

# The story trembles. Contemporary fractured narratives in the films by Alejandro Amenábar and Pedro Almodóvar<sup>1</sup>

## El relato tiembla. Narrativas fracturadas contemporáneas en el cine de Alejandro Amenábar y Pedro Almodóvar

*A história treme. Narrativas contemporâneas fraturadas no cinema de Alejandro Amenábar e Pedro Almodóvar*

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes various contemporary Spanish films as part of one of the most experimental trends within the paradigm of narrative complexity of contemporary visual culture: the so-called puzzle or mind-game films. To solve the question of what lies beneath these narrative disruptions in the Spanish case, we developed four sequence microanalysis based on a semiotic approach to one of the prevailing conflicts in the films *Abre los ojos* (1996), *Los otros* (2001), *La mala educación* (2004) and *La piel que habito* (2010). We conclude that the main discomforts which emerge are the fear of not distinguishing reality from fiction, the distrust against the technologies that determine human subjectivity and the oblivion of one's own guilt.

**Keywords:** textual analysis; post-classical cinema; puzzle films; mind-game films; nonlinear narratives; complex narratives; Spanish cinema.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza diversas obras del cine español contemporáneo como integrantes de una tendencia experimental de la complejidad audiovisual contemporánea: las llamadas puzzle films o mind-game films. Para resolver qué discurso subyace a su desestructuración en el caso español, analizamos fragmentos clave de *Abre los ojos* (1996), *Los otros* (2001), *La mala educación* (2004) y *La piel que habito* (2010). Concluimos que los principales malestares que emergen son el terror a no distinguir entre realidad y ficción, la desconfianza hacia la tecnología que condiciona la subjetividad y el olvido de la propia culpa.

**Palabras clave:** análisis textual; cine postclásico; puzzle films; mind-game films; no linealidad narrativa, narrativas complejas; cine español.

### RESUMO

Este artigo analisa várias obras do cinema espanhol contemporâneo como parte de uma tendência experimental da complexidade audiovisual contemporânea: os chamados filmes de quebra-cabeça ou filmes de jogos mentais. Para resolver o discurso subjacente à sua desestruturação no caso espanhol, analisamos fragmentos-chave de *Abre los ojos* (1996), *Los otros* (2001), *La mala educación* (2004) e *La piel que habito* (2010). Concluimos que os principais desconfortos que surgem são o terror de não distinguir entre realidade e ficção, a desconfiança da tecnologia que condiciona a subjetividade e o esquecimento da própria culpa.

**Palavras-chave:** análise textual; cinema pós-clássico; puzzle films; mind-game films; não linearidade narrativa, narrativas complexas; cinema espanhol.

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## INTRODUCTION. POST-CLASSICAL FRACTURED NARRATIVES

A ghost haunts contemporary cinema. A wily ghost, punching holes in the narrative consistency of conventional movies and stealing away with the knowledge to which spectators, accustomed to (or spoiled by) the usual docility of the mainstream industry that is the direct descendant of classical cinema, believe they have an innate right. Amnesiac, sleeping, sick and deceitful narrators pervade the thriller genre, inverting the detective figure, who often ends up being the perpetrator of the crime he or she is investigating. In this paper we seek to analyze the contribution of Spanish cinema to a trend that seems to defy the logic of Hollywood's mainstream cinema, both from its core and from other national cinemas of more modest distribution; among them, the Spanish presents several cases worthy of analysis. In them, although the hegemonic narrative is not completely broken, it is dislocated at the service of the staging of a crisis such as distrust of uninterrupted technological progress or the lack of anchorage to reality.

Categories variously labelled puzzle films (Buckland, 2009, 2014), mind-game films (Elsaesser, 2009, 2013), forking-path narratives (Bordwell, 2002), modular narratives (Cameron, 2008) or multiple-draft-films (Branigan, 2002) baptize this post-classical phenomenon, present from the decade of 1990. Its more remarkable features, like the nonlinearity paired with unstable narrators, are already present in the early *Open your eyes* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1996), previous to titles of major international resonance such as *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1998) or *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000). Many subsequent films will follow in its footsteps, taking up both their plot themes (amnesia, mental and personality disorders, conspiracy paranoia) and their narrative resources. In contrast to the teleological advance and the causal logic of the Hollywood story, mind-game films compromise the spectator's usual expectations through a "fragmented spatiotemporal reality, time loops, a blurring of the boundaries between different levels of reality, unstable characters with split identities or memory loss, multiple, labyrinthine plots, unreliable narrators, and overt coincidences" (Buckland, 2014, p. 5).

We must clarify that the omnivorous Hollywood industry has integrated some of these features in its blockbusters<sup>2</sup> and, in turn, a large part of the post-classical cinema belonging to our object of study—as heir of the classic—respects some of its basilar conventions,

especially in what refers to the closing of the work, to its informative completion, whose achievement comes progressively when the viewer receives the necessary clues to recompose the story. Such clues are possible, precisely, thanks to the respect of part of the conventions of the hegemonic cinema that differentiate these post-classical proposals from the bitter, conscious and ideological rupture of the cinematographic modernity, as well as from the formal radicality of the avant-garde. Both modernity and mind-game films have a high degree of self-reflexivity and apparently hold on rebellious positions. However, if the former thrives in the opacity of a cinematographic language unable to take charge of an autistic world, postmodernity revolves it so that the viewer can entertain itself in solving it, unable to restore the wound uncovered by modern cinema, but sensitive to it. The rationality of classical grammar apparently broken by nonlinearity or the contradictions of points of view is posed as a challenge, a dysfunction, to be solved. Not surprisingly part of the challenge of many puzzle films is to understand why the story is told differently. Its experimentation with the narrative results, in most of the corpus, more in a game than in a vindictive position<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, Elsaesser explains that the phenomenon far exceeds the geographical confines of the North American industry: "[t]o varying degrees and in sometimes surprisingly different ways, 'mind-game' films are also being made in Germany, Denmark, Britain, Spain, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan" (2009, p. 15). Some examples are the films by François Ozon *Swimming pool* (2003), *In the house* (2012) or *Double lover* (2018), the emblematic *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003), recently adapted by Spike Lee (2013), or *Alabama Monroe* (Felix Van Groeningen, 2012).

