

## **Cinematic Rewriting in *The Room Next Door* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024): (Pink) Snow Is Falling upon All the Living and the Dead**

### **Reescrituras filmicas en *La habitación de al lado* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024). Cae la nieve (rosa) sobre todos los vivos y los muertos**

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#### **Abstract:**

*The Room Next Door* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024) is a film adaptation of the novel *What Are You Going Through* (Sigrid Nunez, 2020) based on a relatively faithful cinematic transposition that rereads the original literary text and reorients it towards the Almodóvarian style. A comparative study of the novel, screenplay and film reveals convergences, divergences and interferences between the three works. By analysing four sequences in the film (the inciting incident, the first and second plot points, and the resolution), along with their different representations in the other two texts, it is possible to discern the filmmaker's use of intermedial, interdiscursive and also profoundly intertextual strategies to carry out an exercise of appropriation of Nunez's work. Almodóvar's translations, omissions, developments, additions, transformations and visualisations, identified in the film's enunciation, rhetoric, narrative and mise-en-scène, are reflected in cinematic alliterations related to duality, motherhood, intimacy, ghosts, and ultimately a whole range of concepts that allow us to better understand and identify with both the living and the dead.

#### **Resumen:**

*La habitación de al lado* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024) adapta la novela *Cuál es tu tormento* (Sigrid Nunez, 2020) a partir de una transposición filmica de proximidad relativa que relee el texto literario original y lo reorienta hacia el propio Almodóvar. El estudio comparativo entre la novela, el guion y la película permite acceder tanto a convergencias y divergencias como a interferencias entre las tres obras. A partir del análisis de cuatro secuencias de la película, que se corresponden con el detonante, el primer y segundo punto de giro y la resolución, así como de sus diferentes representaciones en los tres textos, se detecta que el cineasta utiliza estrategias intermediales e interdiscursivas pero también profundamente intertextuales para llevar a cabo un ejercicio de apropiación de la obra de Nunez. Las traslaciones, supresiones, desarrollos, añadidos, transformaciones y visualizaciones llevadas a cabo por Almodóvar, y confirmadas en el campo de la enunciación, la retórica, la narrativa y la puesta en escena, se representan en la película a partir de aliteraciones cinematográficas relacionadas con la dualidad, la maternidad, la intimidad, los fantasmas y, en definitiva, todo tipo de conceptos que permiten comprender mejor y acompañar tanto a los vivos como a los muertos.

**Keywords:** Pedro Almodóvar; Sigrid Nunez; Film Adaptation; Screenplay; Film Analysis; Film Narrative.

**Palabras clave:** Pedro Almodóvar; Sigrid Nunez; adaptación cinematográfica; guion; análisis filmico; narrativa cinematográfica

## 1. Introduction

Although over the course of his long career Almodóvar has written most of the scripts for his films himself, there have been times when he has drawn on the literary works of others. Four of the Spanish filmmaker's feature films are adaptations of novels or short stories by different writers: *Live Flesh* (*Carne trémula*, 1997), an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's 1986 novel of the same name; *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*, 2011), based on Thierry Jonquet's *Tarantula* (originally published in France as *Mygale* in 1984); *Julieta* (2016) based on Alice Munro's short stories 'Silence', 'Soon' and 'Chance', all published in the collection *Runaway* (2004); and *The Room Next Door* (*La habitación de al lado*, 2024), based on the 2020 novel *What Are You Going Through* by American author Sigrid Nunez.

In the case of *Live Flesh*, and to a lesser extent *The Skin I Live In* and *Julieta*, the adaptation falls into the category of maximum or intercultural transposition, involving the transfer of 'the action of the hypotext to insert it and redefine it in a different society' (Cid, 2011, p. 36). Among other factors, the re-contextualising of the stories in Spanish settings (the original works being set in England, France and Canada, respectively) distance all these films drastically from their source material. In fact, Almodóvar's adaptation of *Live Flesh* retains little more than the premise of the novel to construct a story that diverges from the original in practically every other way, and although *The Skin I Live In* and *Julieta* do contain various narrative and discursive elements present in the original texts despite the changes of setting, the filmmaker's various additions and (especially) omissions make them markedly different from the works that inspired them.

*The Room Next Door*, however, which is filmed in English, is not a transcultural adaptation. This adaptation thus falls into a different category of cinematic transposition known as relative proximity or reorientation, which, according to the definition proposed by Adriana Cid, offers 'a rereading of the literary text that adds certain accents, modifies elements to differing degrees and even goes as far as introducing decisive differences' (2011, p. 32). It is clear that 'rereading', 'modification' and the introduction of 'decisive differences' constitute the basis

for the development of Almodóvar's two texts inspired by Nunez's novel: the screenplay on the one hand, and the film on the other.

