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Melo-Thriller

Hitchcock, Genre, and Nationalism in Pedro Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*

Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz

Hitchcock's work is visually the richest in the history of the cinema.
— PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

Introduction: Almodóvar, Spanish Cinema, and Intertextuality

Pedro Almodóvar has been probably the most internationally prominent Spanish filmmaker since his breakthrough films of the 1980s, *The Law of Desire* (1987), and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). The critical and commercial success of some of his films in the United States (*Women on the Verge, Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* [1989], *High Heels* [1991], *Kika* [1994], and the Oscar-winning *All About My Mother* [1999]) has made his name synonymous with Spanish cinema in many circles. Almodóvar's films have been celebrated as irreverent, self-reflexive, and self-conscious explorations of Spanish national identity, sexuality, repression, and desire. His films are recognizably excessive, full of colorful characters, vertiginous plotlines, rich intergeneric allusions, and complex media intersections that include television commercials, billboard advertisements, popular songs, kitsch art, and the cinema.

Critics and historians of Spanish national cinema in general and Almodóvar in particular have pointed out how national identity in the cinema after 1980 has been reflexive of the crisis in which the country found itself after the end of General Francisco Franco's regime in 1975 and the beginning of redemocratization in the early 1980s. In the transitional period after forty years of the repression of many cultural practices that were not sanctioned by the state, Spanish popular art was reborn with a vengeance, appropriating and revising

the past cultural markers of fascism (the reduction of Spanish cultural identity to the kitsch aesthetics of bullfighting, flamenco dancing, Catholic imagery), and reinvented itself as signifying change, tolerance, political and sexual liberation, and artistic freedom. Almodóvar emerged as an artist in the cusp of this transitional period, becoming representative in the cinema of this "new Spanish mentality" (Kinder 432; Yarza 117–22). Almodóvar's films (along with some other directors') celebrate "cultural anxiety" (Yarza 174), generic instability (Acevedo-Muñoz 25), "marginality" (Kinder 429–33), the revision of social and political institutions (D'Lugo 50), and eventually the return to a pastoral, country setting as a symbol of stability (Del Pino 170). These themes suggest the problematic transition into democracy and the reintegration into the European community as symptomatic of the nation's new identity, troubled but open, paradoxically stabilizing and unstable.

Among the signs and symptoms of Spain's and Spanish cinema's "new mentality" and reinvention as a site of the convergence of diverse cultural practices was the appropriation and adaptation to Spanish contexts of discursive and stylistic models from high, low, and popular culture from abroad, including Hollywood and European cinema. Almodóvar and some other directors (Vicente Aranda, Agustín Villaronga, Eloy de la Iglesia) managed to break through into "specialized" international film audiences, writes Marsha Kinder, and "Almodóvar was celebrated as a cross between Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk, and David Lynch" (437). Almodóvar's films are full of cinematic allusions to and quotations from formative figures of international, Hollywood, and independent cinema including Luis Buñuel, Ingmar Bergman, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wilder, Sirk, Vincente Minnelli, Nicholas Ray, John Cassavettes, and Alfred Hitchcock. But said appropriations, allusions, intertextual references and citations serve to cement Almodóvar's own style as something in a constant state of transition and maturation, arguably analogous to Spain's own cultural heterogeneity after the end of Franco's regime. In reference to Almodóvar's most popular film of the 1990s, *All About My Mother,* I have argued elsewhere that the film finally settles into a definably melodramatic format, neutralizing the generic schizophrenia of earlier films (like the thriller/melodrama/musical *High Heels*) in what results in "an understanding of identity as something ambiguous (sexually, culturally) and problematic, yet ultimately functional" (Acevedo-Muñoz 27). Even earlier on, however, in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown,* Almodóvar's use of Hitchcock's films as intertextual discourse was showing signs of a generically hybrid quality (in *Women on the Verge* between the thriller, screwball comedy, and melodrama). In *Women on the Verge,* his most popular film of the 1980s and the definitive

breakthrough into American movie theaters, and later in *All About My Mother,* intertextuality is in itself signifying of the process of building and rebuilding, inventing and reinventing an identity that is occasionally defined by its own instability. More than any other outside text, acknowledged or otherwise, it is Hitchcock's work, "visually the richest in the history of the cinema" (*Almodóvar on Almodóvar* 147), that becomes more eloquent of a schizophrenic identity that paradoxically leads to a happy ending.

The presence of Hitchcock in Almodóvar's films often appears in the form of "appropriation" rather than homage. While allusions to Sirk, Minnelli, Bergman, and other directors are usually referential and frequently acknowledged (for example, among Almodóvar's *Patty Diphusa* writings there is a story in homage to Sirk entitled "Scrotum in the Wind," and in *High Heels* the two principal characters discuss how their lives mimic the relationship between Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann in Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*), citations from Hitchcock's films are incorporated into the narrative and generic configurations with which the director plays. Hitchcock becomes Almodóvar's own discourse. Almodóvar's interest in Hitchcock as a visual stylist is well documented, as illustrated in the opening epigraph also cited above (*Almodóvar on Almodóvar* 147), but while some critics dismiss Almodóvar's generic and intertextual games as "ironic humor or pastiche" (Smith 112), they help to understand better Almodóvar's aesthetics as a discourse on crisis that aspires constantly to reinvent and "correct" itself.

This essay explores the meaning and contribution to Almodóvar's style and discourse of the Hitchcockian appropriations present in his most popular film, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. Almodóvar has long been recognized as the defining, most important voice of Spanish cinema since the middle 1980s, and this essay analyzes the meaning and relevance of Hitchcockian texts to the work of Almodóvar and their contribution to the Spanish director's thematic interest in issues of identity and desire. Specifically I argue that Almodóvar's style, which is based in part in the instability of genre as a metaphor for sexual and national identity, draws from Hitchcockian themes and direct quotations of Hitchcock's oeuvre in order to signify.

The meaning of a dramatic moment in many of Almodóvar's films is often based on the recognition of its Hitchcockian allusion to make meaning. Below I analyze the dramatic and formal significance of direct citations and motifs from Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Spellbound* (1945), *Rope* (1948), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *Rear Window* (1956), *Vertigo* (1957), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963) in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. Almodóvar's films exploit their generic "indefinition"

for dramatic value, playing equally with conventions of melodrama, screwball comedy, and the thriller. Helping to hold the structure of *Women on the Verge* together are the Hitchcockian allusions that emerge in key moments of crisis and revelation. Almodóvar's intertextual experimentation is instrumental to the exploration of identity issues that characterizes his films. His reworking of Hitchcock in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is particularly meaningful (as is his visit ten years later to Elia Kazan, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and Tennessee Williams in *All About My Mother*), but not just because of its postmodernist irreverence. Its significance lies in the complexity of intertextuality and how it serves to deepen the meaning of what really is an emerging multicultural aesthetic that has helped Almodóvar redefine the meaning of national cinema. Almodóvar here appropriates Hitchcock and Hitchcock's meaning to make a statement on Spanish national and cultural identity in a moment of crisis.