The two premises on which mind-game and puzzle films are based are nonlinearity and narrative instability. While nonlinearity alludes to the fact that the sequences are not arranged according to a progressive temporal logic, but mixed together so that they do not follow a constant chronological advance, narrative instability will be associated with complex narratives (Simons, 2014) that affect points of view (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995) or problems that go beyond the mere chronological alteration of the story. Elsaesser exemplifies it by mentioning the appearance of characters that do not physically exist in the diegesis, but are imaginary projections of others, the uncertainty about the living or dead condition of the protagonist

and the radically individual conspiracy paranoias. Particularly, he stresses

central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological; [...] their ways of seeing, interaction with other characters, and their 'being in the world' are presented as normal. The films thus once more 'play games' with the audience's (and the characters') perception of reality: they oblige one to choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible 'realities' or 'multiverses' (2009, p. 14-15).

In this regard, we prefer to use the term puzzle film regarding the cases in which there is no diegetic explanation for nonlinearity, neither from the argument –as it would be in the case of multiple universes or temporal paradoxes<sup>4</sup>– nor from the point of view –narrations focused on characters with dissonant perceptions<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, we identify as mind-game the narrations filtered by a deceptive point of view, derived from the knowledge of an amnesiac, sick, liar, or crazy character, such as *Open your eyes* and *The others* (2001), by Alejandro Amenábar. In both, the subjectivity of protagonists whose perception is strongly conditioned by their past prevails and filters the diegetic facts as they perceive them, thus transferring their anguish and knowledge gaps<sup>6</sup>.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. SYMPTOMATIC STORIES

Fractured narratives require from the spectator a strong re-composition effort due to their convoluted editing. This implies a certain loss of calm when watching them, which entails a more active interpretation (Michaud, 2004, p. 84) to give meaning to the story. This active participation in the textual reordering reflects the need for an interpretation that sustains the story, disguised in classical writing. Thus, the editing evidence recalls the “void that separates the frames, [...] the abyss of darkness that underlies the cinema” (Doane, 2012, pp. 275-276). It is no accident that fragmentation, as a key attribute of the post-modernism, signals the artful nature of the appearance of representation beneath which lurks the suspicion of nothingness, of a barren alienation resulting from the “crisis of the grand narratives” posited some years ago now by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). In mind-game films the narrative is revealed as an unstable and unreliable process, and not as the messenger of a self-sufficient truth that happens in a world under control. Somehow, they challenge the viewer as Alfred

Hitchcock did with the lying flashback of *Stage fright* (1950), about which the filmmaker reflected in his interview with François Truffaut (1974):

in cinema we readily accept that a man tells a false story. In addition, we also willingly accept that when someone tells a story that develops in the past, it is illustrated by a “flashback”, as if it were happening in the present. In that case, why could not we tell a false story instead of a “flashback”? (p. 165).

As Hitchcock warns, what is offensive to the classical viewer is not the presence of lying characters, or temporary changes, but rather that the story as a whole, empathizing with some deceived or deceptive character, lies from a point of view apparently omniscient. However, after decades of accumulation of all the ground-breaking and vindictive weight of cinematographic modernity<sup>7</sup>, Elsaesser emphasizes the spectator's delight in solving the trap:

Yet one overriding common feature of mind-game films is a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators (besides carefully hidden or altogether withheld information, there are the frequent plot twists and trick endings). Another feature is that the spectators on the whole do not mind being “played with”: on the contrary, they rise to the challenge (2009, p. 15).

Usually, what allows the simple consumption of these postclassic proposals is the possibility of solving the puzzle thanks to the clues provided by the enunciation. Most mind-game films offer, in fact, a closed ending, which closes the meaning of the story facilitating its functioning as a whole –respecting, for example, the coherence of the raccord between sequences, even if they are not contiguous.

However, formal dislocation is associated to the tragic from some of the visual culture. Didi-Huberman (2009) takes up the concept of *Pathosformeln* to inextricably link form and content, arguing that by twisting the form the cultural survival of the instinct crystallizes, which flees from hermetic rationalism. The disruption of formal order, of the calm of representation, determines the inferences that can be drawn from the image, as well as from its cinematographic linkage, in the case of nonlinear cinema. The deliberate challenge to the linear temporal progression of the filmic time and to the correlative accumulation of knowledge that usually accompanies it (governed by a logic of cause-consequence) twists the form of the story, generating a kind of pathos, a narrative *pathosformel*.