## **2. State of the Question: Studies of Adaptations in Spanish Cinema and in the work of Pedro Almodóvar**

For this study, an extensive review of the literature was conducted, with special attention given to research identified in the Web of Science, Scopus and Dialnet databases involving the comparative analysis of film adaptations of literary works, including studies of such adaptations in Spanish cinema and particularly in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography.

José Luís Sánchez Noriega's *De la literatura al cine* (2000) is one of the pioneering texts in Spain studying film adaptations of literature. This book includes a full comparative analysis of *El Sur* (Víctor Erice, 1983), *The Beehive* (*La Colmena*, Mario Camus, 1982) and *Live Flesh* with the respective books on which they are based, laying the foundations for a field of study which, although it has not led to a particularly prolific volume of comparative studies of Spanish films, has at least produced several paradigmatic explorations. Erice's film has also been meticulously analysed by Marcos Díaz Martín (2012), who draws on various narrative, enunciative, spatial and temporal concepts associated with the relationship between literature and film, while the dialogues written by José Luis Dibildos for Camus's film have been examined by Méndez-García de Paredes (2019) in terms of the relationship between the novel, the screenplay and the film, in an in-depth exploration focusing on the analysis of linguistic variants. Other studies of Spanish films adopt a wide range of approaches to focus on different aspects of the adaptation process. For example, González Arce (2004) uses three short stories by Manuel Rivas to discuss the way they are fused together and integrated into *Butterfly* (*La lengua de las mariposas*, José Luís Cuerda, 1999); Malpartida Tirado (2015) examines the work of Manuel Martín Cuenca to reassess concepts such as subjectivity and identification in both *The Weakness of the Bolshevik* (*La flaqueza del bolchevique*, 2003) and in *Cannibal* (*Caníbal*, 2013); and González de Canales Carcereny (2017) analyses how Albert Serra's films dialogue with, question and reinterpret different literary classics.

Almodóvar's film adaptations of literary works have also been researched from various perspectives. In the case of *Live Flesh*, Carmen Pérez Ríu (2017) explores the idea of urban space through an analysis of the film as a transcultural and transmedial adaptation and based on the notion of the filmmaker rewriting the novel using the aesthetic strategies that characterise the rest of his filmography. This idea of the transformative nature of adaptation is also evident in Zaragoza Ninet's (2016) exploration of 'infidelity' in Almodóvar's adaptation through the analysis of the reception of both the novel and the film in the Spanish media. In any case, the most common approach to the analysis of *Live Flesh* involves a consideration of its intertextual elements, such as its references to film *noir* (Ortiz, 2021), Cervantes or Buñuel (Burningham, 2025), among others.

The relationship between *The Skin I Live In* and *Tarantula* has been studied by authors such as Peña Ardid (2020), who finds that the director goes beyond the novel in his exploration of themes such as gender identity. Felix and Santos da Silva (2017) take a similar approach, reflecting on the ambiguity of the concept of the body through the analysis of two scenes in the book and in the film. Cepedello Moreno (2022) takes a view similar to Sabbadini's (2012), suggesting that the analysis of film adaptations should focus on the differences between the ideological maps of the two works, and taking a hermeneutic and psychoanalytic approach in an effort to explain the repercussions of Almodóvar's interpretation of Jonquet's novel.

In the case of the adaptation of Alice Munro's three short stories in *Julieta*, although various studies have examined the film from an intertextual perspective (Raimond, 2018; Camarero Gómez, 2017; Poyato, 2021), none of these explorations focus on the stories on which it is based. Gómez Gómez (2024) does dedicate part of his study to the connections and differences between the works and their characters, but his analysis focuses strictly on the depiction of age and ageing. The exploration that perhaps comes closest to a comparative literature study is an article by Caldeira Gilnek and Kaminski Alves (2019), who examine the theme of the quest in Munro's *Juliet* and Almodóvar's *Julieta* to consider the intermedial and transformative processes involved in the adaptation of literature to film.

Pedro Almodóvar's film adaptations of plays have also been the subject of scholarly studies that adopt a wide range of approaches. De la Torre Espinosa (2017; 2018) focuses on the works of Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams and Federico García Lorca referenced in his films, while Durán Manso (2017) analyses Williams's presence in the melodramatic traits of several of his characters, and Hornero Campos (2021) conducts a profoundly transtextual microanalysis of the title credits for *The Human Voice* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2020). One of the most original academic approaches can be found in a study by Abes (2015), who offers an exhaustive analysis of the script for *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999). Abes posits the screenplay as a site for experimentation involving three profoundly cinematic operations: thinking, shooting and editing.

