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Still Life with Flowers and Fruits: Painting with Images or the Poetic Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar

Bodegón con flores y frutos: pintar con imágenes o el cine poético de Pedro Almodóvar

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Abstract:

This article examines the ways in which Pedro Almodóvar's cinema engages in dialogue with the visual arts, with particular attention to the tradition of the still life genre. It first considers the filmmaker's appropriation of the visual and formal codes of painting to translate the reality captured in the image into filmic language. It then explores the symbolic resonance of still lifes when flowers or fruits are foregrounded or positioned in the background of a scene. The discussion centers on *Live Flesh* (1997), *Julieta* (2016), and *The Room Next Door* (2024), analyzing how fruits are integrated into the audiovisual discourse not merely as decorative elements, but as narrative devices that enrich the poetic dimension of the films.

Resumen:

Este artículo aborda el diálogo que establece el cine de Pedro Almodóvar con las artes plásticas, en concreto, con las naturalezas muertas o los bodegones. Analiza, por un lado, el modo en que el cineasta se apropia de los códigos visuales y plásticos de estas pinturas para recrear la realidad representada en la imagen; por otro, el significado simbólico que adquieren cuando las flores y los frutos de las naturalezas muertas aparecen en primer plano o al fondo de la escena. Finalmente, se centra en el análisis de *Carne trémula* (1997), *Julieta* (2016) y *La habitación de al lado* (2024), en concreto, en el modo en que los frutos se representan en el discurso audiovisual y desempeñan una función en la construcción del relato que acentúa la poeticidad del filme.

Palabras clave:
Bodegón; símbolo; cine y pintura; cine español; Almodóvar, Pedro.

Keywords:
Still life; Symbol; Cinema and painting; Motion pictures, Spain; Almodóvar, Pedro.

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1. Introduction

The visual arts occupy a prominent place in Pedro Almodóvar's films, permeating both his narrative discourse and his "visual style" (Alison, 2003, p. 224) within a distinctive iconographic and pictorial universe. His abundant artistic references include visual reenactments of canonical paintings, as well as the incorporation of designs, posters, photographs, and collages, together with reinterpretations of sculptural and architectural works. Particularly noteworthy are the still lifes featuring flowers and the floral motifs that adorn domestic interiors. These are often positioned within private spaces such as living rooms and bedrooms, yet the viewer's gaze is equally directed toward vases of flowers and bowls of oranges and lemons, filmic compositions that unmistakably evoke a specific pictorial tradition: the Spanish still life genre known as *bodegón*.

In this way, Almodóvar's cinema establishes a dialogue with the visual arts that contributes to shaping a highly personal aesthetic, one that interweaves tradition and postmodernity. His visual style—marked by Mannerism and hyperbole—produces "fascinating images" defined not only by their striking formal qualities but also by their intertextual character, through ongoing dialogue with music, popular song, and literature (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 191).

Across his oeuvre, Almodóvar has consistently woven painting—particularly the pictorial dimension of still lifes—"into his characters and his world, thereby generating a dynamic structure" (Navarrete-Galiano in Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 56). This strategy at once complicates narrative transparency and reinforces the fictional pact with the spectator, underscoring the work's nature as performance and its sustained dialogue with culture.

The following discussion seeks to demonstrate how still lifes are integrated into Almodóvar's cinema as both visual and dramatic vehicles. They function not only to channel and intensify the emotions of the characters in key scenes, but also to transcend their painterly origins, becoming objects that

acquire new symbolic meanings and that are directly inscribed into the narrative arc.

2.- Objectives and Methodology

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the presence of poeticism in Pedro Almodóvar's cinema, understood not as opposed to narration but as fully compatible with storytelling. His body of work displays what Pérez Bowie (2020, p. 17) has described as a "relative poeticism," which has become increasingly pronounced over time, such as

> The creative use of language, de-automation, the deployment of 'über-significant' language, and the semantic density associated with condensation are linked to the systematic employment of various forms of recurrence, the predominance of connotation over denotation, and the overarching use of symbolic and metaphorical language. (Neira, 2007, p. 293).