The twisting of the plot, the narrative form, embodies the convulsion. Didi-Huberman attributes to such

images the condition of symptoms of discomfort, as representations of what is hidden, and therefore insists on their reappearance, which always implies a return, a nonlinearity, an update: the amnesic protagonists are forced to be faced with scenes related to what they have not got over, what survives. This is the case of Cesar and his deformed face in *Open your eyes*, Grace with her husband in *The Others*, Linda with her husband in *Premonition* or María with her son Diego in *Hierro*. Thus, the repetition that distorts the narrative linearity becomes an image-symptom of non-assimilated discomfort. This provokes, or stresses, as we will see, the tragic nature of some losses and their non-acceptance. Nonlinear narratives are echoes, thus, of that idea of the most rejected, the ghosts that reappear from among the order and convention. This happens from the argument and from the signifier, since the violence of nonlinearity generates that kind of *pathosformel* narrative from which a twisted, truncated or looping plot emerges.

Narrative instability and nonlinearity correspond to hidden tragedies and delusional subjectivities. As opposed to the more ludic puzzle films, the Spanish films that we will study present a tragic density that allows us to understand their de-structuring as a symptom of certain obsessions, even though these are circumscribed to the products of an entertainment industry such as cinema<sup>8</sup>.

Vicente Sánchez-Biosca already proposed, regarding the dismemberment of the postmodern story, that “its breaking into pieces in some of the latest audiovisual expressions will help to clarify our relationship with certain hidden strata of life and death that have always been passed-on as stories” (1995, p. 12). If “what is repressed returns as pacts, as commitments” (1995, p. 184), they can be found in the cinema consumed by a broad spectrum of audiences. In fact, according to Thanouli, the problematic approach to the real is a basic feature of post-classical cinema: “the post-classical narration does not renounce the importance of the ‘real’; what it renounces is the unproblematic and seamless manner that classical Hollywood had used to approach it” (Thanouli, 2009, p. 50). Not in vain, as we will see, among the most recurrent conflicts of mind-game films are the non-acceptance and forgetting of guilt regarding a violent event –the implication in a misfortune, the death of a loved one, or one’s death, etc.–: the tangled narration is a symptom of those conflicts. This is what happens in *Memento*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010), *Goodnight mommy* (Severin

Fiala & Veronika Franz, 2014), *Premonition* (Menan Yapó, 2007), *Triangle* (Christopher Smith, 2009) or *Spider* (David Cronenberg, 2000). Their misfortunes revive something of the classic tragedy, since they concern people united by ties of kinship, “when, for instance, a brother kills, or is about to kill, his brother, or a son his father, or a mother her son, or a son his mother,” (Aristóteles, 2004, p. 68). Elsaesser reflects on the insistence of similar situations in what he calls “paranoia films”:

women –mothers– grieve for a child, or are haunted by the loss of children. [...] fear for their sanity because of the mixed messages they get from the world around them, or are driven insane by husbands whom they no longer think they can trust” (2009, p. 25).

As we will see, *The Others* is an example of this.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used combines textual microanalysis of especially relevant fragments with the application of the theoretical framework developed. The analysis of issues typical of the cinematographic language, such as staging, editing or narrators, should shed light on what issues underlie the complexity of the most relevant mind-game films in Spanish cinema in recent decades. Therefore, we choose scenes that show the core of the traps around which there is a final turn. Among the corpus susceptible of being analyzed, we focus on those works in which the characteristics mentioned above most clearly converge. They are also an important part of the filmography of two of the most important filmmakers in the Hispanic scene: Alejandro Amenábar and Pedro Almodóvar.

The sample of our analysis is composed of eighteen films that must comply with three factors. In the first place, they must be films of Spanish nationality, according to the catalog of qualified films of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Government of Spain. Secondly, that their premiere date was between 1996 and 2018, i.e., that they correspond to the temporality of the trend of international puzzle films enunciated in the researches referenced in the theoretical framework. Finally, the sample is composed of films that present fractured narratives. Although the subjectivity of what we have described as obfuscated narrative coherence implies omitting other films that can potentially be ascribed to the sample, the definition of the parameters of the filmic narration is done according to the narratology proposed by Bordwell.

Título	Dirigida por	Fecha de estreno
A body in the woods	Joaquim Jordà	November 8, 1996
Earth	Julio Medem	April 10, 1997
Open your eyes	Alejandro Amenábar	December 19, 1997
Lovers of the Arctic Circle	Julio Medem	September 4, 1998
The others	Alejandro Amenábar	September 7, 2001
Bad education	Pedro Almodóvar	March 19, 2004
Hipnos	David Carreras	October 8, 2004
The machinist	Brad Anderson	December 17, 2004
Rewind	Nacho Vigalondo	June 27, 2008
<i>Hierro</i>	Gabe Ibáñez	January 15, 2010
The skin I live in	Pedro Almodóvar	September 2, 2011
Anna	Jorge Dorado	January 24, 2014
<i>Presentimientos</i>	Santiago Taberneró	January 24, 2014
Another me	Isabel Coixet	June 27, 2014
Innocent killers	Gonzalo Bendala	July 3, 2015
Regression	Alejandro Amenábar	October 2, 2015
Marrowbone	Sergio Gutiérrez Sánchez	October 27, 2017
The warning	Daniel Calparsoro	March 23, 2018

Table 2. Sample of films of Spanish nationality with fractured narratives

Source: Own elaboration based on the catalog of qualified films of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Government of Spain.

