

Fotografía, memoria y cultura material en *Madres paralelas*

(Pedro Almodóvar, 2021)

Photography, Memory and Material Culture in *Parallel Mothers*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to highlight the ‘parallel’ relationships established between the fashion photographer Janis and the forensic anthropologist Arturo in the film *Parallel Mothers*. These are examined in terms of each characters’ photographic praxis and in their search for evidence to reveal the locations and identities of the victims who disappeared during the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime and whose bodies lie in mass graves awaiting exhumation. Using a qualitative methodology based on film analysis, this work shows how the Janis's fashion still life photographs for the magazine *Mujer Hoy* are presented as revealing visions that foreshadow the photographs of the material culture found in the mass grave and which, at the same time, conclude the final step in the process of finding and identifying the corpses.

Resumen:

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo poner de relieve las relaciones “paralelas” que el filme *Madres paralelas* establece entre la fotógrafa de moda Janis y el antropólogo forense Arturo, tanto en su praxis fotográfica como en la búsqueda de evidencias para la localización e identificación de las víctimas desaparecidas durante la Guerra civil española y el franquismo y cuyos cuerpos yacen en fosas comunes a la espera de ser exhumados. Desde una metodología de naturaleza cualitativa fundamentada en el análisis filmico se evidencia cómo las fotografías de los bodegones de moda que lleva a cabo Janis para la revista *Mujer Hoy* se presentan como visiones reveladoras y prefiguraciones de la cultura material que es encontrada y fotografiada en la fosa común por Arturo y que, al tiempo, contribuyen a concluir el proceso de búsqueda e identificación de cadáveres.

Keywords:

Almodóvar, Pedro; Parallel Mothers; Spanish Civil War; Photography; Memory.

Palabras clave:

Almodóvar, Pedro; Madres paralelas; Guerra civil española; fotografía; memoria.

1. Introduction

Walter Benjamin observes that memory is the *medium* that enables the secrets of the past to be unearthed so rescuing them from obscurity and revealing them to the present (1989, pp. 160-161). In the present work, the act of “revelation” becomes particularly significant taking on a double meaning since our focus is the photography and the photographic praxis of, on one hand, Janis (Penélope Cruz), a fashion photographer, and on the other, Arturo (Israel Elejalde) a, photographer working in forensic anthropology in the film *Parallel Mothers* (*Madres Paralelas*: Pedro Almodóvar, 2021). This is something that acquires an even greater relevance as both characters pursue their common interest with regard to the excavation of mass graves from Spain’s Civil War and the location, disinterment and identification of the victims of political repression and violence during the war itself and the dictatorship that followed.

In this regard, using the ideas both of an archaeological excavation and of collecting photographic images, Benjamin (1989) suggests that the past communicates and presents as a form of memory topography (pp.160-161). And, just as the man who digs attempts to safeguard history—as is the case of Arturo at the Aldea de la Monte mass grave where Janis’s relatives are buried—in this Benjaminesque conception of history, it is only in a world of ruins that one can construct the necessary network of crossroads whose spatio-temporal voids facilitate contact with the present and awaken “man’s historical consciousness” (Benjamin, 1989, pp.160-161). That is, those who are “always at the crossroads” can place themselves between a past and a present that enables new modes of thinking about history. It is in this spirit that Janis reproaches Ana (Milena Smit) in response to her lack of interest in the mass graves and those who disappeared during the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship: “It’s about time that you realised which country you live in”.

Pedro Almodóvar’s interest in the legacy of Spain’s past and its repercussions in the present, is something of a constant in his cinematographic output, as noted by Zurian and Vásquez (2005) Smith (2014), Gutiérrez-Albilla (2017)

and Noble (2020). Indeed, it can be seen throughout his corpus of work, appearing, perhaps, as intertextual references in films alluding to the dictatorship, in his challenges to traditional ways of thinking or in how his work addresses individual trauma and the processes of healing (Sánchez-Arce, 2020, p.11). Nevertheless, his commitment to restoring the memory of the victims of Spain's Civil War and Francoism is especially evident in two works completed by El Deseo SA (the Almodóvar brother's production company) prior to the release of *Parallel Mothers*.

The first of these films is the short documentary, *Against impunity. For the dignity of the victims of Francoism* (*Contra la impunidad. Por la dignidad de las víctimas del franquismo* by Azucena Rodríguez, 2010) in which Pedro Almodóvar himself and other luminaries of the cinematic and cultural world use their voices and faces to bring life to the testimony of those killed with impunity during the Spanish Civil War and whose remains still lie in mass graves. The project took place three years after the passing of Law 52/2007, of 26th December, known popularly as the Law of Historical Memory. This law requires, among other things, the removal of all public symbols relating to the Francoist regime, and recognises the existence of the dictatorship's victims and the need to support the exhumation of the disappeared. The film *Parallel Mothers*, deals, in particular, with these last two elements of the law, and was premiered a year before the approval of a related piece of legislation: the Law of Democratic Memory (Law 20/2022, of 19th October) which proposed a more centrally coordinated approach to the exhumation of mass graves.

The second of these works is the feature-length documentary *The silence of others* (*El silencio de otros* by Almudena Carracedo & Robert Bahar, 2018). This project tells the story of the so-called "Argentine Complaint" (14th of April 2010), a bid for justice instigated by survivors of the Francoist regime seeking to prosecute crimes against humanity committed in Spain by supporters of Franco's dictatorship.

The idea for *Parallel Mothers* was conceived several years before the two documentary works mentioned above; in fact, it appears as a screenplay

written by Harry Caine/Mateo Blanco (Luis Homar) in *Broken Embraces* (*Los abrazos rotos*, 2009). However, *Against impunity* and *The silence of others* constitute a prior place of reflection allowing Almodóvar to work through ideas surrounding the recuperation and reparation of memory regarding victims of Spain's Civil War and Francoism when he returns to the screenplay to produce a definitive version of the film in 2020.