In this context, the analysis seeks to substantiate Jean Epstein's thesis that visual thought is "well suited to a poetic use" insofar as it is "fundamentally instinctive, sentimental, and moving" (Epstein in Pérez Bowie, 2020, p. 25).

Specifically, we will focus on the dialogue established by the filmmaker with the visual arts, and, more precisely, with still lifes —also known as *bodegones*— due to the symbolism hidden in the objects that make up the various compositions. After identifying the still lifes that appear in his films —and the role they play within the story—, highlighting those photographs and paintings that foster self-referentiality, we will concentrate on the symbolic meaning of flowers and fruits, not only within the still lifes themselves but also as part of the set design or naturally integrated into the narrative.

From a multimodal approach —with the inter-artistic space being one of the most effective methodological perspectives in comparative studies of literature and film—, we have conducted a qualitative study consisting of the critical analysis of the still lifes cited in his films and of the function fulfilled by isolated objects, once they transcend the still-life framework. Although

references can be found in the vast majority of his films, we have chosen to focus on his more dramatic works, with a strong presence of his most recent films, *Julieta* and *The Room next Door*, as well as *Live Flesh*. These three examples allow us to observe the poetic language of cinema, where fruits, once they transcend still lifes, are integrated into key scenes that complete the narrative, acquire further figurative meanings, and appear repeatedly throughout the story.

These are three stories that freely adapt literary works. The growing intensity of Pedro Almodóvar's engagement with literature is evident in his adaptations: *Live Flesh* (1997), based on Ruth Rendell's novel of the same title (1986); *The Skin I Live In* (2011), adapted from Thierry Jonquet's *Mygale* (*Tarántula*, 1995); *Julieta* (2016), which reworks three short stories by Canadian writer Alice Munro; the short film *The Human Voice* (2020), inspired by Jean Cocteau's stage monologue *La Voix humaine* (1930); and most recently, *The Room Next Door* (2024), whose screenplay adapts Sigrid Nunez's novel *What Are You Going Through* (2020).

Our symbolic analysis draws not only on the broader artistic and cultural tradition but also on the works of Arango (1998) and Cirlot (1997). We focus on those instances in which flowers and fruits—whether represented within a painting or presented as objects—"acquire one or more figurative meanings that overlap with, without erasing, their literal meaning" (Neira, 2007, p. 296). Of particular interest are the fruits that recur throughout Almodóvar's films and that he strategically inserts into key scenes, whether in the foreground, background, or in close-up shots.

By examining the poetic strategies applied to flowers and fruits, Almodóvar's ongoing experimentation with multiple forms of expression, and his exploration beyond the surface of the visible, we reaffirm that his work must be understood as auteur cinema. It is marked by subjective intentionality, by the evolution of a distinctive aesthetic, and by a sustained dialogue—emerging from within postmodernity—with classical tradition.

3.- From still nature in painting…

From the late sixteenth century to the present, still life painting has engaged with themes of mortality (*memento mori*) and the brevity of existence (*vita brevis*) through the depiction of everyday objects and utensils—such as flower vases, fruit bowls, tableware, or glass bottles—arranged, most often, upon a horizontal table.

In the Netherlands, still life distinguished itself from other genres, such as religious or historical painting, as well as from portraiture and landscape, during the final decades of the sixteenth century. Gradually, it acquired recognition as an independent genre, attaining extraordinary popularity throughout Europe, particularly in Italy and Spain. In this context, the English expression *still life* emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century to denote "motionless nature" (Schneider, 2003, p. 7) or "inanimate objects" (*stilleven* in Dutch), in contrast to the designation "dead nature" that remained prevalent in most Catholic European countries.

Through their careful arrangement and containment within a limited pictorial space, these objects—varied in texture, shape, and colour, and almost invariably illuminated by a light source descending from the upper part of the canvas—invite the viewer to contemplate their fleeting beauty (*vita contemplativa*). At the same time, they direct attention to the moral and symbolic dimensions that underlie the transient nature of life embodied in the pictorial representation of "still nature."

