

MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRACES IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S JULIETA AND PAIN AND GLORY

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of memory in the construction of identity in Pedro Almodóvar's *Julieta* (2016) and *Pain and Glory* (*Dolor y Gloria*, 2019). Through a comparative textual and narratological analysis, I will examine how both films portray memory as a way through which loss and emotional suffering are reinterpreted and transformed into narrative and artistic creation. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma, I will argue that the protagonists reconstruct their identities through acts of remembrance triggered by bereavement, physical pain, depression, and the enduring relationship with their mothers. Particular attention is paid to the autobiographical dimension of *Pain and Glory*, the melodramatic aesthetics characteristic of Almodóvar's cinema, and the intersection between autobiography and autofiction. Overall, I will demonstrate that memory functions as the central organizing principle of both films, allowing the director to transform personal experience into a particular reflection on identity, trauma, nostalgia and motherhood.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar, memory, identity, trauma, autobiography, autofiction, motherhood, melodrama

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pedro Almodóvar's films engage with themes of memory, family relationships, motherhood, loss, and the complex process of coming to terms with the past. These concerns recur throughout his filmography, from *The flower of my secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995) and *All about my mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999) to *Volver* (2006), *Julieta* (2016), *Pain and glory* (*Dolor y Gloria*, 2019), and *Parallel mothers* (*Madres paralelas* 2021). While his cinema is recognized for its vibrant colour palette (particularly the expressive use of reds, blues, yellows, and greens) and melodramatic aesthetics, its visual richness conceals a sustained exploration of memory as a visual force. In these films, Almodóvar's characters are particularly defined by the memories they carry and by their persistent attempts to reinterpret traumatic experiences that shape their identities.

In this paper, I will consider the role of memory as a driving force in the construction of identity in Pedro Almodóvar's *Julieta* (2016) and *Pain and Glory* (*Dolor y Gloria*, 2019). Although distinct in their narrative structures, the two films explore a common set of concerns, such as the relationship between past and present, family relationships, and the use of memory in the construction of personal identity. The first film, *Julieta*, is about a middle-aged woman who, after unexpectedly learning that her daughter may still be alive, begins writing a letter that retraces her life, confronting the traumatic events and feelings of guilt that happened in her past. *Pain and Glory* centers on Salvador Mallo, an aging film director suffering from chronic physical pain and creative paralysis, whose encounters with people and places from his past lead him to revisit his childhood, his relationship with his mother and his lovers, and his artistic career. In both film narratives, the protagonists seek to make sense of their present lives through repeated returns to the past, transforming remembrance into a process of existential and psychological reconstruction. This interpretative approach is reinforced by Almodóvar's own reflections on his creative process. In an interview in the review "Film Comment" (2019) about *Pain and Glory*, the filmmaker acknowledged that, although he had never been particularly drawn to works focused on nostalgia, he found it impossible to avoid this emotional dimension in *Julieta* and, even more explicitly, in *Pain and Glory*. Describing the latter as "a film about what time, the passing of time, inflicts on our lives" and "a film about how my memory works," Almodóvar suggests that nostalgia emerges as an inevitable consequence of confronting memory, aging, and, of course, the passage of time (Rapold, 2019, online).

Moreover, Almodóvar links this perspective to a broader existential condition moulded by the aging body, the fragility of the human condition, desire, and a growing sense that contemporary society is experiencing the erosion of values alongside the rise of right-wing populism and far-right political movements. His authorship is therefore driven by a creative impulse to construct what Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki describe as a "personal archive", an evolving repository of lived experiences, cultural references, political contexts, and memories that are