The central character in *Parallel Mothers* is Janis (Penelope Cruz), a Madrid-based photographer and acquaintance of Arturo (Israel Elejalde). Arturo is an archaeologist and forensic anthropologist who, towards the end of the film, helps Janis exhume the remains of her great-grandfather and nine other people from her town who were summarily executed at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Janis and Arturo become lovers and the fruit of their relationship, a daughter named Cecilia, arrives two years later. In the days leading up to her own due date, Janis meets Ana (Milena Smit), a young, soon-to-be single mum. Both women give birth on the same day, and mix-up at the hospital results in their two newborns being swapped. Arturo's doubts about Cecilia's paternity compel Janis to get the baby DNA-tested. Just as Janis discovers she is not Cecilia's biological mother she receives news of the sudden death of baby Anita, her true daughter who was given in error to Ana shortly after she was born. Janis and Ana meet again, and after working through the difficulties both must face at discovering the truth about their respective daughters, the film's final scene takes us back to Janis's hometown, Aldea de los Montes. Having waited many years, Janis and Arturo—a couple once again but now in a broader family unit that includes Ana and Cecilia—have been given permission to conduct DNA tests on the descendants of those recovered from the town's mass grave. This means that Arturo and his team can finally complete the process of exhumation and identification of the bodies.

2. The state of the art

In Spain, the academic study of Almodóvar's oeuvre has developed an especial momentum since the 1st International Pedro Almodóvar Congress in 2003 held at the Cuenca campus of the University of Castilla-La-Mancha. This conference drove a rethink concerning the importance of this director's cinematography both in the field of audiovisual studies and within modern cinema more generally (Zurian & Vázquez-Varela, 2005). Since then, and during the intervening twenty years before the 2nd International Almodóvar Congress at the Complutense University in Madrid (Zurian, 2024), the number of research papers produced concerning this director and *El Deseo* (Zarauza-Castro & Bogas-Ríos, 2025) has multiplied considerably. This body of work encompasses a range of different perspectives and foci (Iturbe & del Castillo, 2025) offering a rich and varied terrain in which to explore Almodóvar's cinema, society and Spanish culture (Zurian & Mira, 2025). While it is possible to find certain important works from the 1990's, for instance, Holgún (1993), it is not until the end of the first decade of the new century that research into Almodóvar's cinematographic corpus really takes off with studies by, among others, Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010), De la Torre Espinosa (2015), Mora Díez (2016), Mao (2019) and Martínez Serrano (2020). With a particular focus on translation, dubbing, and language teaching and learning, we have the work of Rox-Barasoain (2009), Santamaría-Ciordia (2011), Monterubbiano (2011), Crespo Fernández (2012), Wang (2013) and Kerdkidsadanon (2015); concerning the promotion and dissemination of his films there are the studies of Tabuenca Bengoa's (2008, 2009) and Saavedra Llamas (2012); relating to the design of title credits, works by Cartelle Neira (2022) and Hornero Campos (2022) stand out; with respect to Almodóvar's soundtracks, we should mention articles by Relova-Quinteiro (2015), Iglesias-Prieto (2015) and Tovar-Vicente (2015); and taking perspectives related to gender or sex-gender diversity, here, important works include those by Manrubia-Pereira (2013), Vázquez Lima (2015), Shen (2018) and Garrido-Lora & Ramírez-Alvarado (2020).

Approaches to Almodóvar's cinematography have also been nourished by perspectives that consider his films through the role of photography (Parejo, 2020); the Movida in Madrid (Torre-Espinosa, 2020); trauma (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017); age (Zurian & Muñoz-Torrecilla); LGBTIQ+ studies (Zurian, 2024) and fashion studies (Navarro-Gaviño & Muñoz-Torrecilla, 2024; Navarro-Gaviño, 2025; Kwitko & Longhi, 2025). Similarly, in the international arena, there are significant compilation works, for example, D'Lugo & Vernon's (2013) Companion to Almodóvar, as well as individual, focussed studies such as that by Julian Smith (2014).

Concerning *Parallel Mothers*, several works examine the relationship between this film and Lorca's *Doña Rosita the spinster* (*Doña Rosita la soltera*: Amaya- Flores, 2022; Herrera Cepero, 2022). There are also approaches from the perspective of motherhood and politics (Martínez-Sánchez, 2021; Marcantonio, 2022; Alcalde-Silveira, 2024), and of great relevance here, that pay special attention to photography as a form of testimony, for example, Stuart Davis's (2024) recent work.

Despite the high profile of photography in Davis's (2004) study and the transversal role it plays in other previous examinations of *Parallel Mothers*, questions remain. In particular, an as yet unstudied area involves the relationships the film attempts to establish between Janis's photographic praxis—especially in her work as a fashion photographer for the magazine, *Mujer Hoy* (*Today's Woman*)—and the material culture found in the mass graves, which are, in turn, photographed by Arturo in his role as a forensic anthropologist. A dialectic which, throughout the film, accentuates the Benjamin-esque “revelational” function of photography and its capacity to “rub history against the grain” (Benjamin, 2009, p.43). Thus, with the aim of continuing to provide new insights that to enrich the study of photography's role in *Parallel Mothers*, a study that to highlights these very questions seems justified.

3. Objectives and hypotheses

Bearing in mind the above discussion, the principal objectives of this investigation are the following:

Objective 1. To highlight the “parallel” relationships that the film establishes between Janis and Arturo, both concerning their photographic praxis as well as in their search for evidence to reveal the locations and identities of their lost relations and loved ones.

Objective 2. To demonstrate how Janis’s fashion shots for *Mujer Hoy* magazine can be seen as revelational visions of the material culture found in the mass grave, which is itself photographed and, in time, contributes to finalizing the process of locating and identifying the bodies of the disappeared.

Objective 3. To identify the role of photography as a custodian of memory and as a material source of evidence in the process of locating and identifying bodies from mass graves.

From these objectives, the present work proposes the following hypotheses:

Hp.1.: The fashion shots taken by Janis for *Mujer Hoy* magazine which we see via a camera lens through the eyes of the photographer herself, act as a “revelational” and anticipatory vision of the material culture from the mass grave photographed by Arturo and which, in a parallel manner, is also viewed through his camera lens.