If, as Bauer and Prater (1997, p. 12) suggest, the deeper meaning of these images is "veiled by an actual cult of sensory stimulus," such interpretation becomes possible only through humanity's capacity to manipulate and transform material reality. Ultimately, still life, regardless of its subgenres—whether flower pieces, banquet and kitchen scenes, depictions of courtyards and pantries with game, or *vanitas* compositions featuring skulls—constitutes above all a reflection of humankind's supremacy over nature:

> This initial layer of meaning is overlaid by another, one that evokes the transience of wealth and social superiority. The pleasure derived from viewing a beautiful painting—an experience akin to inhabiting a universe of

> power and status—is, in fact, equally fleeting. Thus, the pictorial space accommodates two symbolic attitudes simultaneously: the moment an individual takes pride in material or social power, the reminder of inevitable mortality arrests that pride (Bertulucce, 2022, p. 113).

This memento mori, the awareness of life's brevity, becomes evident when we notice that flowers and fruits are withering, as insects begin to feed on the leaves and petals of the blooms arranged in glass vases reflecting the light of the external world. In a sense, a lavish vase of flowers, in its exuberance, manifests the inexorable passage of time while attempting to fix the beauty of a fleeting moment. This symbolic dimension of the Dutch still life emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, heavily influenced by Caravaggio's formal innovation in *Basket with Flowers* (1596), and became a central element in both landscape and genre painting in the Netherlands:

> Interiors and scenes [...] may also take on characteristics of a still life; figures are positioned 'out of time' in their immobility and contemplation [...]. Vermeer's greatest achievement, therefore, lies in his transposition of the principles of still life to interior and genre painting (Bauer & Prater, 1997, p. 138).

Despite historically being considered a minor genre or a mere exercise in virtuosity, still life persists into contemporary art—visible in the works of Picasso, Braque, Gris, Chirico, and Morandi, as well as Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1889) and Cézanne's *The Basket of Apples* (1895) and *Still Life with Skull* (1895–1900)—and continues to influence forms of expression such as hyperrealist painting, photography, and even cinematic artistic practices, exemplified in the films of Pedro Almodóvar.

Philosopher and essayist Byung-Chul Han emphasizes that Cézanne's vases and dishes with apples are not mere "utensils," but objects possessing intrinsic dignity. In their splendor, he notes, "man and nature melt and interpenetrate. [...] No action or intention can tear man and nature apart" (Han, 2023, p. 33).

This perspective resonates with Almodóvar's conception of the still life, as expressed in 2018—*Bodegones Almodóvar* was the title of his first

photographic exhibition, held at La Fresh Gallery in Madrid in 2017—on the occasion of his second exhibition, *Vida Detenida*, at Marlborough Gallery, Madrid:

> A still life, or *bodegón*, functions as a secular altar, reverencing and venerating objects. Offerings are arranged on the counter, suggesting colors and shapes that resonate with them. This is, in essence, Pop: the elevation of everyday objects—ordinarily confined to practical functions—into artistic models. Regarding terminology, I favor the English term 'still life' over *naturaleza muerta* or 'dead nature,' as it is known in Spanish. Objects are never truly dead, just as light is not, insofar as both remain vulnerable to the passage of time (Almodóvar, 2021, p. 13).

Vida Detenida and *Waiting for the Light* are two photographic exhibitions in which Almodóvar presents an intimate vision of his home through compositions of everyday objects and items from his art collection, transforming them into evocative still lifes. The former project developed from his earlier exhibition, *Bodegones Almodóvar*. Both exhibitions were presented at the Marlborough galleries in Madrid and New York (2018 and 2019, respectively), and later at the Fellini di Sion Foundation, Switzerland (2021 and 2022).

In 2022, a selection from *Flores* (2020) was exhibited at the National Society of Fine Arts in Lisbon under the title *Pinturas em Colaboração*, marking Almodóvar's first collaborative exhibition with painter Jorge Galindo. Many of Galindo's works had previously appeared in Almodóvar's films as intertexts: *Speak Yellow* and *Pigalle* (Galindo, 2009), included in the exhibition *Flores*; *Papeles Arrancados* (2009), featured in *The Skin I Live In* (2011); and *El Niño del Cuadro* (Galindo, 2019), highlighted in a key scene of *Pain and Glory* (2019).