### **3. Research objectives and hypothesis**

The main hypothesis of this study is that an analysis of the processes involved in the adaptation of Nunez's novel to the screen can confirm that *The Room Next Door* is effectively a cinematic transposition that reorients the world of the original novel towards Almodóvar's unique creative universe.

The general objectives of this research are to enhance our understanding of Pedro Almodóvar's work not only as a director but also as a scriptwriter, and to identify the different appropriation techniques used by the filmmaker in his adaptation of literary material.

The specific objectives are to conduct a comparative analysis of Nunez's novel and Almodóvar's screenplay and film in order to identify echoes, connections, deviations and meanings in these three different texts, and to develop and test the methodological value of a model of triangular analysis that involves comparing the novel and the film while also considering the screenplay as an intermediate mechanism in the adaptation process.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. The screenplay as text and context

In his proposition of a different methodological approach to the relationship between literature and cinema, José María Paz Gago identifies two phases in the development of a semiotic-textual comparative method: 'The first phase involves analysing the text of the film and the text of the novel independently, in accordance with their respective semiotic systems of expression [...]. Only then can a comparative study be meaningful' (2004, p. 200). Frago Pérez (2005) concludes that most contemporary studies on adaptation are heirs to a narratological approach founded in semiotics, although she also argues that some authors have managed to develop formulas that represent 'new strategies of reflection from the perspective of intertextuality [...] and transtextuality [...]. In this sense, the notion of adaptation expands dramatically from text to context' (2005, p. 64).

For this reason, all the convergences, divergences and reciprocal interferences between the novel and the film need to be considered, although Gago also recognises the screenplay as one of the inevitable interferences and contexts between the verbal and the visual text, and that although it is rarely referred to in comparative studies of literature and film, it should be taken into account as an 'essential element of the transposition process' (2004, p. 221). On this point, in their review of the state of scholarly research on the screenplay in Spain, Fernández-Ramírez and Nevado observe that studies of film adaptations of literature do not commonly consider the processes engaged in by the scriptwriter or the specific scriptwriting strategies used (2024, p. 76), while Sabina Gutiérrez (2018) argues that the screenplay should be recognised as an independent literary work and asserts that it is also a rich source for constructing images and determining cinematic rhythms in its character as an 'intermediate work' (p. 537). In a certain sense, the screenplay constitutes a mid-point in the process of adapting the literary work, serving as a tool that lays out the basic rhetorical operations for the transfer from one medium to the other while proposing cinematic content to be realised in the final work. The screenplay can be described as a piece located halfway between the novel and the film, belonging to both and

neither at the same time. To analyse the film adaptation of a literary work, it would therefore be necessary to consider various degrees of interpretation, and these levels of meaning could effectively be identified in a triangular analysis of the three cornerstones of any adaptation: the novel, the screenplay and the film. The analysis of a film adaptation thus requires an individual textual analysis of the book and the film combined with an interdisciplinary comparative reinterpretation based on the dialogue between the two works. Drawing on the terminology of Panofsky (1972) and his model of interpretation, which Frago Pérez (2005) argues is a perspective perfectly suited to the field of film adaptation, a thorough and sensitive reading of the works will entail both the identification of the strategies used on the pre-iconographic level and a detailed rationale of the findings on the iconographic level. The approach proposed here involves an analysis on the iconological level, with the inclusion in the study of a third work that is independent of Nunez's novel and of Almodóvar's film and yet that could never have existed without them: Almodóvar's screenplay (2024) based on Nunez's book. As Gutiérrez (2018) argues, the screenplay can serve to explore how the writing process influenced the *mise-en-scène* subsequently adopted by the filmmaker. However, in this case the comparison will be carried out using the published version of the screenplay rather than the shooting script, which means that it can be read not only as a tool used in the filming process but also as a literary work endorsed by the writer and director after the film's release. It is thus an element that both precedes and succeeds the film, a precursor to it and a culmination of it at the same time. In a certain sense, what began as a literary work ends up becoming another one.

#### **4.2. Triple analysis: novel, screenplay and film**

The methodology proposed for this study is a qualitative approach combining an analytical and interpretative method to examine three specific works: Sigrid Nunez's novel *What Are You Going Through*, published in 2020; Pedro Almodóvar's screenplay based on the novel, published in Spanish in 2024; and the film *The Room Next Door*. The three texts are analysed individually and comparatively with the aim of describing and explaining the narrative techniques used in each one, making sense of the processes of creation, selection and

reconstruction, and finding the connections and disconnections in the intermedial transfer between them.