Hp.2.: In conjunction with this parallel photographic practice, the references the film makes concerning photography are oriented to emphasise its character as a custodian of memory and its role as a material source of evidence in the location and identification of the disappeared in the context of forensic archaeology and anthropology.

4. Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of this work, and to demonstrate the hypotheses proposed, the present study employs a qualitative methodology founded in the techniques of film analysis and character analysis. Regarding the former,

this research refers to Sulbarán Piñeiro (2000), and regarding the latter, analysis is based on the work of authors including Seger (2000), Pérez Rufí (2016) and Guarinos (2007, 2013) who, in turn, take inspiration from Casetti & Di Chio (2003) and Chatman (1978). As Pérez Rufí (2016, pp.546-547) notes, it is only through a detailed analysis of a range of filmic elements including characters, aspects of wardrobe, visual and audio features that we may hope to reach a better understanding of how the film's narrative is developed and presented as well as gain profound insights into the message the film attempts to communicate.

In a complementary manner, to support our parallel analysis of Janis's fashion shots and the practices of forensic archaeology and anthropology with respect to classifying the material culture found in Spain's Civil War mass graves, we refer to the studies of Ferrández Martín (2014, 2019) and Moreno-Martín et. al. (2021). This work provides a general reference for methodological approaches to the exhumation of mass graves from the Civil War era and the evaluation of the material culture recovered from these reminders of Francoism. To supplement this, we also refer to research focussing on specific exhumation projects, such as that completed at the Valle Redondo mass grave in Zalamea la Real, Huelva (Alcántara Vegas & Fernández-Martín, 2015) which details the classification and inventory of disinterred objects; the study of material recovered from the Levante front (Jansen Pamblanco & Rodríguez-Cortés, 2022), as well as a study focussing on a child's rattle found in the mass grave at the Old Cemetery in Carcavilla, Palencia (García-Rubio Ruiz, 2023).

The discussion of results obtained will be completed within a theoretical framework comprising Benjamin's corpus of work concerning photography and history (1989, 2009, 2011) as well as Barthes's famous concept of the "has-been" regarding photography and death. Similarly, with respect to photography as a repository for memory we must keep in mind the notions of Susan Sontag (2007) in addition to Aby Warburg's (2010) work, *Menmosyne Atlas*. Our approach also draws on studies about mediated memory in the digital era (van Dijck, 2007), the narrative power of photography (Blanco

Pérez, 2022) and the re-evaluation of family photograph albums from the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship as part of archiving practice (Rosón, 2015; Alonso Riveiro, 2022).

Regarding the representation of objects of memory in cinema, here we look to the work of Kuhn (2010) and Loxham (2011). Finally, in questions about the curation of material culture recovered from Civil War mass graves and the remnants of Francoism, we will refer to work concerning the archaeology, anthropology and memorialisation of the Paterna graves (Valencia) undertaken by Moreno Martín et. al. (2023) for the Valencian Museum of Prehistory (Museu de Prehistòria de València).

5. Results

5.1. Photographic practice and images in *Parallel Mothers*.

Right from the start of *Parallel Mothers*, photography has a significant presence not only in terms of its practice but also as the material support for the fixing and future reproduction of photographic images. The film opens by situating the audience in Janis's photographic studio where she is creating a portrait of Arturo as a forensic anthropologist. The film reveals this is a set for a photo-shoot by showing us the scaffolding, the backdrops, lighting rigs and other props. Janis is not alone, instead she is surrounded by dozens of assistants. This opening allows the cinema camera to focus attention on Janis's photographic camera. A first shot capturing Janis looking through the camera view-finder makes the audience feel like the subject of the photograph. The situation is reversed in other shots where we look into the view-finder of the same camera, seeing through Janis's eyes; now the audience becomes the subject-who-photographs and can experience how the camera shutter captures Arturo, the photographed-subject.

Janis herself lays out the vision for the portrait she wants to make: "They asked me to do a Hamlet-style portrait, with the skull, but I think a skull is a bit clichéd for a forensic anthropologist, you know? So, we're not going to do that". Nevertheless, the set does, in fact, include six skull-shaped ceramic

pieces arranged on a coffee table. Opposite the set is another prop table on which a range of designer bags has been placed; these are similar to the ones that appear later in Janis's fashion still lifes for the magazine, *Mujer Hoy*.

This first photo shoot with Arturo marks, from the film's beginning, the interaction between photography and cinema appearing, as it does, in the opening credits as if in a strip of photographic negatives: the ultimate cliché. Presenting the credits in this way, like a contact sheet, both the opening and closing credits of the film remind us of the source of and means of preserving photographic material.

Janis's photographic practice returns to the forefront of our attention in her photo shoot at home with little Cecilia. The child is lying on a bed on top of a green coverlet while Janis photographs her in a manner not dissimilar to the way Arturo later photographs the human remains recovered from the mass grave. The green backdrop of the coverlet is a stand-in for the field of lush, green grass where the mass grave is thought to be located and that Janis uses as the background on her computer display. The session with Cecilia is interrupted when Janis takes delivery of the DNA testing kit that she uses to determine whether or not she is the mother of the child.

Just as in the film's opening showing Janis's photo shoot with Arturo, the audience's participation as either the photographed-subject or the subject-who-photographs is a repeated theme in Janis's modelling shoots for *Mujer Hoy*. Both in the case of Dana (Daniela Santiago) and in that of the Olympic champion, Ana Peleteiro, the film invites the audience to participate not only in this role-playing game but also in the performative artifice and the act of capturing it. This same strategy is employed once again at the end of the film with respect to Arturo's photographic praxis in documenting both the human remains and the material culture recovered from the mass grave.

Regarding the citation and referencing of other professional photographers, the shelves of Janis's home-office are full of books and photographic catalogues by artists such as David Hockney, and fashion photographers like David LaChapelle and Cecil Beaton. Concerning Beaton, one of his

photographs also appears in a prominent position in Elena's (Rossy de Palma) office at the headquarters of *Mujer Hoy*, where she is director. The particular image in question is *Ball Gowns* (published in US Vogue, June 2948), a photograph showing eight models dressed in designs by Charles James, America's first true couturier.