Hitchcock and *Women*

Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* tells the story of television-commercial and voice-dubbing actress Pepa Marcos (Carmen Maura) and her attempts to communicate with her ex-lover Iván (Fernando Guillén). They have recently broken up, but Pepa has just learned that she is pregnant. That information serves as the MacGuffin, and the movie follows Pepa through her attempts over the course of two days to speak with Iván, tell him the news, and perhaps convince him to get back together with her. In the process she puts their apartment up for rent. Coincidentally, Iván's son, Carlos (Antonio Banderas), and his girlfriend, Marisa (Rossy de Palma), come to see the apartment for possible rental. Pepa's friend Candela (María Barranco) seeks out Pepa for help, as she discovers that her Shiite boyfriend is a terrorist planning to kidnap a plane bound for Stockholm, which Iván plans to take with his new girlfriend, the "feminist" lawyer Paulina Morales (Kiti Manver). Meanwhile, Iván's insane ex-wife, Lucía (Julieta Serrano) also tries to get to Pepa, with whom she assumes Iván plans to leave the country.

At face value, the movie is structured around the coincidences and "displasure" or "bad timing" typical of the maternal subgenre of classic melodrama (Doane 91), following Pepa after the news of her pregnancy through a series of missed telephone connections and her search for Iván around the city. The complications of the plot insistently call attention to the self-reflexive and allusive content of the film (with the presence of film technology and different types of recording devices), to the city of Madrid itself, and to the frantic

search for a vanishing gentleman, all of which build up to the "verge" of a nervous breakdown. The film's credit sequence is typical of Almodóvar, with pictures simulating magazine cutouts allusive to the film content and the different filmmaking tasks described in the credits, accompanied by a torrid love song ("I Am Unhappy" by Lola Beltrán) in the soundtrack. The sequence ends with a picture of a movie set serving as background to the words "screenplay and direction by Pedro Almodóvar." Then the film opens with a fade-in to a simulated conventional establishing shot of an apartment building at dusk. It is clearly revealed however, that the structure is only a scale model of Pepa's apartment building. Accompanied by music heavy on strings reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann's all-strings score for *Psycho,* the shot of the building refers to that Hitchcock movie first, and suggests the opening bird's-eye view of Phoenix and the hotel where Marion Crane and Sam Loomis have their sexual rendezvous. The *Psycho* reference is later confirmed with the revelation of Lucía's insanity and unhealthy relationship with her son Carlos. The shot of the apartment model is followed, incongruously in this apparently modern urban setting, by a shot of a duck, hens, and other birds in a pen, an assured reference to *The Birds*. The opening references to filmmaking, Bernard Herrmann (whose *Psycho* score Almodóvar directly used in *Kika*), *Psycho,* and *The Birds* establish Hitchcock as a formal point of reference from the beginning. As the film progresses, the themes of miscommunication and insanity and the terrorist plot extend the recurring formal references to Hitchcock's films into narrative ones.

The film's MacGuffin turns out to be the elusive meeting between Pepa and Iván operating, as in Hitchcock's films, as a narrative pretext to set off the protagonist on her search (Brill 7–8). In this film, one can argue, the search is for a "vanishing gentleman," posing an analogous reference to the disappearance of Miss Froy in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). As Patrice Petro has argued, Miss Froy's disappearing act, and Iris's search for her, ultimately serve to call attention not only to the invisibility of the woman as that which refuses representation but also to bring under patriarchal control the searching woman's gaze, an argument familiar in feminist film theory after Laura Mulvey (Petro 128–29). In *Women on the Verge,* however, the search is for a "vanishing gentleman" and it is the image of the man that becomes visually difficult to represent. While Iván refuses to allow Pepa to see him, he does leave his voice recorded in numerous telephone messages and other voice recording devices; in Pepa's dreams he appears speaking through a microphone, and he even dubs Sterling Hayden's voice for a Spanish version of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954). In *Women on the Verge,* which, as most of Almodóvar's films,

is populated by a largely female cast, the man's voice becomes a substitute for his image, and Pepa's search ultimately leads to the synchronization of the man's image and sound. Almodóvar's attention to Iván's voice also poses him as a sort of feminized leading man, his voice disembodied, which, as Amy Lawrence argues, is another way for classical cinema to repress women in the hierarchization of the visual (male) and sound (female) tracks (10).

I have detoured here into this discussion because the presence of Hitchcock in *Women on the Verge* is also a way for Almodóvar to revise Hitchcock as the subject of criticism itself. From Raymond Bellour to Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Amy Lawrence, and Kaja Silverman, Hitchcock's films arguably appear more insistently than any other director's as case studies in feminist film theory and criticism. From *Blackmail* to *The Lady Vanishes,* from *Notorious* to *Vertigo, Psycho, The Birds,* and *Marnie,* what Hitchcock does to women is often taken as exemplary of the classical cinema's fixation with controlling, repressing, and occasionally even destroying troubled women. Almodóvar himself speaks of Hitchcock, and while acknowledging the latter's influence in his own style and narratives, he also discusses women as characters and actresses, and their two different relationships, as directors, with them:

> The way I deal with my heroines is less neurotic than Hitchcock's. His female characters are very neurotic, but behind them there's a man whose relationship with women [is] just as highly neurotic . . . Hitchcock used the scenes of his films as a way of relating to his actresses. His difficult relationships with women enriched his female characters and inspired the most memorable scenes of his films, even if they also end up giving a rather negative image of the men. I haven't such a complicated relationship with women; it's much more generous and limpid. (*Almodóvar on Almodóvar* 147)

Almodóvar's admiration for Hitchcock retains some echoes of the general critical perspective on Hitchcock and women. While Iván seems to be displaced into the position of Hitchcock's "women," Almodóvar's "women on the verge" can also be seen as reflections of some of Hitchcock's "men on the verge," from the neurotic Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* to the psychotic Norman Bates in *Psycho,* to the murderous Dr. Murchison and the amnesiac Dr. Edwardes in *Spellbound*. Unlike Hitchcock, however, Almodóvar allows his women the narrative agency (as it is Pepa's search for Iván that structures the plot), the power to liberate themselves from the neurotic men in their

lives, and the chance to build a narrative in which men become neutralized or harmless, and, ultimately, to vanish.