Prior to Lisbon, *Flores* was shown at the Tabacalera showroom as an expanded version of *Flores de Periferia* (2019), which opened at the Andalusian Centre of Photography, Almería. In this series, filmmaker and painter engage in a dialogue with painting, reinterpreting Almodóvar's still life photographs, where vases and flowers serve as living material for

exploring the transformation of photography through painting. The result, as Galindo observes, is a compendium of "impure flowers," which have reclaimed their sumptuousness and sexuality, with the sexual organs of plants desacralized and liberated from their religious connotations (Almodóvar & Galindo, 2019, p. 19).

The collaboration reveals the emotion at the heart of Almodóvar's cinema, which continually seeks a dialogue with the visual arts. The interplay of light and color becomes the primary expressive vehicle in these monumental photographic works of vases and flowers, where Almodóvar consistently aspires to emulate painting, as he does in his films, in which "each still is highly pictorial" (Galindo in Almodóvar & Galindo, 2019, p. 18). As curator Rafa Doctor aptly summarizes: "Everything is passion, everything is action, everything is life. Flowers, flowers, flowers, which will continue to rest in the vases Pedro Almodóvar collects. Flowers that will henceforth be *liveforevers* (Almodóvar, 2019, p. 17)."

4.- ... to living matter in cinema.

4.1.- Flowers

Both the photographs displayed in Almodóvar's two exhibitions and the works resulting from his collaboration with Galindo have been carefully woven into his films since *Pain and Glory*, thereby becoming part of the living fabric of Almodóvar's cinema. Several photographs from the exhibition *Vida Detenida* appear in Salvador Mallo's bedroom, such as *Mi Gato Pepito*. Likewise, still lifes from *Waiting for the Light* are featured in *The Human Voice* (2020), including *Menina* and *Lugar de Ocres*. Other works, such as *Blanco y Noir* and *El Deseo de Pintar – 2*, can be seen in Janis' apartment in *Parallel Mothers* (2021), while *Postal Japonesa 2* appears in Martha's dwelling in *The Room Next Door*(2024). All of these works were later included in the exhibition *Flores*.

As his cinema becomes increasingly self-referential, Almodóvar consolidates his position as an auteur who advances the coherence of his aesthetic project

by engaging in dialogue with his own pictorial and cinematic output. His films embody a distinctive personality—his own—which, as Sánchez Noriega observes, he also "develops in scriptwriting and in the direction of films conceived as unique works encapsulating his interests, style, concerns, beliefs, and literary or artistic tastes" (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 35).

In this sense, the director's forays into other arts reinforce his authorship and the defining traits of his evolving aesthetic. This is particularly evident in his handling of color, especially in relation to his collaboration with Galindo. As Almodóvar reflects:

> My work in cinema resembles that of a painter who uses three-dimensional objects to compose an image. My love for colors goes back a long way. [...] I have been surprised to discover that certain colors I have admired in painting have been scarcely used in my films, especially white. I have been naturally drawn to more or less blurred shades of green, pink, blue, and yellow, and very little red (another innovation). I have always been particularly reluctant to use black. I have in fact never used it, out of sheer respect (Almodóvar in Almodóvar & Galindo, 2019, p. 13).

A comprehensive analysis of his oeuvre reveals his recurrent, albeit discreet, use of green, which became central in *The Room Next Door*. This chromatic choice can be traced back to *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990). Unlike red—ubiquitous in his work—green has seldom been employed, and always with delicacy (Almodóvar in Filmoteca de Catalunya, 2014, 26:50–31:14). Yet, his experimentation with color, influenced both by his collaboration with Galindo in *Flores* and by the evolution of his own practice, has led him to explore the tonal richness of green. In his latest film, green dominates not only costumes, but also furniture and the surrounding environment, particularly the woodland house:

> The house is composed of several blocks arranged on the slope of a hill, nestled within the woods [...]. Descending the staircase, and passing gardens on either side, one arrives at a swimming pool (Almodóvar, 2024, p. 98).