reworked into cinematic fiction (2009, p.3). His personal archive consists of biographical experiences, objects, images (including intertextual references to the works of Lucian Freud, Robert Wilson, and Antonio López featured in *Julieta*, alongside the *Cat on a hot tin roof* and *Hamlet* posters that appear in *Pain and Glory*), and sensory impressions that Almodóvar reorganizes and transforms through the language of cinema. Therefore, through memory the personal recollections are filtered in fiction, reinterpretation, and reflection on the social and cultural realities in which the film director himself is situated. Paul Ricoeur argues that remembrance is mediated by the present and reconstructed from the perspective of the remembering subject (2004, p.11). That means, memory is negotiated in relation to forgetting, while personal identity emerges through the ongoing way of assigning meaning to one's lived experience.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Almodóvar understands memory as a fundamental organizing principle of cinematic discourse. The fragmented narrative structure of *Julieta* and *Pain and Glory*, the constant shifts between past and present, and the recurrent use of letters, photographs, domestic objects, and family spaces transform memory into a narrative technique through which the protagonists reconstruct their identities. Neither Julieta nor Salvador Mallo is able to understand the present without repeatedly returning to traumatic experiences that continue to shape their sense of self. In this context, the distinction between personal memory and cultural memory becomes particularly significant. As James Miller observes, "Almodóvar has long been fascinated by the blurry line between fiction and reality, between cultural memory and personal memory, between autofiction and autobiography" (2025, p.15). While personal memory is rooted in the director's own experiences, most explicitly in *Pain and Glory*, through recollections of his childhood in Calzada de Calatrava, La Mancha, his relationship with his mother, and his earliest artistic and emotional experiences, cultural memory draws on a repertoire of Spanish traditions and collective references, including Catholicism, rural life, popular music, theatre, melodrama, and the history of Spanish cinema. Rather than separating these two forms of memory, Almodóvar intertwines them, allowing characters recollection to become a path for collective memory. In light of these considerations, it is appropriate to introduce Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, developed in *Oneself as Another*. Ricoeur distinguishes between *idem* (identity understood as permanence and continuity over time) and *ipse* (identity as selfhood, openness to change, and the capacity for self-reconfiguration) (1992, p.13). In these films, the two dimensions enable characters to integrate the fragmented experiences of their lives into a coherent story about themselves. In fact, identity is also conceived as an act of (re)interpreting character's past experience.

2. REMEMBERING THE SELF: MEMORY, TRAUMA AND IDENTITY

In *Julieta*, the protagonist reconstructs her identity through the letter she writes to her daughter, Antía. Writing is a means of reorganizing the past, allowing Julieta to understand and also explain the traumatic experiences that happened to her life and affect her relationship with her daughter. One of the film's opening sequences, in which Julieta carefully reassembles a torn photograph while writing her letter to Antía, highlights a powerful metaphor of identity. By piecing the photograph back together, she symbolically reconstructs the fragmented narrative of her own life, suggesting that the past can only be recovered through the reinterpretation of its meaning. This process becomes even more explicit in *Pain and Glory*. Salvador Mallo does not recover his artistic identity by overcoming or leaving the past behind, but by returning to it repeatedly. Memories of childhood, his relationship with his mother, his first love, bodily suffering, and creative impasse are gradually woven into a renewed narrative of the self, one that allow him not only to recover his artistic voice but also to rediscover the desire and courage to continue creating. The film itself unfolds as remembrance, the present continually activates fragments of the past, while those memories, in turn, help Salvador to add meaning to his life.

Equally important in Ricoeur's thought is the relationship between memory and forgetting. Every act of remembrance involves a process of selection, suggesting that identity is also constructed by what is forgotten, avoided, repressed, or left unspoken. The philosopher argues that memory must continually negotiate with forgetting: "Could forgetting then no longer be in every respect an enemy of memory, and could memory have to negotiate with forgetting, groping to find the right measure in its balance with forgetting? And could this appropriate memory have something in common with the renunciation of total reflection?" (Ricoeur, 2004, p.413). This tension lies at the heart of both *Julieta* and *Pain and Glory*. In *Julieta*, the protagonist attempts to distance herself from the past by moving to a different neighborhood in Madrid; yet her encounter with Bea, Antía's childhood friend, together with photographs, personal belongings, and the letter she writes to her daughter, repeatedly reactivate memories she cannot escape. Similarly, Salvador Mallo appears unable to create precisely because certain experiences remain suspended in memory, resisting integration into a coherent narrative. Only when these memories are acknowledged and understood, he is able to recover both his creative impulse and his identity as a filmmaker.

Closely related to this dynamic is the experience of depression, which constitutes one of the emotional cores of both films and is inseparable from trauma and the process of remembrance. Both Julieta and Salvador Mallo undergo prolonged periods of emotional withdrawal and an inability to engage fully with the present. Their depression can therefore be understood as the manifestation of an unresolved traumatic experience that has yet to be integrated into their lives. In *Julieta*, depression is triggered by a succession of losses: the death of her husband, Xoan, and, above all, the unexplained disappearance of her daughter, Antía. Yet Julieta's suffering stems not only from these losses themselves but also from her inability to understand and come to terms with Antía's absence. Trapped in a present dominated by guilt, uncertainty, isolation and expectation, she remains unable to move forward. She is obsessed with memories that do not provide closure but instead compel both Julieta and the viewer to revisit the decisions and emotional fractures of the past. From this point of view, trauma persists, as Cathy Caruth (1996) highlights, precisely because it cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, it returns belatedly through acts of remembrance and repetition: "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all." (Caruth, 1996, p.8)