## RESULTS

### AMNESIA, GUILT AND DENIAL OF DEATH. THE CIRCULAR NIGHTMARE OF ALEJANDRO AMENÁBAR

The work of Alejandro Amenábar draws a kind of circle that runs from the first symptoms of the confusion of mind-game films to the fullness of their resources, and even ends with stories with a false appearance of fractured narrative. In *Thesis* (1996) there is a timid use of the confusion between dream and reality, in a thriller that uses the classic strategy of generating suspense by regulating the viewer's access to the knowledge of the

facts, so that he/she always knows less than the murderer.

*Open your eyes* (1997) and *The others* (2001), sustained by deceptive focalizations, assimilate the deceptive narrative and appropriate subjects in which these abound –repression and forgetfulness of a violent and painful episode, for example. Another title of interest is *Regression* (2015), since it enters into the nightmare and the hallucination from internal focalizations to end up unraveling itself, however, as a thriller whose information management does not take the misleading points of view to the limit of puzzle films.

### “RELAX... OPEN YOUR EYES”

During the first moments of the second feature film by Amenábar, a female voice-over insistently repeats the film's title over a black screen. The echo on her voice diminishes as she whispers “open your eyes, open your eyes...”, until the black screen fades into a POV shot filled with sheets, in which a hand turns off an alarm clock, silencing the female voice, and it fades to black again. Besides being the first reference to the liminal stage of the dream world, various enunciative markers are identifiable. In the first place, the imperative mood of the words spoken could be interpreted as a challenge to the spectator – as well as the protagonist – to react to the atypical nature of the narration, which requires him/her to understand that a large part of the diegesis takes place in a dream space. Second, the start from an internal *ocularization* shows the tie to the focalization of César (Eduardo Noriega) which, from the beginning, is revealed to possess a problematic point of view, characterised by lacunae in his memory.

The narrative expresses the confusion and bewilderment of César about his own past and the viewer shares his knowledge throughout the story – when he is right and when he is wrong – through an internal focalization<sup>9</sup>. This justifies, in fact, the narrative nonlinearity: the accumulation of knowledge depends on how César relates his past to his psychiatrist, Antonio (Chete Lera), from the psychiatric cell in which he is interned, accused of murder. The scenes, in which he wears a mask that both represents and conceals his real face, appear to take place in the present. These scenes are alternated with César's dreams and with flashbacks from the past that he shares with Antonio.

After becoming disfigured in a car accident caused by his ex-girlfriend Nuria (Najwa Nimri), who dies in the crash, César tries without success to have his face surgically restored, and to win back Sofia (Penélope Cruz), with whom he fell in love the night before the accident. The incongruities of the story come from the alternation between scenes in which César has a deformed face and others in which a successful surgery has restored his looks and he lives happily together with Sofia. The incompatibilities as part of the same past generate ontological problems, which lead César, supposedly, to murder Nuria, who in turn claims to be Sofia. But the protagonist can only conceive that Nuria is alive or dead, that the true face of Sofia corresponds to Najwa Nimri or Penélope Cruz as actants, and that the César's face is disfigured or repaired.

Finally, the young man discovers that he hired the

services of the company Life extension and committed suicide to be resurrected in the future. He bought the option of living in a dream designed by himself, in which practically all memories from the accident would disappear and be replaced by a life in which his face is returned to normal and Sofia loves him.

The film thus approaches what has been called irrealty films, in which “characters [...] eventually awoken to the fact that reality exists somewhere else” (Yoshimoto, 2016, p.125). But the tragic returns, it resists being erased from his unconscious.

The repetition of the repressed painful memories – the accident, his deformity, the lost love – turns them into *afterlives* signalling his discomfort. All this has its correspondence with the narration structure, because the repetition affects both issues of *mise-en-scene* and script: the return of the disfigured face, changing faces of some photographs, memorable script lines repeated by different characters at different moments, etc. In fact, Kilbourn associates it directly with the trauma, pointing out that the trauma is not found in the original event, but in its re-experimentation through memory (2010, p. 133).

César's puzzlement when he notices the repetition reflects a meta-referential dimension to the story not only directed at the spectator but also interwoven into the focalization of the protagonist. This typical feature of much of the mind-game films prompts the spectator to wonder whether the entire story or a good part of it takes place in his mind, as it is ultimately revealed to be in this case.

### “WE ARE NOT DEAD!”

Another obsession that emerges powerfully as an explanation of the temporary jubilation is the will to flee from death, both of loved ones and of one's own. In *Open your eyes*, there is an attempt to cheat death by purchasing a fictional existence that is restricted to the economically privileged. When César insists that the surgeons experiment with him, he argues: “I am not just any patient. And this is not Social Security. I'm willing to pay what is needed”. Even upon discovering that he is inhabiting a false reality that is breaking down, the first thing he asks is: “And I paid for this?” (Bovaira, Cuerda, & Amenábar, 1997). The sale of trickery and simulation characteristic of the fiercest capitalism, is offered to consumers eager to overcome the barriers of their time and physical materiality. Indeed, according to Kilbourn, these films thematise the commodification of modern memory:

The dissociation between individual identity and ownership, control etc. is seen repeatedly in film after film, prompting the conclusion that since the 1970s a new model of subjectivity has emerged, predicated on a new, more negative, model of memory (2010, p. 130).