Flowers likewise occupy a central place in settings imbued with theatricality, thereby accentuating the artifice of the cinematic construction. This is visible

in Pepa's penthouse in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) or in Tina's apartment in *Law of Desire* (1987), both conceived as "purely theatrical" intimate spaces (Urios-Aparisi, 2010, p. 259). This stylization also extends to the symmetrical placement of flower vases in television set designs, as seen in the interview sequences of *Law of Desire* and *Volver* (2006).

At other times, flowers appear within domestic environments, evoking femininity or an archetypal notion of the "eternal feminine." Such is the case in Martha's room in *The Room Next Door*, as well as in Janis's and Teresa's rooms in *Parallel Mothers*. In this film, Almodóvar appropriates Federico García Lorca's *Doña Rosita the Spinster or The Language of Flowers* as an intertext, where flowers transcend the still life tradition to become integral to the costumes worn by the main characters.

> The section in which Teresa secures the main role begins with Rosita's lament on the passing of time: "Every year that passed was like a secret pledge that withered my flesh" (García Lorca, 2006, p. 546). Almodóvar seems to have radicalized this association with Lorca by imprinting floral motifs onto his characters' clothing, thereby visually embodying their preoccupation with the inexorable flow of time. Thus, Teresa's floral attire when she confirms having secured the role of Rosita may be read as a direct link to the character's withered and frustrated condition, symbolized through the *rosa mutabilis*. Similarly, floral patterns are associated with death—as in little Anita's flowered pajamas, worn just before her passing—or with the brevity of life, as suggested by the flowers adorning young Ana's robe (Amaya, 2022, p. 47).

As Amaya notes, flowers appear no fewer than twenty-six times in the film, thereby intensifying its semantic density and establishing a dialogue akin to that cultivated by Federico García Lorca in his own work. Beyond their varied presence in garments, flowers permeate other dimensions of the mise-en-scène: "they are white on the vest worn by the childminder; white flowers are also left on Anita's grave to symbolize purity, and they decorate Teresa's and Janis's homes, as well as the hospital room where the women eventually give birth (Amaya, 2022, p. 46)."

This proliferation of natural flowers—integrated into domestic interiors or echoed in paintings that reproduce the same organic imagery—is complemented by multiple green spaces located in balconies, courtyards, or gardens. Such spaces constitute a recurring motif throughout Almodóvar's cinema: in the El Bosque clinic of *Talk to Her* (2002), where nature becomes a symbolic extension of vitality; in the shared garden of Salvador Mallo and Alberto Crespo in *Pain and Glory*; or in the country house where Martha and Ingrid spend their final days together in *The Room Next Door*. In the latter, the protagonists recline on sunbeds in the garden, appropriating and reinterpreting the Hopper painting that hangs in the house's main room. The scene underlines what has been suggested throughout the film: the two women—Ingrid gazing ecstatically at Martha as she contemplates the treetops and the sky (Almodóvar, 2024, p. 117)—become inseparable from the natural environment. Their presence dissolves into the landscape as if they themselves were part of a canvas, transcending material representation to embody an intimate emotional truth.

4.2.- Fruits

Pictorial references are visually omnipresent in Pedro Almodóvar's cinema. The director appropriates the visual and plastic codes of painting either to reconfigure the reality they represent or to quote them explicitly, situating them in the foreground or background of a scene "to suggest an underlying theme, make the sense of a given scene more explicit, define a character, or establish a cultural filiation" (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 56). Perhaps the most illustrative example, due to the density of artistic allusions it contains, is *The Skin I Live In* (2011). This film incorporates reproductions of two canonical works by Titian (*Venus of Urbino*, 1538; *Venus with an Organist and Cupid*, 1555), alongside previously mentioned works by Jorge Galindo, as well as two still lifes: *Recuerdos del Olivar* (1920) by Alberto Vargas, and *Naranjas y Limones* (1927) by Julio Romero de Torres (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 57).