In *Pain and Glory*, Salvador Mallo's depression originates in a different form of loss, yet it has similarly consequences for his identity. His emotional crisis is closely linked to the deterioration of his body and the creative paralysis that prevents him from making films, and, at the same time, memories of his youth, his encounters with former lovers, and the memories of his mother after her death evoke moments of tenderness. In both films, depression works as a symptom of memory that has not yet been fully integrated into the protagonists' life narratives, while remembrance is a way through which traumatic experience is gradually reinterpreted and incorporated into a renewed understanding of the self. Almodóvar himself connects this creative process with introspection and memory. In an interview for the Spanish public broadcaster RTVE, he explained that, while writing *Pain and Glory*, he felt the need for "an introspective gaze into the darkest part of myself, while at the same time combining it with the brighter memories of my childhood" (*una mirada introspectiva hacia la parte más oscura de mí mismo y mezclarla, a la vez, con recuerdos más luminosos de mi infancia*; my translation). This interplay between suffering and remembrance reflects the film's central premise, that memory is never exclusively painful or nostalgic but emerges through the constant dialogue between loss, grief, desire, and love. Almodóvar has explained that, while writing *Pain and Glory*, he was suffering from chronic pain caused by spinal problems and complications following surgery. These physical limitations forced him to reduce his professional activity and prompted a retrospective reflection on his own life. In few words, bodily pain is therefore a catalyst for memory.

A significant point of convergence between *Julieta* and *Pain and Glory* is the protagonists' experience of an inner rupture brought about by loss and their confrontation with the past. In both films, memory functions as a means of negotiating the relationship between trauma and the present, allowing the protagonists to move toward a renewed understanding of themselves.

3. ACTING PERFORMANCES AND CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION

One of Almodóvar's most compelling directorial choices in *Julieta* is the decision to cast two different actresses in the title role. Adriana Ugarte portrays the younger Julieta, while Emma Suárez takes over the role after Antía's disappearance. This casting choice functions not merely as a marker of chronological time but as a visual expression of the transformation of woman brought about by trauma. Following Xoan's death and Antía's disappearance, Julieta is no longer the woman she once was. Almodóvar opts for an entirely different actress, suggesting that traumatic experience alters identity so fundamentally that it can no longer be represented by the same body or face.

Another key figure in the film is Marian, played by Rossy de Palma. As the family's long-time housekeeper, Marian is actually a custodian of memory, preserving and transmitting crucial knowledge about the family's past, including Xoan's affair with his best friend, Ava (Inma Cuesta), and the hidden tensions in the relationships between the characters. Rossy de Palma occupies a special place within Almodóvar's cinematic universe, having appeared in seven of his films: *Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*, 1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988), *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (¡Átame!)*, 1990), *Kika* (1993), *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995) and *Broken Embraces* (*Los abrazos rotos*, 2009). To be precise, her presence activates the intertextual memory of spectators familiar with his oeuvre, that extends across Almodóvar's body of work, reinforcing the continuity of his recurring collaborators.

A similar approach can be observed in Antonio Banderas's performance as Salvador Mallo in *Pain and Glory*. His acting is deliberately restrained and remarkably understated. Unlike the exuberant protagonists of Almodóvar's earlier films, Salvador speaks very little, while his body constantly denotes physical pain and

emotional exhaustion. Banderas conveys the character's inner life through gestures and an introspective physical presence, allowing the body itself to become a repository of memory and suffering. On the contrary, Asier Etxeandia, who plays the actor Alberto Crespo, serves as a mediator between personal memory and artistic creation. By performing Salvador's autobiographical text as a theatrical monologue, Alberto demonstrates how intimate experience can be transformed into cinematic expression. The performance gives voice to Salvador's memories and also confronts him with his past from a critical distance, illustrating the therapeutic and creative potential of storytelling. Leonardo Sbaraglia's portrayal of Federico represents the affective dimension of memory. As one of Salvador's great loves, Federico embodies a past that is remembered not with bitterness but with serenity and emotional maturity. Their reunion does not seek to revive the relationship. Instead, it allows both men to acknowledge the significance of their past as lovers. Through Federico, Almodóvar suggests that memory can preserve also desire, affection, intimacy and emotional fulfilment, showing that remembrance allow both men to revisit one of the happiest and most meaningful periods of their lives with tenderness and care. Taken together, Salvador, Federico, and Alberto represent three complementary models of masculine vulnerability. Each confronts the passage of time and the persistence of memory differently, revealing how love and desire are inseparable from loss and fragility.