Regarding the manifest rejection of organic reality, subject as it is to the laws of time and prone to cuts, bruises and injuries, the facial prosthesis offered by the surgeons, incapable of giving back symmetry to his features, is significant. The facial prosthesis generates a sinister doll effect that signals duality as a constant displayed throughout the film: the two opposing types of female character, the two faces of César, past and present, reality and dream, life and death. The mask also serves as a reflection of the protagonist's identity problems, visually represented in a nocturnal sequence in which he drunkenly puts the mask on backwards and appears to have two faces at once. In a powerful metaphor, the lighting in the scene prevents us from discerning which is his real face. Narratively, the film denies the protagonist's death several times: after the accident, which (because of the alternation between dreams and diegetic reality) seems a mere nightmare, after his suicide (of which we do not know until the film has advanced a lot) and when, finally, he plunges into the void to wake up of the artificial life in which he has been during practically all the diegesis –the year 2145. César commits suicide to live dreaming cryogenically and commits suicide again to get out of that dream turned into a nightmare. Mind-game films as paradigmatic as *Inception* also base the power of their suspense in the insecurity about whether suicide in the dream will lead to the awakening in the true reality or, conversely, the protagonist already inhabits that present and, as it happens to Mal (Marion Cotillard) in Nolan's film, the wish to wake up by dying results in an irreversible suicide.

The same theme of the denial of death acquires a different sensibility in *The Others*, starring a mother (Nicole Kidman) haunted by moving objects and mysterious banging that shake the dark, silent mansion where she lives with her photosensitive children and three servants. The film takes place in 1945, and its neo-Gothic aesthetic can be guessed from the initial credit titles inscribed on inked illustrations that anticipate subsequent diegetic plans. The architecture of the Cantabrian mansion of late 19th century recalls the romantic English recovery of rustic medievalism. The long skirts, the upsweep hair, the corseted silhouettes of

the women, the constant fog, the absence of electricity or the flickering light of small gas lamps are references to the Victorian era. Even more, the album of post mortem portraits that Grace finds in the house recalls is even more evocative of this bygone era. Horrified, the woman considers it a macabre and superstitious practice. The supposed anachronism establishes a dialogue between the 19th century preservation of the absent through photography, an embalmer of time and convener of the missing par excellence, and the trauma of sudden, uncertain death, without a body to mourn, typical of the war.

The effectiveness of *The Others* lies in its integration of the codes of the horror genre and its success in making both their protagonists and the viewer believe that they are living a canonical ghost story. The enunciation conceals that, although it is indeed that kind of story, the spectator is located on the other side of the mirror, along with specters who are likewise unaware of their condition. We are thus presented with the inexplicable phenomena that occur in the mansion inhabited by Grace Stewart and her children Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley), attributed by the girl to a family that she says she can see. The point of view that predominates is that of Grace. She is not able to see such intruders and is therefore unaware of the existence of a (living, real) family residing in the mansion.

Grace's discovery of the post-mortem portraits of her servants, in a scene cross-cut with the scene of her daughter simultaneously discovering their graves, convinces her of the link between the world of the living and the dead, that she believed were in different spheres. Prior to these two discoveries, the servants themselves have been shown hiding graves. The dramatization of the extra-diegetic soundtrack, the low-angle shots that give them superiority and their attitude lead the viewer to distrust both –nevertheless, she still does not suspect that she is dead. A travelling opens the shot allowing the tomb that Mr. Tuttle (Eric Sykes) hastens to cover with leaf litter to enter the visual field, while the volume of the tense soundtrack that alerts the viewer of the dubious intentions of the old couple increases.

For the first time, the living with the dead coexist in the seance that takes place almost immediately afterwards. While Nicholas cries sitting in a corner, Anne speaks into the ear of the medium, one of the intruders who have contacted her children. When the old woman asks if the mother murdered them with a pillow they shout, insanelly: "We are not dead! We

are not dead!” (Bovaira, Cuerda, Park, & Amenábar, 2001). The *ocularization*, which when Grace entered the room confirmed the point of view that the girl defended throughout the diegesis (the visibility of the *other* family), alternates with what *the others* cannot see, making Grace and the children disappear from the scene. Thus, the balance of knowledge is reversed, confirming that the protagonists are the dead, the intruders, those who refuse to leave the house: despite screaming enraged that they are not dead, all three have remembered the episode of infanticide.

The coexistence of both *ocularizations* in the same present constitutes an enunciative mark that points towards the idea constantly underlined by the film: the indissolubility of life and death, present and past, the repression of guilt and its supposed oblivion and the insistence of ghosts in reappearing. A fade, the literal coexistence of the two realities in the same image without a cut, makes the living family disappear and drags the scene to the dramatic confession of the murderous mother.

The idea of the cyclical existence of the dead who refuse to leave the mansion is driven home by the final explanation of Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), already free of suspicion, who explains that the intruders are leaving, but others will arrive; they will sometimes perceive them and sometimes not, because it has always been that way. Visually, the idea takes shape with the Stewarts behind the windows of the mansion, repeating to themselves “this house is ours, this house is ours” (Bovaira et al., 2001). If previously the servants, against the light, behind the door of the mansion, had generated the sensation of threat, in the end it is Grace and the children who constitute a ghostly image. However, the night has given way to the day and the lighting has been reversed: their bodies appear illuminated and not against the light. The point of view, also reversed, observes them from outside the house and not from within, as the perspective that had previously been limited to within the mansion’s walls has now broken free to gain access the experience of the living.

Again, it is a fade the resource that makes them disappear from the frame, while the camera pans down the architecture to show the departure of the family from the house. The little boy stares at the window behind which they are. The front gate of the mansion is closed after their exit and we can see in it a poster that announces its sale, suggesting that the history will be repeated when the house is inhabited again.