Alongside the volumes of fashion photographs, Janis's bookshelves also hold other books and catalogues containing photographic work known for documenting conflict and social injustice. The first of these is *Gold* (2019), published by Taschen, which includes photographs from Sebastião Salgado's project about the Brazilian mine, Serra Pelada (1986). The second, is a book about Robert Capa, a graphic reporter who documented the activities of Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. His most iconic photograph, *Death of a militia* (*Muerte de un miliciano*, *Vu*, 23 sept. 1936), was taken barely a month and ten days after the disappearance of Janis's relatives from their home in Aldea de los Montes.

Other photographic references in the film include the work of US photographer Irving Penn known as much for his fashion photography as for his still lifes. A large-format copy of his *Nubile Young Beauty of Diamare, Cameroon* (1969) occupies a focal position in Janis's living room.

5.2. Archiving practices and the creation of photographic family-memory-devices.

Archiving and the making of photographic family-memory-devices are recurrent themes throughout the film. Janis keeps a digital archive of images on her computer; this hoard includes images showing the site of the Aldea de los Montes mass grave as well as the collection of photographs her great grandfather took of his fellow villagers. The sound of a camera shutter—a symbolic stand-in for a rifle-shot—accompanies Janis's every mouse-click as she opens images of the disappeared and, as each image fills the screen, Janis names and explains the identity of the person depicted.

These images comprise the collective memory of Janis's home village and, their sharing—not as print copies arranged in an album but via a computer

screen—is set against the backdrop of a blown-up reproduction of *Marriageable young women* (*Jóvenes casaderas*: 1961) by rural photographer, Virxilio Vieitez. This photograph is given pride of place in Janis's office and shows three young women dressed in their Sunday best. Between 1955 and 1965, Vieitez dedicated himself to portraying his neighbours in Soutelo de Montes, a small village in Pontevedra. Like Janis's great grandfather, Vieites wanted to record and document the people around him to create a huge family album to safeguard the collective memory of his small piece of countryside.

Virxilio Vieitez's photography makes a further appearance in the film when one of his portraits from Soutelo de Montes is used to play the part of Grandma Cecilia. This portrait forms part of the photographic family-memory-device that Janis creates in the shape of a large collection of images grouped together on her living room wall: "This is Grandma Cecilia. She's the one who looked after me and brought me up". Next to the image of Grandma Cecilia is a self-portrait showing Janis lying in bed with baby Cecilia, two framed individual pictures of her great grandparents and, lastly, to complete this assemblage of family memory, a photograph of Janis's own mother in Ibiza holding in her arms a few-weeks-old Janis. This last photograph is, in fact, a copy of *Hippy festivals* (*Les festes hippies*), a picture by the Catalán photographer Oriol Maspons taken in 1976.

The same photographic family-memory-device reappears in the house in Aldea de los Montes that Janis has inherited from Grandma Cecilia. Here, it is found distributed across the bedside tables in her bedroom. In addition, two framed photographs of baby Cecilia appear in the living room displayed beneath a picture of the photographer Irving Penn. Similarly, on a dresser in the home Ana shares with her mother, Teresa (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón), we find another family-memory-device comprising eight framed photographs representing three generations of Teresa and Ana's family history.

The practice of sharing printed copies of family photographs, whether in albums, sets of framed pictures, or in the form of other memory devices, reappears at the end of the film. First, during the interviews Arturo conducts

with the families of Aldea de los Montes' dead and disappeared as a way to obtain the maximum amount of information for their identification. And second, when Janis and the other village women march to the mass grave once Arturo's team have exhumed all the bodies. In their arms they carry framed photographs of the dead; photographs taken by Janis's great grandfather.

To complement these physical family-memory-devices configured as printed copies, framed and placed in a premeditated order on a particular surface—either the vertical surface of a wall or the horizontal surface of a dresser or bedside table—the film also explores digital versions of such devices. Specifically, it considers the role of collections of digital images stored in mobile phone memories or on the cloud: “I’d like to keep everything I have on this phone,” Janis tells the assistant at the mobile phone shop when she goes to change her phone number.

In the film, photographs taken and sent via mobile devices are used as evidence of an event that determines a present that “has already been”. For instance, take the case of the image that Cecilia’s new nanny sends to Janis while she is in the middle of a photo shoot for *Mujer Hoy*. But above all, their role is to be a memory archive: “Could you send me the photo of your Anita?” Janis asks Ana at one point in the film. The mobile phone thus becomes an on-demand memory device that holds images of the already deceased, as in the case of the photograph of little Anita, or that records a traumatic event, like Ana’s photograph of the group of adolescents who sexually assaulted her. This latter image, thanks to its being archived on her mobile phone, years later leads to the possibility of accurately identifying baby Cecilia’s father. A process that, in a parallel fashion, is repeated with the photograph of Anita when, after the baby’s sudden death, Janis shows her picture—also using a mobile phone—to Arturo, her biological father.

5.3. Still lifes and the material culture found during the exhumation of mass graves.

“Still lifes of accessories. A shoe, jewellery, maybe a belt and little else,” Elena declares, explaining what she’s looking for when she commissions Janis to take some photographs to accompany a *Mujer Hoy* feature. “Great, I’d love to take some pictures of shoes and belts,” Janis responds without hesitation.

In demonstrating Janis’s photographic praxis in the still life sessions she undertakes for *Mujer Hoy*, the film uses the same strategies of alienation as in the photoshoot scenes with Arturo and, again, with the two magazine fashion models. When we see the photographed-subject through Janis’s eyes via her camera lens, this image fills the entire screen and comes accompanied by the loud click of a camera shutter.

Against a neutral, white background, Janis composes shots of high-end fashion accessories. Janis’s still lifes include an item of Chanel jewellery in the form of an eye with details in gold, pearls and emeralds; a pair of red leather, high-heeled, platform shoes by Saint Laurent (modelled by Janis); a pair of black, studded platform shoes by Miu-Miu; a pair of Archlight 1A43L1 trainers in white and cream by Louis Vuitton; some Bvlgari BV 8223B-548013 sunglasses in transparent brown; four Lancôme lipsticks in various shades of red; and a M56845 Capucines Mini bag by Louis Vuitton in red leather.