To conduct a comparative examination of the three works, two specific analytical models were developed, each of which combines a number of original aspects with elements drawn from methodologies proposed by authors specialising in the analysis of different kinds of film adaptations. For the general analysis of the correlations between the literary text and its film adaptation, the first model proposed for the study focused on categories such as the type of adaptation and its degree of fidelity (Díaz Martín, 2012), the kinds of cinematic transpositions that occur in the transition from the page to the screen (Cid, 2011) and the features related to narratological techniques and focalisation in the literary and film narratives (Sánchez Noriega, 2004). The objective of this first general analysis, together with the analysis of the production context of both works, was to identify some of the main parallels and differences in the stories and discourses of Nunez's novel and Almodóvar's film from a descriptive and global perspective. Four sequences of the film were then selected for the purpose of conducting a comparative analysis of the film against both the original novel and the screenplay as an intermediate tool in the film adaptation process. One of the objectives of analysing these four specific sequences was to identify particular resonances and parallels between the film and the two works that preceded it, and to this end, the selection process was based on the four main elements that articulate the dramatic structure of a film (Sánchez-Escalonailla, 2014): 1) the catalyst or inciting incident; 2) the first plot point; 3) the second plot point; and 4) the climax or resolution. The aim was to perform a microanalysis of the different techniques used to determine the film's narrative structure (beginning and ending, first and third acts) based on four sequences that generally fulfil the main functions of encoding, engagement, exposition and dramatic development in cinema.

To organise the specific analysis of the film sequences and their relationship with both the original book and the screenplay, the second analytical model drew on certain categories in Sánchez Noriega's design for the comparative analysis of film adaptations (2004, pp. 138-140). Specifically, the categories related to enunciation and point of view, temporal and spatial structure, narrative procedures, translations, omissions, compressions, developments, additions,

transformations and visualisations were chosen. The model also included variants proposed by other authors with categories such as focalisation (Cuevas, 2001; Gago, 2004), incorporation, transfer, additions and omission of narrative elements (Taranilla, 2021), intertextual relationships (Bensahla and Berbar, 2022), the rhetorical devices used (Malagón, 2011), the additions and connotations that mark the filmmaker's authorial presence in relation to the mise-en-scène (Frago Pérez, 2005), and the analysis of cinematographic codes (Casetti and Di Chio, 1990). These, in addition to a few original categories developed specifically for this study, facilitated the creation of a specific analytical model to examine the elements of each sequence in the novel, the screenplay and the film independently while at the same time reflecting the transitions between them. The main reason for creating an ad hoc analytical model was the need to establish a complete, systematic comparison between the three different works, which is something that none of the previous models had attempted.

The categories of analysis and their specific subcategories are listed below. From numbers 1 to 9, the model analyses the excerpts selected from the novel, the screenplay and the film, while categories 10 and 11 apply only to the screenplay and film sequences:

1. Enunciation and point of view: Time. Focalisation.
2. Temporal and spatial structure: Location. Order, duration and functions. Frequency and repetitions.
3. Narrative procedures: Organisation. Structure.
4. Textual relationships: Intertextuality. Interdiscursivity. Intermediality. Translation.
5. Rhetorical devices: Adjunction. Simile. Ellipsis. Substitution. Hypallage.
6. Translations, omissions, compressions and additions: Of time. Of spaces. Of actions. Of characters. Of descriptions. Of dialogues.
7. Developments: Of implicit actions. Of quick actions and character traits. Of context. Of descriptions.
8. Transformations and transfers: From dialogue to non-verbal space. From prose text to dialogue. From direct to indirect dialogues. Substitutions or equivalences.
9. Visualisations: Actions, times or spaces evoked. Descriptive elements

transferred to cinematic language.

10. Cinematographic codes: Visual. Audio. Syntactic. Technological. Graphic. Acting and language codes. Paradigmatic connotations. Syntagmatic connotations.
11. Mise-en-scène: Framing options. Off-screen space. Perspective. Blocking. Authorial traits.
12. Other.

## **5. Results and discussion: the different ‘next doors’ and ‘rooms’**

### **in *The Room Next Door***

Nunez's novel follows an anonymous protagonist whose profession (writer) and reflections bear similarities to the reality and interests of the author herself. *What Are You Going Through* is a story narrated in the first person about the protagonist's relationship with a friend, also anonymous, who is suffering from terminal cancer and asks the protagonist to help her by being with her when she takes a euthanasia pill. As this main plot unfolds, the protagonist interweaves stories and reflections on various themes (old age, death, literature) that give the story a protean quality, conveying the impression that “at times, the plot matters less than the anecdotes and digressions of that character who is and at the same time is not the author” (Vicente, 2021).