Hitchcock "On the Verge"

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown thus begins with immediate self-reflexive attention to filmmaking, Hitchcock, and the reversal of the roles women and men assume in classical cinema, as exemplified by Hitchcock's films. As discussed above, Pepa's life in the two-day story time of the movie is organized around the need to find this vanishing gentleman so that she can give him the news of her pregnancy. The promise of an oedipal narrative is ultimately subverted, as Spanish cinema so often does, but in this case that happens by focusing on the organization of the narrative around the intertextual Hitchcock allusions, rather than the oedipal story itself. The movie's attention to the filmmaking process resumes early on in the film, when it is revealed that one of Pepa's (and Iván's) jobs is to dub Spanish dialogue for American movies. The choice scene for that revelation is from Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), in which Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden are reunited after many years, and it is revealed that (in exact opposition to Pepa and Iván's situation) Joan Crawford is no longer romantically interested in the nominal hero. Iván shows up first at the EXA studios to do his recording, in the first of a series of missed encounters between him and Pepa (she has overslept due to her dependency on sleeping pills). Iván seductively moistens his lips in extreme close-up, almost touching the microphone, and we see Sterling Hayden's face speaking with Iván's voice. It's the famous "tell me some lies" dialogue in *Johnny Guitar,* and we see Joan Crawford's moving yet mute lips responding to Sterling Hayden's requests for lies ("Tell me you still love me as I love you"). The vanishing gentleman Iván always speaks in clichés and is always mediated by recording technology, whether a cinema soundtrack or an answering machine, telephones, or tape recorders. After his "out of synch" love confession, Iván quickly goes to a telephone booth and places a call to Pepa. She does not answer the telephone (out cold with sleeping pills), but he leaves a message on the recorder, which introduces the first reference to *Dial M for Murder*. A close-up shot of the telephone and answering machine not only paraphrases the shots of the ringing telephone in the 1954 Hitchcock film, but the choice of a wide-angle lens allows for a distorting effect and shot size that even suggests *Dial M*'s original stereoscopic (3-D) format. Then the wide-angle close-up of the telephone and answering machine is directly juxtaposed

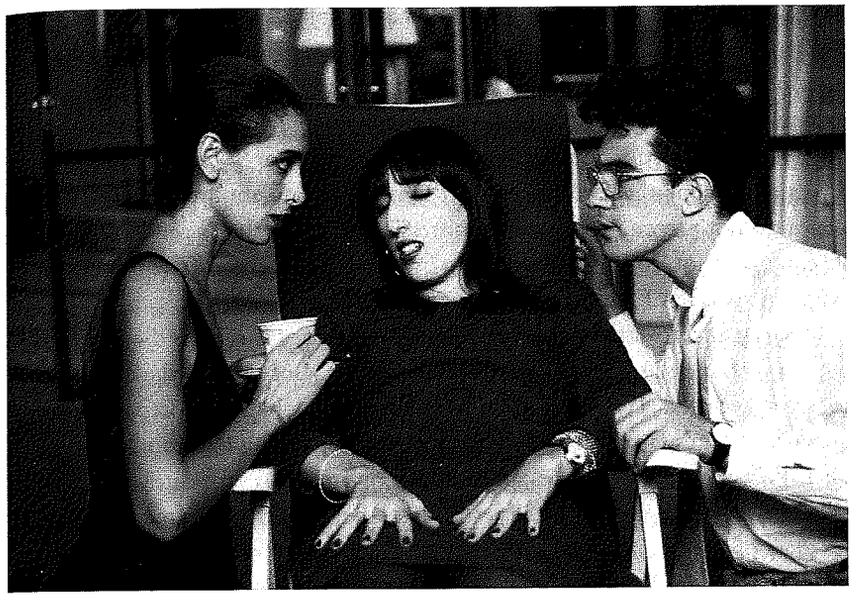
to a medium close-up shot of Iván in the phone booth: we see him through the right angle made by the two glass panes that make the booth, one red and one blue, precisely as if they were the two lenses of a pair of 3-D glasses. The motif of telephones is as insistent in *Women on the Verge* as it is in *Dial M for Murder*. Eventually the action in *Women on the Verge* is also temporarily confined to "real time," a single set, and somewhat theatrical space, as in *Dial M*. These two stylistic choices also refer to Hitchcock's other "single-set" films, *Lifeboat* (1944), *Rope* (1948), and *Rear Window*. Pepa spends most of the film calling Iván from her home, pay phones, and other people's telephones, or trying to retrieve her messages in the belief that Iván will eventually call. In *Women on the Verge,* as in *Dial M,* there is an implicit danger in answering the phone and a heightened sense of suspense about how difficult it becomes to actually have the conversation. While in *Dial M* answering the phone means death for Grace Kelly, in *Women on the Verge* for Pepa it means the misery of a relationship with a man that she considers as murderous, in a way, as Ray Milland in the Hitchcock film: later Pepa even refers to what Iván has done to her as "terrorism." Yet it also means "life" rather than death since Pepa's main intention is to give Iván the news of her pregnancy. In *Women on the Verge,* as in *Dial M,* there is no real telephone conversation, and yet the telephone miscommunication leads to a tragedy and to the arrival of the police on the scene to investigate a crime (due to an anonymous tip about the terrorist attack plotted by Candela's boyfriend).

Pepa eventually makes it to the studios to do her dubbing of Joan Crawford's voice in *Johnny Guitar*. The studio setting allows for more self-reflexive licenses on Almodóvar's part, beginning the sequence with a view of the recording studio from inside the projection booth. The shot shows the studio through the projector window. We then see the film leader running through the projector, the film loop inside the projector, and then the screen as the synch-sound mark bleeps when the leader hits "2." Besides the direct reference to the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), the close-up of Pepa in front of the microphone reveals her to be wearing glasses similar to those worn by several female characters in *Strangers on a Train* (Patricia Hitchcock and Laura Elliot, who plays "Miriam") which upset the murderer Bruno (Robert Walker) so much. Pepa recites Joan Crawford's lines in Spanish, paradoxically having the conversation she wishes to have, only with Iván's voice in the "projected" setting of the recording studio. Pepa's delivery is ironic in the sense that unlike Joan Crawford in that film, Pepa does mean the words she addresses to Iván: "I still love you . . ." At the end of the recording, overcome by heartbreak, emotion, and morning sickness, Pepa faints and collapses on