With respect to the identification of the bodies and the examination of material culture found in the mass grave, Arturo begins his work by taking saliva samples from close relatives of the disappeared and interviewing all the people who knew them. These interviews enable him to assemble the maximum amount of data about potential victims, from photographs to oral testimony about their lives. In his quest to identify the bodies exhumed from the mass grave, among the most important questions Arturo asks are those about items of material culture: “And, your grandfather, did anyone talk about something he always wore or had with him? A watch? A pen? A piece of

jewellery?" he asks Herminia (Arantxa Aranguren) and her sister (Trinidad Iglesias).

During his conversation with Brígida (Julieta Serrano), Janis's great aunt, a rattle takes on particular relevance as an object in her oral testimony:

Brígida: I was four months old. I remember what my mum told me. When they came for him, my father was holding me in his arms. He was playing with me [...] The last thing my father did was play with me. I had a rattle. And since they took him, the rattle vanished. My mum looked for it all over the house, but never found it. I suppose he must've taken it.

Regarding the interview with Herminia and her sister, several objects of importance are mentioned including a glass eye, a wedding ring, and a pair of work shoes (espadrilles).

Herminia's sister: Grandpa was tall and handsome. With such incredible eyes...

Herminia: Only one. The other was glass. Herminia's sister: You can't tell from the photos. [...]

Herminia: My dad told me that grandpa never took off his wedding ring. Not even when he went into the fields. On the inside it had an inscription with the date of the wedding and my grandma's name: Josefa.

Herminia's sister: Ah! And he was wearing his espadrilles when they took him. They didn't give him time to change his shoes.

As a result of Arturo's excavations, the film reveals the mass grave to contain a rich archaeological record including not only human remains but also the following examples of material culture:

1. Evidence of violence and repression

Munitions: bullets and bullet casings.

2. Clothing and accessories.

Clothing: pieces of some kind of footwear that might correspond to espadrilles and a button (found next to a phalange bone).

Personal objects used for adornment: a ring

3. Prostheses and implants

A glass eye found inside the ocular cavity of a skull.

4. Objects linked to childhood

Toys and other items connected with play: a rattle.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Photographic images, as privileged surfaces for the inscription of complex memorial processes, can *de-compose*—in Didi-Huberman’s (2008) terms—into visual devices that allow the reading of time. That is, we can read images: “so that time has the opportunity to be deciphered anew” (p43), or as Benjamin puts it, be rubbed against the grain.

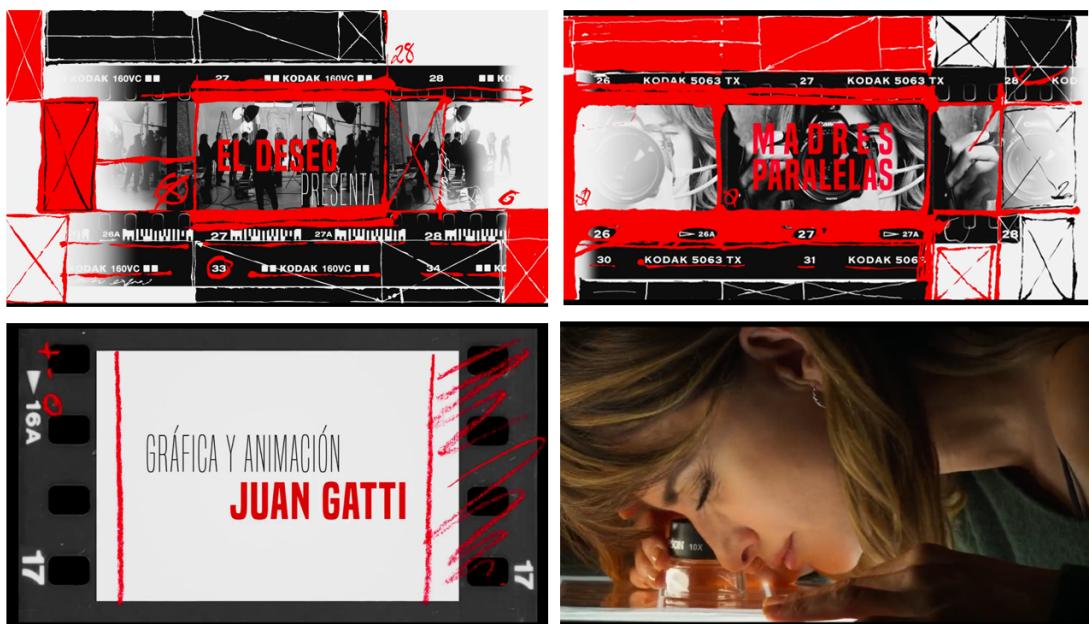
Presented as they are, with annotations, marks and symbols on a contact sheet or strip of photographic negatives, the opening and closing credits of *Parallel Mothers* already evoke an act of de-composition and the use of images to articulate a history. In this way, and as Benjamin (2009) notes, “there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it is transmitted from one owner to another” (p.43).

In the exercise of re-reading history and of dignifying the memory of Aldea de los Montes’s Civil War victims, the film’s opening credits could be understood as a kind of archive. This archive speaks to us of the importance of the material preservation of photographic records so that these images can be “revealed” to future generations both in the sense of revealing information from the past and that of revealing the image each time a negative is developed. As Dijck points out: “negatives are not kept to be looked at but to ensure future re-production; like slides, their value as objects lies in their reproducibility and ‘projectionability’” (2007, p.108).

In this regard, the two photographs by Virxilio Vieitez reproduced in the film—one of which appears twice posing as a portrait of Janis’s grandmother—suggest new parallels at the margins of those indicated in the

film's title sequence. On one hand, both Virxilio Vieitez and Janis's great grandfather were photographers who made portraits of the people living in small rural villages enabling, through their labour, the configuration of photographic devices of individual, family, and collective memory.