Another important dimension of Almodóvar's cinema is the relationship between memory and the maternal figure, often imbued with nostalgia and melancholy for the past. In *Julieta*, motherhood means loss and absence rather than presence. The relationship between Julieta and her daughter, Antía (Priscilla Delgado), becomes the emotional link in which memory functions as a means of affective survival, while the protagonist's identity remains suspended by her daughter's disappearance. Julieta's repetitive gestures, preparing Antía's birthday cake each year, preserving photographs and personal objects, and writing the letter that frames the narrative, reveal her inability to detach herself from this relationship. From this perspective, motherhood shows the persistence of memory. Julieta continues to exist as a mother even after she can no longer perform that role in everyday life, suggesting that maternal identity is sustained through remembrance rather than through physical proximity.

At the same time, *Julieta* also explores the protagonist's relationship with her own mother (Susi Sánchez), who is bedridden and suffering from a degenerative illness. Their relationship is characterized by emotional distance and the impossibility of genuine communication, reflecting Almodóvar's nostalgic engagement with a disappearing familial world. Julieta's mother represents an older generation shaped by rural traditions, while the deterioration of her body anticipates one of the director's recurring motifs: the vulnerability of the female body and the gradual erosion of family memory. As Julieta witnesses the decline of the family into which she was born (including her father's affair with the family's housekeeper while her terminally ill mother remains confined to bed) she simultaneously experiences the collapse of the family she has created. Here, motherhood is an intergenerational experience in which silence and unequal gender relations are passed from one generation to the next, revealing that identity is shaped by inherited legacy of patriarchal oppression.

By contrast, in *Pain and Glory*, memory is articulated around Salvador Mallo's relationship with his mother, Jacinta. His return to childhood, to his earliest artistic experiences. Jacinta is portrayed by Penélope Cruz in the childhood sequences and by Julieta Serrano in the final years of her life. Through these two performances, Almodóvar presents the mother as a unified yet multifaceted figure. On the one hand, she appears as a young, energetic, and protective woman, on the other, as an aging mother who expresses disappointment and unresolved grievances toward her son. The memories of Salvador's childhood are structured around the maternal figure. He recalls the cave-house in which they lived, the women washing clothes in the river while singing, and his mother's determination to provide him with an education despite the family's poverty. She introduces him to language, sensitivity, human kindness, and the careful observation of everyday life, experiences that later become the raw material of his cinematic imagination. Yet Almodóvar deliberately avoids idealizing the mother-son relationship. One of the film's most emotionally powerful moments is, in the end, the final conversation between Salvador and his mother, in which she reproaches him for never fully understanding what she truly wanted. In this scene, memory becomes a space where love coexists with guilt, disappointment, and regret. Almodóvar understands reconciliation as a path that requires acknowledging unresolved conflicts and accepting the complexity of the past.

Within this framework, melodrama emerges as one of the defining stylistic features of Almodóvar's cinema, providing the aesthetic form through which intimate conflicts are translated into emotionally and visually expressive narratives. Unlike classical Hollywood melodrama, where emotional conflicts often rely on clear moral oppositions, Almodóvar employs the conventions of melodrama to explore the ambiguities of memory, the fragility of identity, and the inseparable relationship between children and parents (especially mothers). Also, Alberto Iglesias's emotionally resonant score, Antxón Gómez's production design, and the symbolic presence of

everyday objects, Almodóvar constructs a cinematic universe in which visual and sonic elements function as material repositories of memory and affect.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, *Julieta* and *Pain and Glory* demonstrate that, in Pedro Almodóvar's cinema, memory is a narrative technique in which trauma, suffering, loss, and desire are reinterpreted and transformed into artistic creation. Almodóvar constructs a cinematic world in which memory functions as the principal mechanism through which identity is continually reconfigured. At the same time, the blurred boundaries between autobiography and autofiction, reality and fiction, highlighted by James Miller, reveal that the past is never simply recovered but is continually rewritten through cinematic images, melodramatic aesthetics, and the creative act itself. On the whole, Almodóvar's films suggests that memory does not imprison individuals within the past; rather, it offers the possibility of understanding, reimagining, creating and giving new meaning to lived experience.

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