#### THE THEMATIZATION OF FRAUD IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

In *Bad Education* and *The skin I live in* the conflict of the memory entangles with types of simulation more conscious than the previous ones, highly explicit and self-referential. These processes are acting, lying and plastic surgery, which represent direct action on the materiality of bodies rather than on the psychological feature of the previous examples. The work of Almodóvar fits with the concept of puzzle films because, more than irreconcilable contradictions, in the story there are stratified stories, told from different focalizations and times. Their complexity emerges even when considering them linearly, due to the density of the relationships that link the characters and their unfolding. This last strategy is the core in which lies the secret, the great discovery on which the intrigue in both films pivots.

#### MALICIOUS SCHEMERS

The duplicity of *Bad education* respond to metafiction and deception. Its narrative structure contains a diegetic present, an intradiegetic script written by Enrique (Fele Martínez), based on his and Ignacio’s (Gael García Bernal, Francisco Boira) childhood, and in the recent past of the latter, explained by the former school teacher and priest who abused him and was blackmailed by the young man years later. Thus, García Bernal embodies three different characters: the false Ignacio, the character of Zahara belonging to Enrique’s script, and Juan, Ignacio’s brother.

The insistence on the transfer of the past to intradiegetic fiction, its consequences in the present, the lying narrators and the insecurity about the true identity of some characters show the importance of how fiction generates distrust towards itself while inviting the viewer to repair its inconsistencies<sup>10</sup>. This is how *Bad education* and *The skin I live in* work; the latter is built on the undisclosed premise that Vera (Elena Anaya) and Vicente (Jan Cornet) are the same person, whose body has been altered in a process that includes a sex change performed by Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas). The time jumps conceal the progressiveness of the body’s transformation, giving the impression that they are two different characters. However, the signs given to the spectator mentioned by the author are present, for example, in the form of various cross fades that become enunciative markers. The first of these brings together the profiles of Vera and Vicente, which belong to different times, offering the first clue



that it is the same person. Later, a close-up of Vicente looking at the camera will fade into another one of Vera, suggesting another ellipsis that clarifies the identity of the character. Thus, still more clearly than in *The others*, the fade is taken beyond its conventional function as a punctuation mark in the grammar of the editing to signal the main twist in the story. In *Bad education*, the fades also mold the faces of children subjected to sexual abuse in their corresponding adult selves. The twist is reflected in the fact that the face that the adult who claims to be Ignacio doesn't actually match the child's; in reality, he is only pretending to be Ignacio in order to seduce Enrique and get work as an actor.

In *The skin I live in* the flashbacks do not lie, but the nonlinearity, which exceeds the conventional, makes them perverse. At least initially, the returns to the past should be relied by the viewer, although when they derive from the explanation of a character they may have other interests behind (Cuevas, 2005, p. 191). Almodóvar's puzzle films finally confirm, in addition, the conventional closure that rectifies or reveals the deception of the character, although the mega-narrator has previously contributed to the transitory concealment of the truth, as shown by the aforementioned fades. All of this serves to underscore the need to consider the figure of this ultimate knowledge handler who misleadingly withholds and releases snippets of information, rarely examined in studies of fractured narratives in the English-speaking world.

#### PERVERSE PYGMALIONS, REBEL GALATEAS

The crisis of identity, a concept that Amenábar addresses from memory lapses, in Almodóvar is associated with how gender, sexuality and the physiology of the body contribute to its configuration. In fact, the title of *The skin I live in* identifies the body—the skin—not as something immutable but transitory, given that a person may “live in” numerous different places over the course of a lifetime. Both in the films mentioned here and in other nonlinear—*Broken embraces*, for example—we find a constant that recalls, from different angles, the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea that Ovid narrated in *Metamorphosis*, which tells the story of a sculptor in love of his own work, a female statue that comes alive. Not in vain “reflecting on nature itself highlights the approach to identity, a fact that is evident in any self-referential exercise” (Tello Díaz, 2014, p. 116). The work's interrogation of itself concerns the story and the signifier. Clear examples of this are the

constant repetition in *Open your eyes* of what has already been shown in the film, rendering it strange; the creation of abysmal<sup>11</sup> stories of *Bad education*; and the reformulation of other artistic works in *The skin I live in* (like the *Venus of Titian*, *Eyes without a face* (Georges Franju, 1960), etc.).

However, artificial and violent *re-creation* is also embodied in the transformation of Vicente in Vera by Dr. Ledgard to avenge the rapist of his daughter Norma (Blanca Suárez), the cause of the trauma that led her to suicide. The revenge is executed with a perverse twist: the surgeon tries to make Vera look like his deceased wife. Ledgard stitches, models his lost wife in the body of his hostage Vicente. He is, therefore, intending to love his Frankensteinian creation from its conception. In the words of Balló and Pérez, such physical transformation gives rise to the “crystallization of this necrophilic and aesthetic dream—to reborn a loved one” (1997, p. 289), as well as to the attainment of revenge by snatching the body, the identity, the life, to the aggressor of the young woman. Consequently, “the created work does not bring any happiness, but rather it is the distorting mirror of the artist's destruction” (1997, p. 290), since it points to its perversion. In addition, she murders her creator/tormentor and reclaims his original identity when, meeting up with his mother after years in captivity and with the body of Vera, she greets her saying “I am Vicente” (Almodóvar, García, & Almodóvar, 2011).

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: THE DREAM OF REASON CREATES MONSTERS

From *Open your eyes* to *The others*, from *Rewind* to *The skin I live in*, we witness worlds constantly sustained by fragile subjectivities, by individuals who are incapable of distinguishing between what is happening outside and inside their minds. This relationship of knowledge with the mind-game films' plot resembles a Penrose staircase, at whose torsion point the tragedy is unleashed.