the floor of the booth. The shot of Pepa on the floor is a direct citation of Miriam's death in *Strangers on a Train*. We see Pepa through her inverted glasses lying on the floor, the view distorted and mediated by the myopic lenses. In *Strangers on a Train* we see Miriam's murder reflected on and also distorted by her glasses, the image, as Robin Wood argues, "a sexual culmination for both killer and victim" (173). Unlike *Strangers on a Train,* where Bruno's sexual perversion and strange relationship with his mother is a theme linked to Hitchcock's "difficult" relationship with women and to which he returns in *Psycho:* in *Women on the Verge* it is precisely Pepa's dubbing director, standing in for Almodóvar, who enters the frame to rescue her. He bends over her body, picks her up, asks her if she's okay. In *Strangers on a Train* Bruno's "perverted sexuality" is emphasized by the distortion of the image as we see Miriam reflected on the glasses. Formally, Almodóvar's shot is different from Hitchcock's since we see Pepa not reflected, but *through* the glasses, so it appears as mediation rather than a cinematic reflection. The shot's meaning is revised as well, since ultimately she is rescued, not doomed, by the directorial presence. Pepa has her first hysterical crisis over a Hitchcockian moment, and yet the perversion of Bruno's (and Hitchcock's) action is here neutralized.

After her hysterical, symptomatic fainting, Pepa goes directly to the telephone again to call Iván's house. His ex-wife, Lucía, answers the telephone. Lucía's heavy makeup and nervous demeanor suggest her mental instability (which is later confirmed in conversation). Lucía is in the process of putting on her elaborate makeup and trying on wigs. In her insanity and instability Lucía is like Marnie or even Norman Bates, distanced from reality, in drag, and with a criminally psychotic disposition. After insulting and dismissing Pepa on the phone (again, a fruitless telephone conversation), Lucía's son, Carlos, enters the scene to question her. They stand in a two-shot, facing each other and both in sharp medium close-up profile, the shot a perfect facsimile of one of Marion Crane and Norman Bates in *Psycho,* when in the office parlor they have their first real conversation. The shot of Lucía and Carlos is completed in the background with a glass frame full of dissected butterflies. As in *Psycho* where Norman's stuffed owls and cravens in the background suggest Norman's mother's dead, stuffed state and foretell Marion's destiny, in *Women on the Verge* the butterflies help to frame the spectator's discovery of this mother/son relationship. The shot in perfect profile is always significant in Hitchcock's films and Almodóvar's use of it here (and later in *All About My Mother*) is equally important. In his book *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze,* William Rothman writes that Hitchcock characteristically used the profile shot to indicate a character's impenetrability, his or her "complete abstraction and

absorption in an imagined scene to which we have no access" (22). Almodóvar uses the profile shot identically formatted, but to convey instead the knowledge of a character. We are introduced to Lucía and Carlos in the form of this succinct yet direct quotation from *Psycho,* including the dissected butterflies in lieu of the stuffed birds in the background (also suggestive of the wallpaper flowers reflected in the mirrors in Norman's office) and the nervously stuttering young man. Thus, the knowledge of their troubled relationship and her insanity is suggested a priori, before we are given that information in the narrative. For those of us who are able to identify the reference, this particular *Psycho* citation mediates our knowledge of these characters as they are introduced. We may remember other Hitchcock stuttering characters like Shaw Brandon (John Dahl) in *Rope* and Bruno (Robert Walker) in *Strangers on a Train* who, like Norman Bates and Carlos, have unresolved issues with their mothers (Rothman 271). With it, the theme of the troubled relationships between parents and children in Spanish cinema is practically condensed into a type of Hitchcock-inspired shorthand. So, as it is common in Almodóvar's intertextual appropriations of other directors' work (with the occasional yet logical exception of Luis Buñuel in *Kika* and *Live Flesh*), the reference needs to be adapted into something fitting to the cultural function of Spanish cinema in the 1980s, in this case the "troubled" past and the promise of recovery. While the stuffed birds are indicative of death, decay, and aggressiveness, the butterflies, although equally dead, are suggestive of change, grace, and some sign of hope (of recovery from the troubled Spanish national identity issues of the 1980s). This theme is symptomatic of Spanish cinema of the period as seen in movies by Almodóvar and other directors. In *Women on the Verge,* insanity mediates the relationship between Carlos and Mother (who, like Mother Bates, is also suspicious and jealous of his new "girlfriend"). The insane mother and nervous, stuttering son (like Norman) clearly have an unresolved, traumatic relationship. Furthermore, as in *Psycho,* Lucía has, like Norman's mother, neglected her son for the love of a man. It is revealed eventually that Lucía's insanity, which caused her institutionalization, resulted in Carlos being brought up by his grandparents. And her insistent pursuit of Iván after being released from the mental institution has led to a further estrangement from her son. Lucía and Carlos's traumatic relationship, and even the shot citation from *Psycho,* make a direct connection between the two films. Unlike *Psycho,* however, where Norman/Mother's troubled relationship is, as explained by the psychiatrist at the end of that film, the cause of Norman's psychosis and his murderous ways, Carlos's distance from his insane mother allows him to grow up somewhat normal (in spite of his Norman Bates–style



As in many Hitchcock films, Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* focuses on a problematic heroine.

symptomatic stuttering). Significantly, the revision and rearticulation of the oedipal narrative is a recurring theme in Spanish cinema of the last two decades (Kinder 198–200). In Almodóvar's films (especially *Labyrinth of Passion, Matador, The Law of Desire,* and *High Heels*) dysfunctional father/mother/son/daughter relationships are suggestive of the nation's traumatic track to recovery from the forty-year dictatorship. The nuclear family is reconstituted in a revision of the nation-as-family allegory exploited in Franco's days. Carlos in *Women on the Verge,* unlike Norman in *Psycho,* is saved by his estrangement from his mother, who is in this case the murderous one. As he does with the references to *Dial M for Murder* and *Strangers on a Train,* Almodóvar appropriates *Psycho* formally but revises its meaning to make it fit a Spanish national thematic specificity. In the process, Almodóvar links insanity and sexuality to the national cultural trauma and not to the customary Freudian/Lacanian connotations listed by Hitchcock critics (see for example, Bellour on *Psycho*).

