inhabit death and allow its purchase in our understanding of life? To reaffirm *possibilities* in a weakened and amnesiac

body politic, in the virulence of violence, or through death is precisely to allow that negativity a purchase, to understand how illness frames the world we live in and so thoroughly inhabits our time.

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