In *Broken Embraces* (2008), one of Ernesto Martel's dining rooms prominently features the still life *Manzanas*. The painting is an enlargement

of a work by the Baroque painter Juan Bautista de Espinosa, whose original—measuring 21 x 36 cm—is held at the Prado Museum. As Camarero Gómez (2020, p. 547) notes, the reproduction appears to have been further enlarged to adapt to the film set and employs "the use of stone surfaces to increase realism, which was typical of the Madrilenian *bodegón* painters of that period." Within the narrative, the still life functions as an "argumentary metaphor" that underscores "the temptation, disloyalty, repressed passions, and unsatisfied desires that drive the plot. The painting represents Martel and Lena's relationship and thus appears in the background as an interlocutor between them" (Camarero Gómez, 2020, pp. 547–548).

This Baroque still life is juxtaposed with *Mela*, an apple designed by Enzo Mari in 1963 as part of the *Della Natura* series. Unlike Espinosa's symbolic apples, Mari's modernist design is "more compatible with the modernity of the set and stripped of meaning." *Mela* reappears in *Girls and Suitcases*, Almodóvar's homage to *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, inserted within the same film (Camarero Gómez, 2020, p. 548).

Beyond apples and grapes—addressed later in this discussion—the recurrence of oranges and lemons constitutes another significant motif, traceable at least as far back as *Kika* (1993). In the controversial rape scene, the porn actor Paul Bazzo, recently released from prison, inserts a piece of orange into the protagonist's vagina while, in the background, a Tom Wesselmann painting depicts an orange placed beside a nude woman's buttocks. As Sánchez Noriega (2017, p. 122) observes, food typically functions in film "as a metaphor for pleasure or joy." Here, however, it is explicitly linked to Paul Bazzo's sexual desire and to a broader narrative of complex, transgressive masculinity that connects the film's male characters.

On other occasions, oranges and lemons appear more subtly, occupying bowls of fruit in the foreground or background of a scene, acting as silent accomplices to the unfolding action. For instance, in *Kika*, Juana remains tied to a fruit bowl while the woman she works for is assaulted in the adjacent room. In *Pain and Glory* (2019), citrus fruit silently witness an intimate conversation between Salvador Mallo and his assistant; similarly, in *Parallel*

Mothers (2021), they frame an exchange between Janis and Ana. In such moments, fruit transcends its still-life origin, signifying not only the emotional atmosphere of the situation but also, as will be explored further, "establishing a relation with the underlying story or theme." Here, photography becomes crucial: "rich in close-ups that highlight rugosity, shine, texture, and chromatic qualities," it simultaneously enhances the spectator's sensorial experience while "immersing them in the fictional world the director proposes" (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 350).

> Ultimately, objects in Almodóvar's cinema appear endowed with vitality—whether because they embody emotions and participate in the protagonists' lives, or because, within his aesthetic universe, boundaries between human, animal, and object are blurred (Urios-Aparisi, 2010, p. 151).

4.2.1.- The grapes in *The Room Next Door*

On Martha's kitchen counter in *The Room Next Door*, two large bowls filled with fruit are prominently displayed. Later, "Ingrid helps herself to some grapes from a dish" (Almodóvar, 2024, p. 48). These grapes appear in visual dialogue with the reproductions of Dora Carrington's work, particularly a vase of yellow flowers that belongs to the still life tradition. In a subsequent sequence at the woodland house, grapes reappear at breakfast; on two further occasions, they are transformed into wine—first, during the conversation between Ingrid and Damian at her home, and later during the first night the protagonists spend together in the woodland retreat.

Classical tradition has long linked fruit—in this case, grapes—with festivity and abundance. Grapes, the quintessential fruit of autumn, were prized by the Greeks precisely because they could be transformed into their most cherished drink, wine. Yet their symbolic resonance extends further: Epigonus of Thessalonica reflects on the irreversibility of time and "compares the withering of grapes to the senescence of human life: even a bunch of grapes bears the wrinkles of old age" (Haydée, 2011, p. 27). This *memento mori* dimension aligns with the purpose of still-life painting and echoes the central conflicts in *The Room Next Door*: the inexorable passing of time, illness, suffering, and the confrontation with death. These themes have

become increasingly prominent in Almodóvar's cinema, as seen in *Pain and Glory* and *Julieta*. In the latter, Julieta emerges as a woman worn down by the weight of her own experience; in aging, she undergoes an inward exile marked by what critics have described as a burden of "Spanish guilt," allowing Almodóvar to explore the complexities of age and aging (Gómez, 2024, p. 149).