On the other hand, given that Virxilio worked to order, the task of recovering and archiving his negatives and positive images has only been possible thanks to the efforts of his daughter Keta Vieitez. She, like Janis in the film, must have spent long hours peering at negatives, making notes on contact sheets and creating archives of printed as well as digital images.



F1. Opening and closing film credits and Janis viewing image thumbnails using a magnifying glass. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021)

Benjamin's seventh thesis on the concept of history proposes the idea that the method of showing or framing is particularly relevant as a device for generating historiographic knowledge and to illuminate other possible histories that might facilitate our understanding and understanding ourselves from other perspectives.

The decision to show in a frame, that is, by dislocations and re-compositions of everything... will become a method of knowing and a formal procedure born of the war against disorder in the world. It will endorse our perception of the world in the wake of the twentieth century's conflicts: it will become

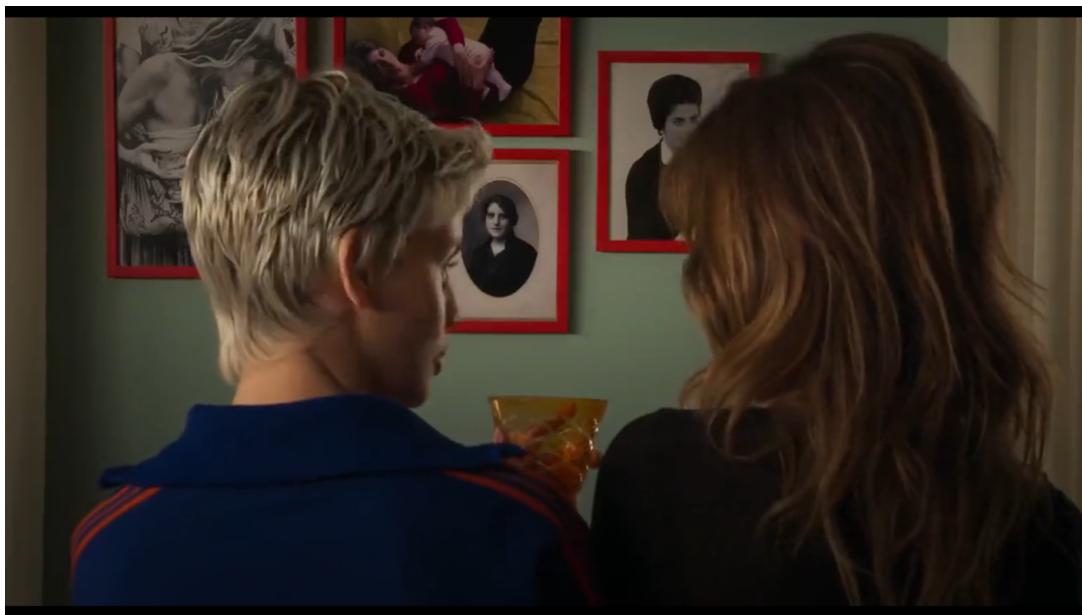
the modern method par excellence (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p.98).

Thus, mounting photographic images to create albums or other photographic memory-devices is a way of participating in this “method of knowing”, here, concerning family memory, so enabling not only visual narratives but also, and indeed, fundamentally, oral narratives. Thus, intergenerational affective relationships are created that evoke the past while, at the same time, connecting to the present. This process is seen in the film first when Janis shares her great grandfather’s digitised photographs with Arturo and again when descendants of the Civil War’s disappeared tell their stories and show their own photographs.

Nevertheless, as the film makes clear the photographic family-memory-device (whether this is an album or using some other means of displaying framed images in an ordered, hierarchical manner on either a horizontal or vertical surface) a powerful mediator of oral narrative. This is especially clear in the scene when Janis talks Ana through the identities of all the people in the photographs she has hanging on her living room wall, among them, Grandma Cecilia, a portrait by Virxilio Vieitez. Exposed and exhibited on the wall, their order varies throughout the film; at one point Janis and Ana view them as a type of visual memory panel highly reminiscent of Aby Warburg’s early twentieth century work, *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

In her work, *On photography*, Sontag tells us that “photography is acquisition in several forms”. To illustrate this, when Janis begins to suspect that Anita is really her biological daughter, she asks Ana: “Could you send me the photo of your Anita?”. As Sontag continues (2007, pp.218-219): “In its simplest form, we have in a photograph surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing, a possession which gives photographs some of the character of unique objects”. Thus, the photograph of Anita acts as the image which enables surrogate possession of a daughter who was mistakenly switched at birth and that, after her death, becomes a repository-device for death and memory; the Barthesian “has-been”. In this way, a photograph of personal

value to an individual is a talisman that has come to represent a past so that it might be revisited at will. It evokes both a memory and something lost, represents both a scrap of life and a perspective on death (Sturken, 1999, p.178).



F2. Janis (right) tells Ana (left) her family history. On the extreme left is a photograph of Janis's mother holding her in her arms (Maspons, 1976) and on the extreme right is a portrait of Cecilia, Janis's grandma (Vieitez, ca.1961) [film still]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021)

The picture of Anita, that of Cecilia with her new nanny and that of Ana's friends, all taken and sent via mobile phone, present new questions relating to the conservation of photographic archives in the digital era. Janis herself alerts us to this when she is changing her mobile number: "I'd like to keep everything I have on this phone". The film emphasises this theme further in its first few frames in which we see Janis's finger on the computer mouse and on her phone screen altering and zooming-in on the image displayed. These activities contrast with the parallel practices associated with the material preservation of images in the form of physical archives suggested in the film's opening credits. Not only this but the film makes several other contrasts: the indexicality of film negatives like those presented in the credits against the ease with which images can be digitally manipulated, the issues of archive capacity and speed of reproduction in the case of physical prints versus

digital images, as well as the different emotional and tactile experiences of viewing digital images on a screen compared to physical photographs.



F3. Relatives of the disappeared march to the mass grave holding in their arms printed copies of victims' portraits. Janis shows Arturo a digital image of Anita, after her death, on the screen of her mobile phone [film stills]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021).