Ignorance triggers catastrophe by an unconscious action—such as the murders of *Rewind*—but the acquisition of knowledge redoubles the strength of the tragic by provoking the anagnorisis. This involves the change of luck, the understanding of the seriousness of the facts that comes with the acquisition of knowledge and broadening of perspective—as Grace's recalling her condition as a child murderer. Below, we expose the crises, obsessions or discomforts that we have noticed within the fractured narrative in the analyzed works,

as well as in other mind-games and Spanish puzzle films like *Rewind*, *Hierro* (Gabe Ibáñez, 2009), *Anna* (Jorge Dorado, 2013), *The machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2009), *Lovers of the Arctic circle* (Julio Medem, 1998), whose detailed study exceeds the limits of this work and which we intend to resume in future research.

1. The delusional rhetoric through which the fractured narratives deploy that terror of not distinguishing reality is associated by Josep Maria Català Domènech to the decomposition “of a reality, stable, homogeneous, objectivist, etc., and [...] a paranoid mentality that would be the characteristic feature of the contemporary imaginary, from politics to aesthetics” (2013, p. 86). This paranoid mentality that characterises the historical subject of the 20-21st century is marked by a subjectivity focused on the constant threat of conspiracy and collapse, and is related, according to Kilbourn, with a larger crisis. A

‘crisis’ of memory as cinema’s, and thus the culture’s, ‘meta-traumatic’ engagement with its own history. This history is still unfolding and merges with the early twenty-first-century present in its unprecedented narcissistic obsession with its own identity as defined over against a host of real and imaginary ‘others’” (2010, p. 136).

2. The author’s observation serves to connect with a second obsession: the tension between the desire to recover a forgotten identity and the danger of facing the painful discovery, which goes back to Oedipal mythology—a universal validity that explains the search for truth as a paradoxical way to a hurtful fall (Balló, 2009). The pain is for Oedipus and the *amnesiac hero* the price of knowledge, since both seek out others to blame for their self-caused misfortunes. The amnesiac hero does not have an informative knowledge, but a symptomatic, unconscious intuition that guides him/her. The cinematographic insistence on treating amnesia, that began in the early eighties (Bourriaud & Hernández-Navarro, 2008, p. 233), is the reverse of the myth of the total memory of digital society<sup>12</sup>, as its huge repositories of artificial memory (Kilbourn, 2010, p. 228) do not guarantee the amnesiac subject the understanding of the story of his/her life. The informative value of the images does not contain the key to his identity, does not sustain his story. Open your eyes, *The others* or *Hierro* are titles directed by Spanish filmmakers that revolve around all this. In his/her incessant pursuit of the objective information that haunts him/her, the protagonist pays the price of being strike by the terrible of the past. Once we have

analyzed the narrative features that characterize the aforementioned films, we defend that their nonlinearity makes present an unresolved past, exposed by a meganarrator as inherent to the diegetic present, as well as by deceptive internal focalizations that demand to resolve an uncomfortable void.

3. Ultimately, the problem lies in the forgetting of one’s own subjectivity, of an intimate trauma. Grüner reminds us that the total dismissal of doubt about one’s own judgment can lead to disaster when people –as individuals, or society as a whole– consider themselves the authority of absolute objectivity and, like the amnesiac hero, repress their memory of their past, their history, and their guilt:

The West has [...] done nothing more than disown what was in its center, and from then on it has ask itself, perplexed, where this ‘irrational’ violence comes from, which constantly stalks it, without noticing that [...] this impulse of domination by a disembodied and ‘instinct-free’ [...] knowledge is what appears as a gigantic new enigma that this time it will not be able to solve except at the price of questioning itself (2002, pp. 308-309).

In parallel, what Elsaesser calls “pathologies (of subjectivity, of conscience, of memory and identity)” (2009, p. 31), present in the cinema that we study, overcome the individual to constitute a general reflection that metaphorizes a whole problematic around the reliability of the present due to the dilution of the limits between reality and unreality. This exceeds, in mind-game films, the confusion of the protagonist to access a higher narrative level and reach the spectator. Català ratifies this, arguing that “the gradual absorption of the hallucinatory world by filmmakers and the public is a clear symptom of the existence of a new sensibility” (2016, p. 222) linked to a destabilization of the parameters that govern the normal. And cinema, as an art form that reflects on its own relationship with reality, also proposes ways of understanding it through formulas such as, in this case, narrative instability.

In fact, as happens on Earth, the most radical mind-game films reject a univocal reality, like the trilogy of David Lynch *Inland Empire* (2006), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Lost Highway* (1997) or *Woman of the Port* (Arturo Ripstein, 1991). Not only do they resist offering a stable point of view, but some disguise that same deprivation to intensify the surprise effect of the misleading focalization. The fractured narratives thus transfer the aforementioned anxiety over the

ambiguity between the healthy/ill or the real/illusory to the narrative mechanisms of the story and, through identification with the unstable point of view, inflict that anxiety on the spectator as well.