A parallel case can be found in *Pain and Glory*, where Salvador Mallo, a filmmaker approaching the twilight of his life, is depicted as profoundly depressed and isolated following spinal surgery. Grapes reappear in his kitchen, this time not as fruit but as an artistic motif in Maruja Mallo's painting *Racimo de uvas*. The purple hues of the cluster contrast with an abstract, ethereal background of undulating lines and a soft blue, characteristic of the painter's surrealist style. This surreal blue enters into a dreamlike conversation with the protagonist, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. In doing so, Almodóvar "invites us to an intimate journey, woven from impressions, memories, and emotions, where he fuses images and symbols into a narrative" on the passing of time and the healing potential of artistic creation (Amaya, 2024, p. 124).

The grape thus emerges as a natural symbol that acquires an "overmeaning, revealing ideas that underlie the narrative and imbuing the screenplay with a poetic intensity and expressive power characteristic of art itself" (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 411).

4.2.2.- The apples in *Julieta*

According to traditional symbolic interpretations, the apple is a fruit associated with youth, rejuvenation, and perpetual freshness. In the *Song of Songs*, for instance, it signifies "the fecundity of the divine word, its wisdom and fragrance" (Arango, 1998, p. 241). At the same time, the apple has been linked to earthly desire and a heightened erotic charge. As Cirlot observes, "the ban from eating the apple stemmed from the supreme voice, which opposes the exaltation of material desires" (Cirlot in Arango, 1998, p. 242). This interpretation eventually contributed to the biblical association of the apple with guilt and sin (Genesis 3:3–19). Such a symbolic tradition is

repeatedly activated in *Julieta*, where apples appear on at least five occasions, entering the narrative precisely when the protagonist begins to revisit her past and recovers the hope of seeing her daughter, Antía, who has been missing for twelve years.

The apple first appears when Julieta takes a bite (Almodóvar, 2016, 11:02). From this moment on, the viewer becomes witness to her written confession to her daughter: a letter in which, from the maturity of age, she shares the sense of guilt that has marked her life since the suicide of the man on the train she could not prevent. The fruit reappears in Xoán's kitchen, displayed in a fruit bowl as he and Julieta share breakfast. Despite Marian's disapproval, both characters enjoy the encounter, struggling to resist their mutual attraction in the wake of Xoán's wife's recent death (Almodóvar, 2016, 29:52).

A third appearance occurs when an apple is visible on the vest of the monitor at the summer camp attended by Antía (Almodóvar, 2016, 43:50). This moment foreshadows the guilt that will later burden both mother and daughter: Julieta, after a heated argument with Xoán, indirectly precipitates his fatal fishing trip; Antía, in turn, comes to feel responsible for her father's death due to her absence. The fourth instance features Antía herself biting into an apple (Almodóvar, 2016, 1:01:43), a gesture loaded with the awareness of absence and the burden of caring for her grieving mother. Finally, apples appear in Julieta's car (Almodóvar, 2016, 1:04:00), shortly before she discovers that Antía has chosen to begin a new life without her, as if intent on punishing her mother by condemning her to the same grief she endured after her father's death. The accumulation of these scenes generates a spiral of guilt that reduces Julieta to a fragile, defeated figure. She articulates this in a letter fragment:

> I raised you with the same sense of freedom that my parents gave me. But when we moved to Madrid and I fell into depression, I kept myself from telling you how overwhelmed I was by guilt—guilt over your father's death and the death of the man on the train. I always wanted to spare you that burden, to let you grow up free of guilt. Yet despite my silence, you felt it, and in the end I passed it on to you like a virus (Almodóvar, 2016, 1:16:02).