In both the screenplay and the film, Almodóvar eliminates most of these digressions, focusing on the relationship between the two friends, who are given the names Ingrid (Julianne Moore), the writer, and Martha (Tilda Swinton), the friend dying of cancer, who is now identified as a former war correspondent. Nunez's book is structured in three parts, of which the Spanish filmmaker's screenplay for *The Room Next Door* draws mainly on the first two: from Part One (eight chapters in all), he uses content from chapters one, two, six and eight; from Part Two (five chapters), he makes use of the first four chapters, leaving only the last one out; and Part Three, which consists of just two chapters, makes no significant contribution to the narrative development of the screenplay.

Almodóvar's rereading and modification of the original literary text in *The Room Next Door* is not based solely on the compression or omission of plotlines or

characters – a common practice in many cases of cinematic transposition – but also on highly significant additions, developments and changes. Notable among the additions are a resolution and climax that are starkly different from those of the original novel, as well as a flashback (to a subplot about Carmelite priests in love, set during the Iraq War) that belongs entirely to the creative universe of the filmmaker. The developments include the expansion of certain important moments that are elided in the book, such as Martha's return to the house in search of the forgotten euthanasia pill, which Almodóvar exploits for the purpose of offering a series of his characteristic detail shots. The complete change to the title is also highly significant. *What Are You Going Through* is transformed into *The Room Next Door*, which is more than just a spatial indication, as it constitutes a symbolic image of one of the film's central themes: support and care for the other, the friend, as an essential part of what makes us human. In both the screenplay and the film, Ingrid stays not in the room next to Martha but in the room downstairs, on the lower floor of the house that they share for several weeks. The 'room next door' thus represents the conceptual embodiment of intimacy and emotional connection that grows between the two protagonists as the story progresses. This physical closeness between the two women also marks a profound departure from the literary text in terms of focalisation: unlike the novel, this is not Martha's story as told by Ingrid, but the collective story of Ingrid and Martha, two women so close to each other that they end up becoming almost indistinguishable, as the promotional poster for the film suggests.

### **5.1. Inciting incident and first plot point**

In both the screenplay and the film, the inciting incident takes place in the first sequence, when Ingrid learns about Martha's illness at a book signing for her latest novel in a New York bookstore. This is an original scene that does not exist in the literary work, as Nunez begins her story (told in the past tense from the perspective of an unspecified present) after the protagonist has learnt of her friend's illness.

The first plot point takes place in a long sequence in which Martha confesses to Ingrid that she has bought a euthanasia pill and asks her to be there with her when she takes it. In this case, despite the transformations, translations,

additions and omissions, the sequence adheres quite closely to the narrative content of chapter eight in the first part of Nunez's novel. Both the film and the screenplay include a key sequence split into two halves with two different settings:

1. In the café at the Lincoln Center, Martha tells Ingrid that she has bought a euthanasia pill and asks her to be there with her when she takes it.
2. After an ellipsis, the conversation continues at dusk in Martha's apartment. Ingrid is uncertain, but on her way back home, she calls Martha from her taxi and tells her she will do it.

Both the opening sequence and the one that includes the first plot point establish the main transformations to the novel's central character, Ingrid, in the screenplay and the film. Almodóvar introduces her with one of his characteristic overhead shots, looking down on the table where she is signing her latest novel, described in the screenplay as a 'book of autofiction [...] called *On Sudden Deaths*' (2024, p. 11). Ingrid is thus introduced from the outset as a creator who could be added to the long list of filmmakers and writers portrayed in Almodóvar's films who embody different *alter egos* of the filmmaker himself. It is also hard to overlook Almodóvar's inclusion of an exchange with a lesbian fan who elicits Ingrid's empathy, allowing the director to include a queer character in the story (one of the recurring features of the Almodóvarian universe).

At the same time, this opening sequence uses various rhetorical devices to construct an aspect of Ingrid's personality that is not developed in the novel: her denial of death. In both the screenplay and the film, alliteration is used to repeat the word 'death' in the first lines of dialogue (three times in the screenplay, twice in the film). Ingrid is introduced as a character whose difficulty accepting that 'something that's alive has to die' is provoked by fear and incomprehension. Her character arc in the film thus differs from that of the novel, which does not give this fear much weight; here, that arc takes her on a journey from terror to acceptance, resolved in a beautiful climax under falling snow. It can hardly be coincidental that the first dialogue in the film includes this observation by one of Ingrid's fans: 'In the prologue you say you wrote this book in order to better understand and accept death.' If Ingrid the writer is understood to be Almodóvar the filmmaker's *alter ego*, it could be inferred that he wrote and filmed *The Room*

*Next Door* with a similar aim: to make peace with the inevitability of his own demise.