After the failed new attempt at a telephone conversation with Iván, Pepa goes back to her apartment, which she now intends to put up for rent. The modern Madrid apartment setting is reminiscent of the use of similar mise-en-scène in *Rope*. First, the apartment windows allow us to see the day go by outside, with some indications of the passage of time, the way the set

design (by Perry Ferguson) and the cinematography (by Joseph Valentine and William V. Skall) do in *Rope*. Also, the apartment serves an intimate, enclosing function, as mentioned before, similar to the way Hitchcock's other single-set films (*Lifeboat, Dial M,* and *Rear Window*) operate. Finally, there are two long, significant sequences in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in Pepa's apartment that are staged and filmed to simulate "real time." These scenes do not pretend to give the impression of Hitchcock's celebrated series of sequence-shots in *Rope,* but they do imitate the integrity of the physical and temporal space, as Hitchcock did in 1948.

Once in the apartment, the first thing Pepa does is run to the telephone and play the messages on the answering machine. But the call she expects has not been received. Pepa then goes to the kitchen, where she prepares a tasty gazpacho (Iván's favorite) and dopes it with prescription barbiturates, so that when Iván comes she will be able to keep him there, even if it is against his will. The drugged gazpacho will return later, performing the same function as the glass of equally drugged milk offered to Gregory Peck's John Ballantine/Dr. Edwardes in *Spellbound*. While alone in her apartment, Pepa packs all of Iván's clothes in a suitcase and accidentally burns their bed with a box of matches. The remains of their relationship charred and stored, she goes back out into the street to look for Iván in his apartment. Another missed connection follows: this time Pepa leaves Iván a note which is intercepted and thrown in the garbage by Lucía on her way out of the apartment. Pepa returns to her apartment and the Madrid skyline begins to reveal itself in the background. As in *Rope,* the sight of the skyline in the background of the main set serves as an indication of the passage of time. Besides the *Rope*-inspired view from her apartment balcony containing a number of recognizable Madrid landmarks (like the Phoenix building dome at the corner of Gran Vía and Alcalá), Pepa's run through the city works, like Scottie's in *Vertigo,* as a veritable checklist of recognizable places. Unlike *Vertigo,* however, where Hitchcock exploits the city of San Francisco and its outskirts for their tourist value, Pepa's run through Madrid concentrates on real places that are of generally little interest to the outsider. Pepa's given home address, as well as Lucía's and Paulina Morales's (Iván's new lover) are all real places in the city. The neighborhood of "Cuatro Caminos" is mentioned by name as are the EXA sound-recording studios, and the sight of the famous Spanish television antenna also appears a number of times in the background. There is a sense of great familiarity with this city, unlike the somewhat uncanny quality of San Francisco in *Vertigo*. As Marvin D'Lugo has argued, the city of Madrid itself is symbolic in Almodóvar's films of the "radical reformulation of Spanish cultural values" (49), of the cultural trajectory from Franco to freedom. In *Vertigo,* however, the city and the characters' trajectory round and about San Francisco are instead symptomatic of their helplessness and desperation. As Lesley Brill states, in *Vertigo* the characters tend to "wander," and their wandering is ultimately destructive (B200–201). In Almodóvar's film, Pepa's search has some structure to it, and her final intention, the recovery, reconstitution, and revision of the family, delivers the promise of reconstruction and further life.

In her wait for Iván, Pepa nervously and rhythmically paces her apartment. She watches the television, where one of her commercials, for the laundry powder "Ecce Homo," comes on. The character she plays in the detergent commercial could come from any number of Hitchcock's films: Pepa is "the murderer's mother" and she proudly displays her son's sparkling clean shirt, which she has washed after his latest crime. The policemen's complaint "no sign of blood or guts" seems a humorous revision of Norman's cleanup after "Mother's" murder of Marion in *Psycho*. While Pepa waits, her friend Candela arrives. Candela has been involved with a Shiite terrorist who plans to hijack a plane to Stockholm that evening. (In a purely melodramatic coincidence, it happens to be the same flight that Iván plans to take with his new girlfriend, Paulina, to escape from both Lucía and Pepa.) But Pepa leaves Candela alone and goes back out to stake out Iván in front of his apartment building.

Pepa sits on a street bench outside Iván's building and inspects the place with an inquisitive gaze. Her wait outside the apartment building leads to the most direct reference to *Rear Window*. Pepa examines some of the oblivious building dwellers through their windows and balconies. Through an open window, Pepa observes a young lady joyfully dancing in her black underwear for some (unseen) spectator in her apartment. The young lady first reminds us of the shapely dancer "Miss Torso," and of the sexually active newlyweds that L. B. Jefferies spies upon. Pepa also sees a lonely man on a balcony, a reference to the lonely music composer in *Rear Window*. The young man seems to be wiping some tears off his face, which connects him to the pathetic "Miss Lonelyheart" as well. Pepa soon discovers Marisa (Carlos's girlfriend) sitting outside the apartment inside a car. Former model and actress Rossy de Palma's striking features immediately catch Pepa's attention. Pepa's gaze finally settles in on Iván's wife and son, whom she can see through the window. They are having an argument (presumably about Carlos's plans to move out). Pepa's expression suggests that she, like L. B. Jefferies, is judgmental of the events she witnesses, her facial expression changing as do her feelings of amusement (at the sight of the dancing beauty), concern (for the crying loner), and curiosity (over Carlos and Lucía's argument). Pepa also serves a kind of mediating

function since her activities are often seen or heard through some kind of representational apparatus (recordings, television, answering machines, telephones, voice dubbing). Unlike *Rear Window,* where L. B. Jefferies' voyeurism is symbolic, reflexive, and deconstructive of Hitchcock and his manipulation of the cinematic apparatus (Stam and Pearson 196–97), Pepa's situation positions her quickly within the projected diegesis of the apartment building (and not so much as a director or spectator). While Jefferies is initially passive and brought by chance and routine to spy on his neighbors, Pepa begins by going out in search of the story and becomes immediately and intrinsically involved. Jefferies' position as a "surrogate for the director" (Stam and Pearson 196) dictates his existence outside of the diegetic world (of his neighbors); he is an image-maker and cinematic speaking subject. Pepa retains the "directorial" control for a moment before choosing to enter the action and claim instead narrative agency, something Grace Kelly (as Lisa) is not allowed to do since she is "directed" by Jefferies to enter the action in Thorwald's apartment.