The repeated appearance of apples and their integration into the narrative arc elevate them into symbolic motifs that contribute to the poetic texture of the film. In this way, it becomes possible "to establish [...] equivalences between filmic and literary processes." Their recurrence fosters semantic density and condensation, privileging connotation over denotation and enabling a metaphorical dimension of audiovisual discourse whereby "we can talk about a poetic language in cinema, which does not exclude narrativeness, but is at the service of the construction of the story itself" (Neira, 2007, p. 293). This symbolic strategy can also be observed, as we shall see, in the case of oranges in *Live Flesh*.

4.2.3.- Oranges in *Live Flesh*

Live Flesh is a carefully structured drama which, like the previous examples, integrates references to other art forms while introducing symbolic objects that acquire meaning within the diegesis through their shape, recurrence, and cultural resonance. Without engaging in the film's broader intertextuality—already analyzed by Poyato Sánchez (2015, pp. 15–34)—this section will focus specifically on the significance of oranges.

The film revolves around themes of passion and desire. Its promotional poster, designed by Juan Gatti, conveys the intensity of passion implied by the title while simultaneously evoking "two naked bodies embracing enigmatically, as the image cannot be decoded at first glance and is relevant to the main theme of the film" (Sánchez Noriega, 2017, p. 90). The poster alludes to the narrative's central sequence: the night of love shared by Víctor and Elena after their first fleeting encounter six years earlier, an encounter that had ended with Víctor's imprisonment, David's paralysis after being shot during the altercation, and Elena's subsequent marriage to David out of guilt. The reunion scene is charged with eroticism and lyricism:

> A scene of intense sexuality, yet also of mysterious lyricism, in which the lovers appear to be drawn together and carried along by a force that smooths their bodies, erasing every hard edge. [...] Through so much kissing and caressing, they seem to have become twins, to the point that it is impossible to tell who is the man and who is the woman. Then, in an unforgettable shot,

> their two bellies merge into a single body, recalling those creatures described by Plato in *The Symposium* (Martín Garzo, 2014, p. 94).

This shot directly recalls the film's poster, in which the lovers' fused buttocks symbolize the two halves of the same orange (Almodóvar, 1997, 1:11:23). Through this image, Almodóvar introduces Aristophanes' myth from *The Symposium* (Plato, 2010, pp. 720–725), while also engaging intertextually with Chavela Vargas's rendition of *Somos*, thus offering the viewer a key to the film's central theme.

The lovers' story concludes in the following scene, when Elena, upon returning home, confesses to David that she has spent the night with Víctor. She then splits an orange in two, symbolizing the end of a relationship born out of compassion (Almodóvar, 1997, 1:18:26).

Oranges appear at least twice in *Live Flesh*, and in both cases they activate a symbolic register rooted in cultural tradition. Although their color, lighting, and framing vary, their repetition establishes an "image system," in Robert McKee's terms (Neira, 2007, p. 299), which anchors the narrative arc and signals essential moments in the storyline. The result is a "procedure of visual condensation, of great effectiveness and poetic strength," in which a single image concentrates the film's semantic density, a quality typical of poetic texts (Gestenkorn in Neira, 2007, p. 299).

5.- Conclusions

The presence of painting in Pedro Almodóvar's cinema is a recurring element that has become more pronounced as his aesthetic has evolved. His engagement with still life—whether directly through painting or through its cinematic recreation—confirms his status as an auteur continually refining his style. This dialogue reinforces the fictional pact with the spectator while incorporating elements of a poetic cinema that enriches, rather than diminishes, narrativity.

As the examples discussed demonstrate, still lifes function not merely as decorative components of the mise-en-scène but as visual and dramatic

devices deeply connected to the protagonists' inner lives. By acquiring metaphorical meaning, flowers and fruits extend beyond their role as objects, introducing a semantic density and condensation that allow us to speak of a poetic language in cinema fully compatible with narrativity.

The persistent recurrence of symbols—especially objects that transcend the still life—underscores the decisive influence of literature on Almodóvar's work and contributes to the stylization of his aesthetic, which draws simultaneously from classical tradition and postmodern experimentation. Ultimately, his films blur the boundaries between painting and cinema, between still life and living matter, between the natural and the artificial, between interior and exterior, and, most crucially, between life and its representation—boundaries that eventually dissolve altogether.

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