The sequence containing the first plot point also features the rhetorical device of alliteration. In her long conversation with Ingrid, first in the café and then in her apartment, Martha makes three references to the room next door: 'I'm just asking you to be in the next room'; 'What I need someone to be there with me, in the room next door'; 'to know that when it happens, there'll be someone in the next room.' On the one hand, this could be read as an example of transfer from literary to cinematic dialogue, as the novel literally includes the same idea, although only on one occasion: 'What if something goes wrong? What if *everything* goes wrong? I need to know there's someone in the next room' (2020, p. 103). On the other hand, Almodóvar's three references to the next room match the three references to death in the first sequence. This obvious interest in a specific rhetorical device (alliteration) brings Almodóvar's scriptwriting closer to the practice of writing literature.

The temporal and spatial structure of the sequence in which Martha reveals her intentions to Ingrid departs significantly from the novel. In the book, the conversation between the writer and her friend is narrated in linear form and takes place in a single setting: a bar that both women often used to go to when they were younger. In the screenplay and the film, the sequence includes an ellipsis that serves to connect the two settings (the café and Martha's apartment) where the extended conversation between the friends takes place. Almodóvar omits elements present throughout this chapter of the book that represent digressions from the main plot, but he also eliminates elements of the screenplay. For example, significantly, he ended up leaving out one moment in the conversation when Ingrid and Martha discuss the possibility of an afterlife: 'If there's anything out there other than the void, I'll do my best to tell you' (2024, p. 83).

These omissions are necessary to accommodate Almodóvar's additions and transformations, which in this sequence occur mainly in the intertextual and interconnected references to a literary work and a film that are not present at all in the novel: 'The Dead', one of the short stories included in James Joyce's collection *Dubliners* (1914) and Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in*

*Italia*, 1954). The significance of Joyce's story in *The Room Next Door* is made explicit for the first time in the sequence immediately before the first plot point, where Martha and Ingrid, after learning that the treatment that Martha has been receiving is not working, look through the hospital window to see pink snow falling outside. This pink snow is also mentioned in the novel, along with an explanation for it: 'because the sun was just going down the snow was tinted a sunset pink' (2020, p. 73). Almodóvar opts to omit this explanation, giving the scene a spectral quality with echoes of fantasy cinema. From that moment, snow becomes a recurring visual motif symbolising the proximity of death, and in the sequence in the hospital, at sunset, while she watches the pink snow falling outside the window, Martha recites the final passage (with minor changes to the original text) of the Irish writer's celebrated short story to Ingrid, who is visibly moved. The scene ends with a close-up on Swinton's face that fades to black, followed by a detail shot of Martha's hand resting on a copy of a Film Society of Lincoln Center program, which has an image of Ingrid Bergman in *Journey to Italy* on the cover. This is no mere coincidence. Rossellini's film includes several direct references to Joyce's story, including the names of its two protagonists: Katherine and Alex Joyce. In *Journey to Italy*, Katherine (Bergman) tells her indifferent husband a sad story about a young poet, now deceased, who risked his life for her on a rainy night; it is a romantic tale of young love that Rossellini took directly from the devastating conclusion to Joyce's story.

The fade to black that ends the scene in the hospital connects Martha's placid face, as she processes the knowledge of her own demise, with the next scene in the café, where she has now made the decision to die on her own terms. At that moment, right after the close-up on the Lincoln Center program, Almodóvar makes Martha, sitting alone in the café looking out the window at the street, the focaliser of the narrative with a POV shot (internal ocularisation) that is hinted at in the screenplay: "Martha looks at all of it serenely, a little like she looked at the snow. In reality, she is saying goodbye to that corner, so typically New York" (2024, p. 73). This idea, combined with the simple editing cut and the fade to black, underpins the profoundly intertextual discourse of *The Room Next Door*: it is this simple syntagmatic connotation that inserts Joyce and Rossellini into

Almodóvar's film and illuminates the connections between them. It is thus clearly no coincidence that one of the protagonists in the film should be named Ingrid.