Concerning Janis's dynamic in her studio photography, Davis (2024, p.245) notes that this acts as a counterpoint to the photography undertaken at the site of the mass grave, a place of contemplation and the work of memory. Looked at another way, however, Janis's photographic praxis in respect to her fashion still lifes can be understood a form of "revelatory" seeing to be viewed in parallel with the material culture that Arturo captures using his camera during the exhumation of bodies from the mass grave.

As is the case with photographs, these objects represent material artefacts of a problematic past. Similarly, they also enable the construction of a new archive through which to explore the potential of commemorative practices to honour those whose memories have been erased. As Moreno Martín et al. (2021) observe, forensic archaeology involves not only the recovery of bodily remains and the mapping of patterns of repression and extermination during the Spanish Civil War but also the recovery and documentation of "repertoires of belongings that shape the materiality associated with the processes of repression and political violence of our recent past" (p.214).

The material culture found in the mass grave facilitates tasks of identification and offers information about specific individuals. In addition, as exemplified by the labours of Janis and Arturo, it complements the tasks of oral data-gathering and documentation, DNA testing and the careful comparison of photographic evidence and skeletal remains, especially skulls.

Janis's fashion still lifes, then, are presented as parallel objects to those found by Arturo in the mass grave. Through her photographic camera, Janis seems to be providing a "pre-vision" of the material culture from the mass grave where the remains of her relatives lie. Similarly, the sound of the camera shutter consistently reminds us of a gun-shot, suggesting that the objects died alongside the person they were buried with.

Bearing this in mind, the shoes and trainers seem to foreshadow the espadrilles that Herminia's grandfather once wore; the arrangement of red lipsticks foreshadows the bullets and casings that bloodied and killed the bodies of the condemned now lying in the mass grave; the eye-shaped, Chanel brooch foreshadows the glass eye belonging to Brigida's father. Indeed, even the tiny pearls forming the design of the Chanel brooch might, in time, be seen to foreshadow the little balls inside Brigida's rattle; the same rattle her father took with him to meet the firing squad.

This rattle, as García-Rubio Ruiz (2023) comments, establishes a parallel dialogue with the story of Catalina Muñoz Arranz. She was executed on 22nd September 1936 and buried—with her son's rattle in her pocket—in the Old Cemetery in Palencia along with 107 others. When she was arrested in 1936, she was 37 years old and the mother of four children. Her youngest child, Martín, who was only eight months old at the time, accompanied her to the prison where she stayed until she was sentenced to death for rebellion (p.6). When the mass grave at La Carcavilla was excavated in June 2019, the team of archaeologists and forensic anthropologists directed by Almudena García-Rubio Ruiz found Catalina's skeleton and with it, the colourful rattle. After all those years of waiting, Martín, now in his eighties, could be reunited with his rattle, an exceptional object and the only one of its kind recovered from the almost 1000 mass graves excavated before *Parallel Mothers* began production.

What is more, the Chanel brooch also foreshadows Janis's pain as a mother when she loses her newborn daughter. In this sense, the item bears formal and symbolic similarities—as is highlighted in certain versions of the film's

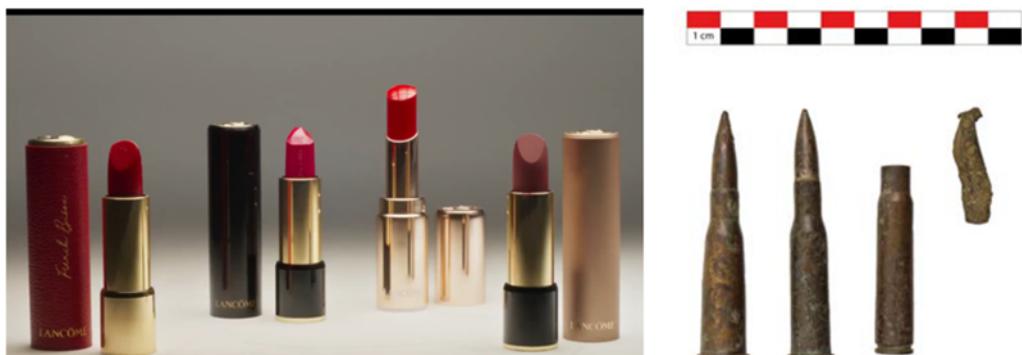
publicity posters—to a nipple as in depictions of the *Mater dolorosa*, whose maternal milk crystallises into tear-like pearls.

To these foreshadowings, we might add many more that do not have a direct parallel in Arturo's photographs of material culture in the film, but that run through the collective memory of all exhumations of Civil War mass graves. Janis's photoshoot includes a bag, for example, that very much resembles the ammunition pouches used by Republican soldiers as well as several pairs of glasses which are extremely common items among the objects recovered from mass graves.