Pepa enters the action by going directly to the telephone booth outside the building, once again to check her messages in the chance that Iván may have called. Of course, he hasn't, but then the telephone booth shakes and rattles violently and noisily, startling Pepa inside the booth. Pepa turns around desperately seeking the reason for the booth's sudden violence, and the medium shot of her turning around in the booth, the noise, the shaking, and the rattling are clear references to Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) in the phone booth in *The Birds*. It turns out that, angry at her son's apparent intention to move out, Lucía throws the suitcase he was packing out the window and it falls on top of the phone booth. Some articles fall out of the suitcase and Pepa comes out to help Carlos and Marisa pick them up. Pepa finds a photograph of Carlos and Iván together, thus discovering their relationship. The introduction of the *Birds* reference is significant since that film, like *Psycho,* which Almodóvar had already cited, also presents the problem of an unresolved mother/son oedipal conflict as the reason for the punishment of the heroine. In his conversation about *The Birds* with François Truffaut, Hitchcock stated that the film was supposed to be the story of "a possessive mother" and that "her love for her son dominated all of her other emotions" (Truffaut 291–92). Carlos in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* shows signs of anxiety (his insistent stuttering) and like Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Marnie Edgar in *Marnie,* his relationship with his mother provokes his symptoms. But Carlos's mother, Lucía, is also troubled, and like Mrs. Brenner (Jessica Tandy) in *The Birds* and Mrs. Edgar (Louise Latham) in *Marnie,* she loses control of her

emotions with the threat of her child's departure, which leads to a "hysterical" reaction (Horwitz 279).

After the chance meeting with Carlos, with whom Pepa eventually develops a pseudomaternal bond, she returns home and again confronts the answering machine. But as always, the message she is expecting has not come in. Instead there are repeated calls from her friend Candela. Exasperated, Pepa yanks out the telephone and throws it out the window, mimicking Lucía's hysterical action. Candela arrives, desperately in need of Pepa's help, but Pepa goes out again to look for Iván on the street. Coincidentally, Iván's son, Carlos and his girlfriend Marisa arrive to look at the apartment, now for rent. Once the action is contained in the apartment set, Pepa returns from the street and Almodóvar stages the first of two interior sequences in Pepa's apartment that occur in real time, like Hitchcock's *Rope*. The editing structure in Almodóvar's sequence does not conform to the complexity and claustrophobia of Hitchcock's experiment. However, the single-set locale, real-time action, theatrical mise-en-scène, and eventually the presence of a "body," clearly imitate the spatial, temporal, and narrative continuity of *Rope*. In the two separate sequences inside Pepa's apartment, the visual and thematic references to *Rope, Vertigo,* and *Spellbound* follow each other and eventually converge as the story itself takes on the Hitchcockian quality of a thriller about a terrorist plot.

Initially, Candela, desperate to talk to Pepa but incapable of getting her attention now that Iván's son is present, goes out to the terrace and tries to jump off the balcony. Suddenly repentant, Candela holds on to the railing screaming for help. Certainly, the scene is reminiscent of Scottie at the beginning of *Vertigo* hanging from the ledge of the building. Candela is seen from above in a medium close-up that reveals her hands in the foreground, her face, and the depth and danger of the possible fall. As in *Vertigo,* Candela is the victim of a traumatic situation (with her terrorist boyfriend) that in this case leads to her momentary suicide attempt. After helping Candela climb back up with the help of Carlos and Marisa, Pepa listens to Candela's story about the terrorist, prescribes her own tranquilizers to Candela, and goes out to talk to a "feminist" lawyer about Candela's problem. Carlos and Marisa have become involved in the action when Marisa accidentally drinks some of Pepa's spiked gazpacho (which contains "twenty-five or thirty" sleeping pills) and passes out in a profound sleep. Marisa thus becomes the "corpse" of this *Rope* situation, and like the dead man in that film, her body remains in the background of the action until the plot is fully resolved.

While Pepa is away speaking with the lawyer, who is, unbeknownst to Pepa, Iván's new girlfriend Paulina Morales, Carlos and Candela at the apartment

discuss the Shiite men's plot to kidnap the airplane leaving that night for Stockholm. Pepa's visit to Paulina allows for the only ellipsis in the time of the story between the two sequences. Meanwhile at the apartment, Carlos, who has fixed the telephone, makes an anonymous call to the police to report the terrorist plot. Soon Pepa returns after her failed attempt to get Paulina interested in Candela's "case." Angry about a new missed call from Iván, she yanks the telephone out again and throws it out the window, and the second "real-time" sequence in Pepa's apartment begins. The sequence retakes the *Rope* motif, and as time passes by the Madrid skyline in the background slightly changes its light pattern, from warm sunny gold to dusk-red to cool blues, indicating the passage of time and the arrival of the evening hours. Also, like the oblivious dinner guests in *Rope,* Lucía arrives at Pepa's apartment accompanied by two plainclothes policemen who have traced Carlos's call back to Pepa's. The party is completed when the telephone repairman, who had been called early in the morning, also arrives. An interrogation follows with Pepa, Lucía, the policemen, Carlos, and Candela discussing the telephone call. Pepa explains that the telephone has been reported broken since the morning, so the tip about the plane hijacking could not have come from there. The "guests" are all offered a glass of Pepa's gazpacho. Holding her glass carefully (knowing of its sedative properties), Pepa finally ties up the loose ends of the plot: she realizes that Iván is leaving for Stockholm with Paulina (having seen the plane tickets in the lawyer's office) and that the Shiites coincidentally plan to hijack the very same airplane. Like James Stewart in *Rope,* Pepa comes to a plot-solving epiphany.

The single set, real time, and Marisa's "corpse" in the background of the action emphasize the *Rope* reference, which is then intersected by *Spellbound.* The policemen, the repairman, Carlos, and Candela quickly react to the drugged gazpacho and begin to fall asleep, but neither Lucía nor Pepa drink. Lucía runs across the room and picks up the policemen's guns, and points them both at Pepa. Lucía confesses to her insanity, and to how she pretended to be cured in order to get out of the mental institution and kill Iván. Her glass in one hand, a gun in the other, Lucía says to Pepa, "Now, let's drink." She raises her glass and the gun. A shot of both objects shows the gun barrel in a tight close-up as at the end of *Spellbound* when the murderous psychiatrist, Dr. Murchison (Leo G. Carroll) points the gun at himself and shoots in a similarly composed shot. Here too, the topics are amnesia (which Lucía has also suffered), insanity, and criminality (Lucía's). Also like Dr. Edwardes (Gregory Peck) in *Spellbound,* Lucía pretends to be "cured" to escape the asylum. Almodóvar's shot contains the two gazpacho glasses, which take on the

place of the similarly drugged milk glass in *Spellbound* that Professor Brulov (Michael Chekhov) offers to Gregory Peck. As in *Notorious* and *Spellbound,* a glass of some harmless liquid easily transforms into something else, something dangerous: poison or sedatives. In *Women on the Verge* Almodóvar even copies the shot of the glass of milk in extreme close-up (through which we see the intended "victim") substituting the blood-red gazpacho for the milk.