### **5.2. Second plot point and resolution**

The whole third act of *The Room Next Door*, including the second plot point and the resolution or climax, completely rewrites the ending to *What Are You Going Through*. Nunez's novel has a different second plot point, in the fifth chapter of Part Two, when the writer and her friend have to leave the rented house where they have spent a few weeks together due to a ridiculous domestic accident. The bathtub overflows and floods the house, and thus their plans are thwarted, much to their despair:

It had been a mistake to come here, it was a stupid idea. It was a fantasy. She should have known it would go all wrong. [...] It was life, that's what. Life going on, in spite of everything. Messy life. Unfair life. Life that must be dealt with. (2020, p. 176-177)

The novel's two protagonists return to the city, which is where Part Three takes place, with the story ending before the inevitable death occurs. Almodóvar's telling of the story is radically different, as he seems to dismiss the idea of life as 'messy' and 'unfair', deciding instead to continue developing the 'fantasy' of a novel about 'a beautiful death in a nice house in a scenic town on a fine summer night' (Nunez, 2020, p. 176). This was 'the end my friend had written for herself,' writes Nunez, and Almodóvar seems determined to bring it to the screen based on some original creations and additions suggestive of his idiosyncratic authorial style.

The second plot point in the film is the long sequence of Martha's suicide, which takes place in the house they have rented in the middle of the forest and includes the following scenes:

1. Ingrid enters Martha's room and tells her she's going out. Martha says good-bye to her affectionately: it is the last time they will see each other, although Ingrid is unaware of the fact.
2. Ingrid goes to a restaurant to meet her former partner, Damian (John Turturro), a university professor who gives talks on climate change, the

neoliberal world and humankind's inevitable extinction.

3. Martha prepares herself, puts on her make-up gets dressed for her grand finale. The suicide itself is elided.
4. Ingrid returns to the house and finds the red door to Martha's room closed: the unequivocal sign that the inevitable has happened. She goes out to the terrace, finds Martha on the sun lounger and sits down next to her, distraught.

The resolution or climax is also shorter. After returning from the cruel police interrogation she is subjected to after Martha's death, Ingrid meets Michelle, Martha's daughter (with whom she had a troubled relationship), at the front door to the house. The film ends with Michelle taking her mother's place on the lounger, with Ingrid beside her.

As noted above, these sequences mark a complete departure from the novel. Almodóvar delves into themes and concepts of his own and transforms some of the core ideas of the original literary work to take it into his own territory. Even in the one scene that the filmmaker partly respects (featuring the character played by Turturro), it could be argued that in terms of interdiscursivity it is completely in keeping with the increasing inclusion of political issues in Almodóvar's more recent work.

One of the most profound changes Almodóvar introduces is to Ingrid's character arc and her progressive transformation into Martha. It is a process reminiscent of the merging of identities that occurs between the nurse Alma (Bibi Andersson) and her patient Elisabet (Liv Ullmann) in *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1968), a film that undoubtedly plays a key role in the complex intertextuality of *The Room Next Door*. Although Almodóvar's film borrows certain narrative tropes from Bergman's (such as the story of two women alone in an isolated house), there are also certain marked differences. The egalitarian relationship between Ingrid and Martha, for example, does not have the vampiric nature of the protagonists' relationship in *Persona*. The fusion between the two characters is also of a different nature: little by little, Ingrid gives up her denial of death and finally comes to accept it. This idea is present in the screenplay, in the scene in which Ingrid discovers Martha's dead body, where Almodóvar includes both technical indications and literary devices: 'We will take a shot from outside, with Martha

dead in the foreground (looking like she's asleep) and Ingrid on the far side of the glass, facing something she has been trying to understand all her life. Perhaps now she understands it' (2024, p. 158).

*The Room Next Door* tracks Ingrid's journey from incomprehension to understanding. Almodóvar constructs the two protagonists as opposing reflections and as parallel characters, highlighting this duality with his mise-en-scène choices. Martha is filmed repeatedly with a background of trees or plants, such as in the sequence with the first plot point, while the reverse shot always shows Ingrid surrounded by furniture and books. In this way, the film constructs this idea of analogy based on opposing concepts and colours: while Martha's green represents her acceptance of the laws of nature, Ingrid's red symbolises her rational resistance against the inevitable. It is therefore significant that in the scene where they say good-bye (by which point Ingrid has completed her process of transformation), the two friends are shown together, framed by a background of a lush forest seen through the large window behind them.