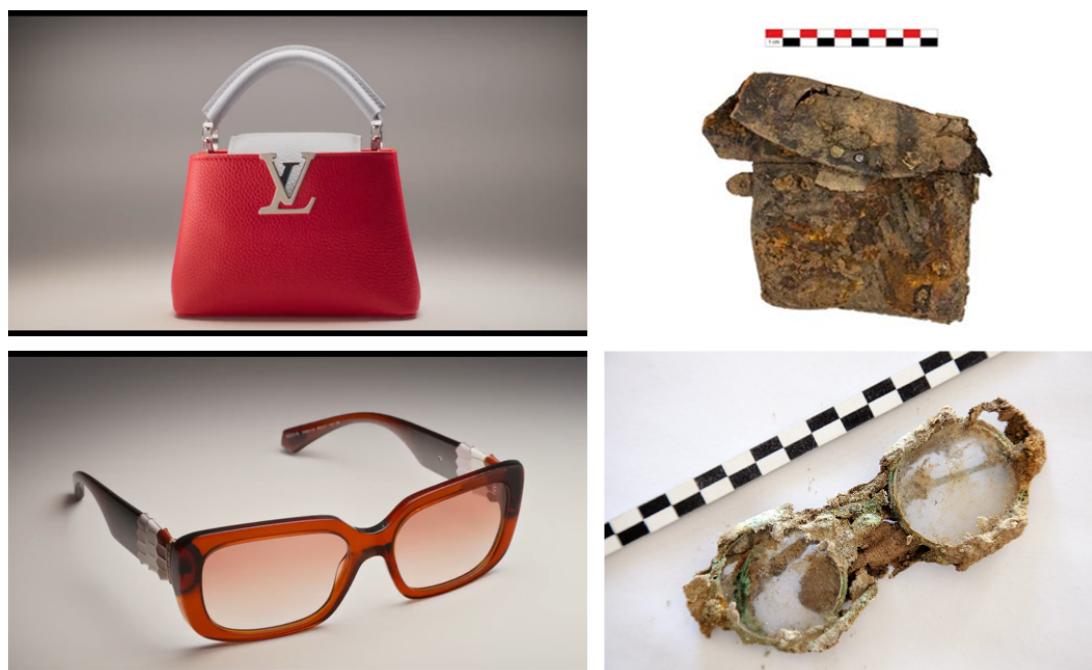
Additionally, in the photoshoot scene that opens the film, a collection of ceramic skulls appears on a table and, opposite these, a collection of bags that Janis later photographs. This foreshadows, from the very beginning of the film, the items that Janis and Arturo both want to find, recover, and photograph from the mass grave in Aldea de los Montes. In parallel, it also alludes to the presence of death, in the form of a skull, and this, in turn, foreshadows the search for Anita's and Cecilia's true parents through DNA testing and, indeed, presages the death of one of them.



F4. Trainers and shoes photographed by Janis and the espadrilles that Arturo finds in the mass grave [film stills]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021). High-heeled shoes recovered from the Civil War mass grave located at the Paterna cemetery. Eloy Ariza (Arqueoantro).



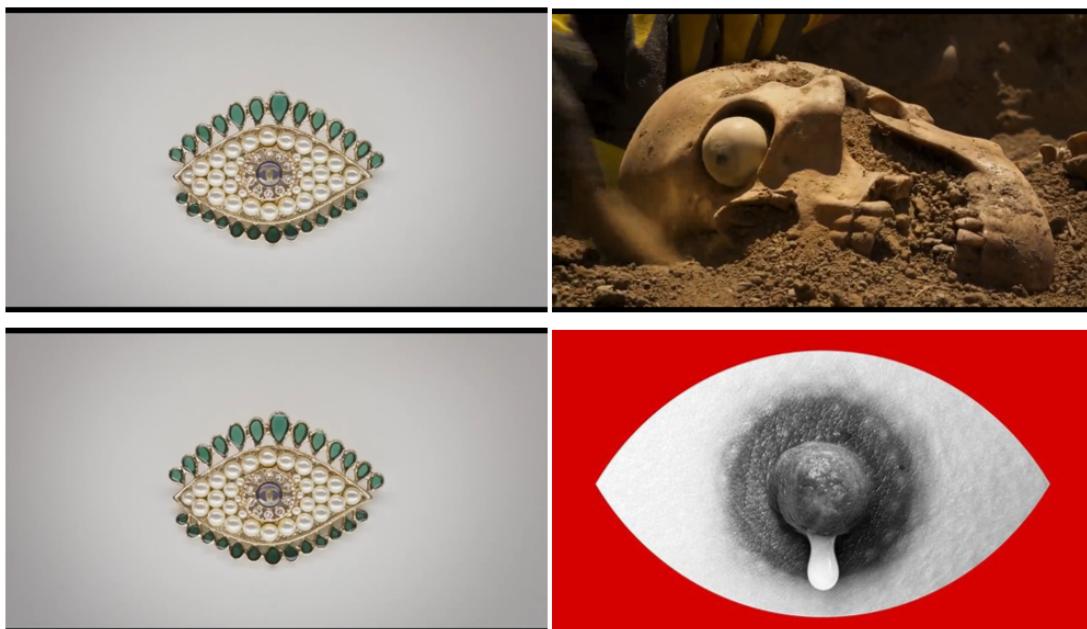
F5. Lipsticks photographed by Janis [film still]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021) and a set of bullets and bullet casings of different calibres from the mass grave at Peña Juliana, Levante front (Jansen-Pamblanco & Rodríguez-Cortés, 2022, p.114).



F6. Looking through the viewfinder of Janis's camera: a bag and sunglasses photographed for *Mujer Hoy* [film stills]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021). Regulation ammunition pouch issued by the Spanish army recovered from the mass grave at Peña Juliana, Levante front (Jansen Pamblanco & Rodríguez-Cortés, 2022, p.118). Glasses exhumed from the mass grave at Valle Redondo, Zalamea la Real, Huelva (Alcántara Vegas & Fernández-Martín, 2015, pp.59).

With reference to the above discussion, and based on our results, our initial hypotheses would seem to be correct. It is clear that Janis's fashion still lifes for *Mujer Hoy* act as revelational visions that foreshadow the material culture Arturo later photographs at the site of the mass grave and, in a manner that parallels the filming of Janis's studio sessions, we also see through a camera viewfinder. Alongside this paralleling of photographic practices, the film's references to photography are oriented such that they emphasise its nature as

a repository for personal and collective memory as well as its role as a material source of evidence.



F7. Looking through the viewfinder of Janis's camera: the eye-shaped Chanel brooch. The glass eye belonging to Herminia's grandfather found by Arturo during the exhumation of the mass grave [film stills] *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021). Detail of the teaser poster for *Parallel Mothers*.

Through Janis and Arturo's photographic work, *Parallel Mothers* situates itself within contemporary practices of commemorating, recovering and dignifying the memory of victims of the Civil War and Franco's regime. The items of material culture found in mass graves act as nodes of memory or points of intersection between the past and present thereby demonstrating evidence of their value and potential to humanise and materialise lives, memories and histories that, perhaps, would otherwise remain devoid of other historical support, sources or documentation.



F8. Janis and Arturo as they undertake their respective photographic tasks [film stills]. *Parallel Mothers* (Almodóvar, 2021).

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