The significance of the *Spellbound, Rope, The Birds,* and *Vertigo* citations in this sequence condenses and explains the function Hitchcock serves in Almodóvar's cinema as a whole and in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in particular. Almodóvar's films tend to revise and exploit the theme of traumatic relationships between men and women and between parents and children, because Spanish cinema after the 1970s practices a reversal of the oedipal scenario, classic in Hitchcock, to suggest the need to resolve the traumatic past of the nation, symbolized by the absence of a "strong" father and the presence of unstable mothers (Kinder 198–200). *Psycho* and *The Birds* give the characters in *Women on the Verge* a point of reference for signification that mediates the oedipal relationship through what is already a recognized cinematic allusion. *Rope* and *Vertigo* emphasize that link to Hitchcock with direct formal references (to lighting, composition, and temporal-spatial continuity). *Spellbound* emphasizes both the need for a psychiatric solution and the ineffectiveness of that very solution, since Lucía, like Dr. Edwardes, is a psychiatric "impostor" of sorts, and like Dr. Murchison, a potential murderer.

The gazpacho standoff between Lucía and Pepa ends when the former splashes the spicy drink on Pepa's face, blinding her momentarily, and then at gunpoint hijacks Pepa's biker neighbor to drive her to the airport. The film's climactic sequence is a frantic pursuit as Lucía rushes to the airport to kill Iván while Pepa follows her in a taxi to prevent it. The race is made even more dramatic by the formal retention of the real-time structure: it continues the sequence begun upon the reunion of Pepa, Candela, Marisa, and Carlos some thirty-two minutes before. We ride with them from Pepa's apartment on Montalbán Street to Madrid Barajas Airport. As in *Rope* and partly in *Psycho*—where the entirety of the acquaintanceship between Norman Bates and Marion Crane is contained within one temporary continuous sequence that is only briefly interrupted during Norman's drive to the pond with Marion's whole life stuffed in the trunk—the insistence on real time grants the entire sequence realism, intimacy, and a strong sense of identification. The most disturbing effect in *Psycho* is certainly Marion's death, not just because of its violence, but because of the time, effort, and formal elements invested in building identification with her before she is brutally and abruptly taken

away. These strategies include her imagined scenario about the discovery of her crime (which we hear in voice-over as she drives) juxtaposed with the shots of the empty road, and the candid reactions that we see on her face (in direct close-up) as she drives to her "private island," or rather to the Bates Motel. To cement that sense of identification that will make Marion's death even more disorienting for the cinematic spectator, Hitchcock retains the "real time" of the entire Marion/Norman meeting. Although Hitchcock dismisses his formal experiment in *Rope* as "a stunt," the continuity of time and space in that movie also underscores the sense of danger, and, upon the arrival of James Stewart, the inevitability of its own resolution (Truffaut 179). Equally in *Psycho,* the temporal containment of Marion and Norman's entire meeting in a single thirty-two minute sequence has the effect of underscoring the sense of intimacy. In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown,* Almodóvar's staging of Pepa's discovery and resolution of the "plots" (both Iván's and the Shiite terrorists') in "real time" equally allows for the character's trajectory to be completely rounded; we see Pepa go from the "verge" of insanity, from the frantic desperation of a jilted lover, into the role of a full-fledged heroine. Unlike the Hitchcock heroines Pepa resembles, Marion Crane or Judy/Madeleine (Kim Novak) in *Vertigo,* who, writes Lesley Brill, breakdown or "shatter . . . their personal coherence," becoming inarticulate as they swirl into their own "traps," Pepa's dramatic arc leads her from drug-induced incoherence, heartbreak, and desperation to redemption, regeneration, the assertion of her subjectivity and desire, and the satisfying closure of her unresolved narrative (227).

At the airport, as in many Hitchcock endings, a last-minute resolution seems less satisfying than the MacGuffin itself: the sequence involves a motorcycle/car chase, a crazy woman with two guns, and a thwarted terrorist plot. Pepa prevents Lucía from killing Iván, the crazy woman is quickly arrested after missing one shot, the flight to Stockholm is saved, and almost as an afterthought Pepa finally has the conversation with Iván that serves as the main narrative pretext. She informs him that she only wanted to speak to him, and that she now wants nothing to do with him, not even revealing that she is pregnant. Like in *Spellbound* and even *Rebecca,* the woman's love and partial sacrifice saves the troubled man from death or the law (and the "madness" of the ex-wife). But the climax turns out to be improbably elusive (we don't even learn the fate of the Shiite terrorists), and Pepa emerges from the "verge" to reconstitute herself, reconstruct her family, and rebuild her whole life.

In the end Pepa returns home, her apartment cluttered with the sleeping policemen, Carlos, Candela, Marisa, and the telephone repairman. In the background, the *Rope*-style skyline is now darkened, unrealistically compressing several Madrid landmarks. Pepa decides to keep the apartment, because she says she "loves the view," while we hear her birds, now a homey sound, in the background. Marisa, finally awakened from her drugged sleep, becomes the first person to hear Pepa's news about her pregnancy. The two women bond over the revelation, and Marisa confesses she had an erotic, orgasm-inducing dream during her sleep, which has made her a different woman. "I was a virgin when I walked through that door this morning, now I'm not sure I am," she announces. Maternity and sexuality are resolved in the epilogue. These two topics are initially the cause of the women's "troubles" and the mediating forces that repress Hitchcock's heroines (Marion Crane, Marnie Edgar, Melanie Daniels, Constance in *Spellbound,* and others), but in *Women on the Verge* they become ultimately liberating. The greatest revision of Hitchcock's themes in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is that Almodóvar's heroine does not cross from the "verge" into full-blown hysteria, or dementia, or death, for that matter. Out of the chaos of her relationships and the shadow of her past, through a Hitchcockian crucible, Pepa emerges at the end as a well-adjusted, socially and psychologically functional woman.

By Way of Conclusion: "Curing the Disease of the Past"

We all go a little mad sometimes.