The game of mirrors between the two women also evokes the very Bergmanian figure of the ghost. In a sequence that appears in the novel but is given more of a central role in the film, Ingrid finds the red door to Martha's room closed and believes it means she has committed suicide. She collapses onto the lounger in distress, and then through the large window behind her, Martha drifts into sight with the ethereal pallor of a spectre. It is a striking apparition, which for a moment turns *The Room Next Door* into a phantasmagorical story, at least until the truth is revealed: Martha is still alive. The ghost motif appears again in the sequence with the second plot point: after entering the house and again seeing the door to Martha's room closed, it is Ingrid this time who appears as an ashen figure behind the glass, while in the foreground is Martha's dead body, elegantly dressed and with make-up on, bathed in sunlight. It is a contrast that is referred to explicitly in the screenplay: 'Now she's the one who looks like a ghost, moving and looking from side to side' (2024, p. 158). Ingrid then goes out to the terrace and sits down beside Martha, who is lying peacefully with her eyes closed on the green lounger. Martha's face then gradually disappears in a lap dissolve that simulates a fade to green, as if she were a ghost leaving this world forever, leaving the screen flooded with the vibrant colour of the sun lounger.

The appearance of Martha's daughter exponentially multiplies the notion of duality. On the one hand, Michelle is the spitting image of Martha, as Tilda Swinton plays both mother and daughter. On the other, Ingrid's personal journey has brought her so close to Martha that she has in a way ended up transforming into her, thus becoming Michelle's surrogate mother. This in turn allows Almodóvar to introduce one of his favourite themes: the representation of alternative, unorthodox models for the mother and the family. While the character played by Julianne Moore hints at this idea in her voice-over, the screenplay is much more explicit:

Michelle has the sensation that she'll be able to ask Ingrid everything she never asked her mother. Ingrid is going to become, in a very non-obvious way, the mother she never had. Michelle is a living replica of Martha, but it is Ingrid who will end up transforming into Martha... she has inherited her strength. (2024, p. 182)

Like a Rossellinian epiphany, Ingrid's definitive transformation into Martha takes place in the final scene of the film. Michelle, who takes the place on the green lounger that was previously occupied by her mother, is lying next to Ingrid. It begins to snow, and Ingrid takes Martha's place by reciting the passage from Joyce's 'The Dead' that we have heard before in the film on two occasions: first in the pink snow sequence; and then when Martha and Ingrid are watching the final moments of the film *The Dead* (John Huston, 1987) together. Almodóvar rewrites Huston's film, replacing his images of snowy meadows with shots of the forest, the pool and the house where Ingrid and Martha have been living together; and, through Julianne Moore's emotional voice, he also rewrites Joyce's text, adapting it to the love story of these two parallel characters:

The snow is falling. It's falling on the lonely pool we never used... It's falling on the woods where we walked and you lay exhausted on the ground. Falling on your daughter and on me, falling upon the living and the dead.

## 6. Conclusions: three rooms

This comparative analysis of Nunez's novel with Almodóvar's screenplay and film confirms that the Spanish filmmaker, rather than merely adapting or

transferring, has rewritten and modified Nunez's text to bring it closer to his own authorial style, both at an intertextual level and in terms of its writing approach and mise-en-scène. This study of Pedro Almodóvar as a multidisciplinary creator (filmmaker as well as screenwriter) also sheds light on a connection and transition between novelist, screenwriter and director that reveals meanings on three different levels (novel, screenplay and film). The analytical model proposed pinpoints transfers between the literary and cinematic texts that might otherwise have gone undetected, while also facilitating access to the reasons and motives behind the meanings. Moreover, as a triangular method, it also strangely echoes the key significance of the number three in both the screenplay and the film, which is not present in the novel.

As explained above, the filmmaker and screenwriter uses the rhetorical device of alliteration to include the same word ('death') or phrase ('the next room') three times in the same sequence. He also includes three flashbacks, three distinct recitals of the final passage from 'The Dead', and even three phantasmal female figures. There are also three intertextual references in the film to works that are themselves interconnected: Joyce's short story, Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* and Huston's *The Dead*. And there are three bedrooms (one next to the room with the red door, and a third downstairs) in the house in which two women (later three), despite their opposing natures, forge a genuine emotional bond.

The number three resonates with the idea that somehow this adaptation of a literary work constitutes a triple adaptation: the film's adaptation of Nunez's work, the screenplay's adaptation of the novel, and the film's adaptation of the screenplay. In fact, it may even be possible to speak of a fourth: our own adaptation when, as readers and spectators, we relate the film to the works that came before it, but also to the director's filmography and to our experience of it as witnesses. Much like Ingrid and Martha do for each other, Almodóvar's films guide, enrich and care for us in a way, as if in our off-screen lives we too had someone in the room next door, accompanying us on the journey.

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## Acknowledgements

Translated from the Spanish by Martin Boyd.