4. The ability to confuse from the unfolding of a same character taken to its extreme is exploited by David Lynch in his three reference mind-game films. But, unlike Almodóvar and Amenábar, Lynch refuses to explicitly solve why a single character has different bodies in the same story or change roles for no apparent reason<sup>13</sup>. Not in vain it is one of the most radical proposals regarding the intertwining of different and incompatible versions of reality and its limits. The other case that most takes to the extreme the refusal of a univocal ending is Ripstein's *Woman of the port*, because the three versions of the harrowing and turbid history of family grudges, prostitution and incest vary very significantly according to the adopted point of view without knowing, finally, which of the three is the one that prevails. In contrast, most of the Spanish puzzle films resolve the disruption by adopting the convention of post-classical cinema and forsaking the avant-garde, modern inconclusiveness and the integration of the un-known. In this way, despite the overwhelming complexity of the films, the narrative unravels all the motivations, points of view and gaps of the past to finally offer an overall portrait that respects the causal logic. No questions are left unresolved. In the words of Chris Dzialo, "we only want to play with the arrow, not destroy it; after all, if there is no arrow, there is no

future, and therefore no chance for pleasure" (2009, p. 109). José Antonio Palao Errando takes this stand in his exhaustive compilation, classification and theorization of the resources set in motion in the nonlinear cinema of González Iñárritu, concluding an idea that also serves for the work of Almodóvar. According to Palao Errando, this style

never violates the sacred laws of IMR. Both the laws of raccord and montage, as well as those of the story, although pushed to the limit, never discover the real of their enunciative support, but, in any case, provoke an invocation of the mega-narrator's figure (2013, p. 160).

Although this undermines the story, it also ends up offering clues to recompose it.

Although the nonlinear films of Ibero-American directors such as González Iñárritu or the specific case of *City of God* (Fernando Merielles & Kátia Lund, 2002) have been addressed by film studies, this work could be expanded by studying more in detail the rest of the Hispanic films. The flirting with a tormented subjectivity remains, as in them, a challenge whose resolution is enabled by conventional storytelling and the refuge of a rationality that drives away the monsters, the anxiety, to clear the way for a grief or expiation closer to the catharsis of classical tragedy than to the subversive poetics of the avant-garde or the dry alienation of modern cinema. In the end, deception and the fragility of memory emerge as contemporary obsessions obstructing the search for a supposed truth, which itself is placed in doubt.

## NOTES

**1.** This work has been conducted in the framework of the research project *La crisis de lo real: la representación documental e informativa en el entorno de la crisis financiera global* [The crisis of the real: the documentary and informative representation in the context of the global financial crisis] (P1·1A2014-05), funded by the Universitat Jaume I through the competitive call for research projects of UJI (evaluated in 2014 by the *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, AQU*), for the period 2014-2017, under the direction of Javier Marzal Felici.

**2.** The literature in this regard is mainly focused on the intersection between the action blockbuster and the narrative complexity of films of marked authorial style –like those of Amenábar and Almodóvar–, as well as to great commercial successes like *Inception* (Cristopher Nolan, 2010), baptized by Jordi Revert as the ultimate mind-game film (2013).

**3.** Wherever modernity proposed irreconcilable disagreements in which to recall the past, explaining it without summoning an accurate memory –*Last year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961)–, the disappearance without resolution of a protagonist –*The adventure* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960)–, unresolved murders –*Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966)– or the suicide of a child –*Germany, Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948)– post-classical dislocation proposes restored amnesias –*Open your eyes*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Shutter Island*, *Unknown*, etc.– disappearances, murders and restored identities –*Memento*, *Spider*, *The machinist*, *Identity*, *Hierro*– and children who are ghosts or dialogue with them –*The sixth sense*, *The others*, *Haunter*.

4. As in *Rewind* (Nacho Vigalondo, 2007).
5. Clear examples would be the trilogy of Alejandro González Iñárritu *Love's a bitch* (2000), *21 grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) or the films directed by Pedro Almodóvar *Julieta* (2016), *The skin I live in* (2010), *Broken Embraces* (2009) o *Bad education* (2004). In all of them, the only figure to which the responsibility of nonlinearity can be attributed is the abstract entity of the mega-narrator (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995).
6. Despite the clarifying distinction established here, time loops and narrative instability can also work imbricate, as in *Open your eyes*.
7. Whose deep reflection is not taken up by mind-game films, understood by Elsaesser as "candy for the brain" (Elsaesser, 2009, p.38).
8. In this regard, Burucúa asks: "*Pathosformeln* are always fundamental features of historically singular civilizational processes [...] Why not try then a similar widening in our time and search for *Pathosformeln*?" (2011, p. 42).
9. Its use here endorses the theory of Edward Branigan, who states that "i.n the case of complex experiences of character consciousness, a diegetic observer, or narrator, would be wholly inadequate to the task" (1992, p. 102).
10. María Poulaki states it this way: "The metafictional aspect of complex films has to do mainly with the way they undermine the truthfulness of their own narratives. At the same time, the play between reality and illusion their plots establish is combined with a self-conscious narration that directly invites the viewer to participate in the construction of the diegesis, despite the unreal impression their storyworlds may create" (2014, p. 41).
11. We use the term in relation to the concept of *mise en abîme*, which designates, in the image and literary theory, the visual or narrative nesting of a text inside another that re-frames it. Considered in the classical writings as a subversive practice since it makes the fictional explicit, in this work it refers to the stories that in *Bad education* are developed within others that contain them, such as the script of the film or the characters' past.
12. As evidenced, among others, by *Open your eyes*, *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Final Cut* (Omar Naim, 2004) or *Black mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011-).
13. Although there are debates in this regard that address these issues from philosophical and political points of view (Lovat, 2018), if we only look the evolution of the diegetic facts it is impossible to recompose the story in a rational way.

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