—NORMAN BATES

In his book *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films,* Lesley Brill argues that many of Hitchcock's characters are victims of the "traps" of their own past (as Norman would say), inevitably and fatally paying for their own and their parents' crimes and sins. In reference to *Vertigo* and *Psycho* (but applicable to other characters), Brill writes that:

> The central figures [in Hitchcock's films] struggle to understand and resolve destructive personal histories . . . They fail. Their defeats reflect the unforgiving necessities of Hitchcockian tragic irony . . . Retribution replaces forgiveness. Confusion and ambiguity baffle resolution. [The] films give centrality to human illness and decay, not healing . . . [T]he disease of the past is incurable . . ." (200)

Pedro Almodóvar's films since 1980, as many critics and historians of Spanish cinema have argued in the last two decades, are centered on the trauma of

Spain's history since 1936, presenting a specifically Spanish strain of the "disease of the past." In Almodóvar's films, characters are forced to confront the nation's mistakes under Franco (1936–1975) that eventually led to the bumpy road into redemocratization in the 1980s. While Almodóvar's early films began as irreverent satires of Spanish national history, cultural definition, politics, and social and sexual relations (*Labyrinth of Passion, What Have I Done to Deserve This?,* and *Matador,* for example), his later films (beginning with *The Law of Desire* and *Women on the Verge*) rehearse more positive, optimistic views of the nation's psychological forecast without ignoring or trivializing its troubled origins. The trauma of the past, expressed as stressed, criminal, incestuous, or improbable relations between parents and children, mental patients, criminal nuns, or serial killers (in *Labyrinth of Passion* and *What Have I Done, Dark Habits,* and *Matador,* respectively) ultimately leads to emotional and, by extension, psychological "healing" in *Women on the Verge, Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, High Heels, The Flower of My Secret,* and *All About My Mother* (Del Pino 170, Acevedo-Muñoz 38). But most importantly, in Almodóvar's films "the disease of the past" is curable, and must be cured, because on its healing rests the stability and survival of the nation. Almodóvar's films, as Alejandro Yarza argues, are known for articulating Spanishness from a "camp" perspective, reappropriating cultural and historical symbols that had been adopted in Franco's Spain and "recycling" them in order to deconstruct, as a form of therapy, the mechanisms of cultural and religious repression.

In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* Almodóvar allegorically extends his treatment of the national trauma into the convergence of generic instability (in this case mainly between Hitchcock's thrillers and Sirk's melodramas) with the stabilizing presence of Hitchcock as intertext. Hitchcock citations in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* serve to underscore the typical excesses of melodrama. Similar to Almodóvar's adoption of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve,* Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire,* and Elia Kazan's film version of the Williams play in *All About My Mother,* the Hitchcock citations in *Women on the Verge* become symptomatic of the characters' emotional trajectory. Furthermore, Almodóvar adopts Hitchcock as part of his own nationalist discourse. As I have argued elsewhere, Almodóvar's use of generic instability can be seen as a way of referring to the nation's process of coming to terms with its own cultural complexity and self-recognition as a rich, multicultural, even transnational space. *All About My Mother* settles ultimately as melodrama, reconstituting the national family and offering the promise of a new, redefined and redeemed social and cultural construct. In *Women on the Verge* Almodóvar already attempts to build

stability and consensus out of the film's chaos. In this case, however, even before treating the nation as a generic hybrid, Almodóvar goes directly to the characters' psychological traumas, and with the help of the multiple insistent yet revisionist Hitchcock citations, allusions, and references, he explores the nation's "disease of the past." Unlike the Hitchcock characters to whom they refer, however, Almodóvar's women remain "on the verge" of insanity. With the exception of the unstable "Mother" (a character Almodóvar explores in *Matador* and *High Heels* as well), Pepa and the others ultimately reach some emotional stability. Relationships between mothers and their children are a recurring motif in Hitchcock's films, but they point to "personal" problems of identity and sexuality. Almodóvar mediates the same themes through Hitchcock, but his attention to identity and the family is allegorical of the nation's process of reconstitution and recovery.

At the end of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* Lucía, the unstable mother, asks to be taken back to the mental hospital where she belongs, after her failed assassination attempt of her ex-husband. Unlike Norman Bates, for whom the idea of sending Mother "someplace" is a threat to everything his psychotic mind believes to be true, in *Women on the Verge,* it is acceptable to put the crazy woman, the one who is "beyond the verge," away so that maybe the others can recover from the effects of repression. In Almodóvar's case, of course, "repression" is as much political as it is sexual, and its resolution or containment is good for the individual and the collective mind. Hitchcock's contribution to Almodóvar's films, especially *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (but also *High Heels, Kika, Live Flesh, Talk to Her*), is that it allows for a kind of cinematic shorthand: every Hitchcock moment in *Women on the Verge* deals with the psychological and sexual traumas of desire and repression, and their conflict with the law. But Almodóvar's revision of those moments denies the fatal implications or the ironic distance of how those relations are presented and resolved (or unresolved) in Hitchcock's films. On the contrary, Almodóvar suggests that even though "we all go a little mad sometimes," the "disease of the past" can be cured, or at least neutralized by understanding that instability (formal, narrative, generic) can be, paradoxically, a redeeming force.

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"Knowing Too Much" about Hitchcock

The Genesis of the Italian *Giallo*

Philippe Met

Enigmatic childhood trauma flashbacks; the fetishistic ritual of black gloved hands getting ready for the kill; point-of-view shots of a faceless murderer wearing a shiny trench coat; the flash of a blade in the dark (be it a knife, a razor, a meat cleaver, or a hatchet); scantily clad "scream queens" being stalked and subjected to shocking and sadistic acts of violence; a morally decadent and sexually deviant upper-class milieu; an inept local police force and an eye witness as impotent amateur sleuth; a deleterious atmosphere of rampant suspicion; an abundance of red herrings and twist endings (that not too infrequently lapse into non sequiturs); a baroque or mannerist use of lighting and color. Short of cohering into an elegant, formal definition, all of the above feature prominently amongst the quasi-formulaic trademarks of the *giallo,* a hybrid, horror-meets-crime (sub)genre that emerged in early 1960s Italy. "Giallo" is Italian for yellow, in reference to the distinctive color of the dust jackets used for a collection of lurid crime pulp novels that Mondadori started to publish in 1929. Not unlike the development of the *série noire* in post–World War II France, these page-turning whodunits were first translated and adapted from the English but increasingly penned by native authors.

Fast-forward to the late 1950s (and well into the 1970s): in its filmic avatar, the giallo can be regarded as an integral part of a certain golden age of Italian genre cinema. Alongside such subcategories as peplums (or sword-and-sandal epics), supernatural Gothic horror, spaghetti westerns, cannibal or zombie films, mondo movies or shockumentaries, nunsploitation and the like, it arguably helped delineate and consolidate the popular underside of Italian cinema: what its numerous detractors prefer to term its "sleazy" or "exploitative" underbelly; what one might qualify, more polemically, as the dark secret har-