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Short-Circuiting Urban and Rural Spanish Society: A Parallax View of *Volver*

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“We must say that these savages are even more sensitive to incest than we, perhaps because they are more subject to temptations than we are, and hence require more extensive protection against it.”
– (Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 15)

From early to late Almodóvar, or, from the Frankfurt School to Žižek

Among contemporary *auteurs*, perhaps none is more concerned with the oppression of the female voice than Spain’s Pedro Almodóvar. Almodóvar’s earliest films, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls on the Heap*, 1980) and *Entre tinieblas* (*Dark Habits*, 1983) in particular, demonstrate an acute awareness of historical female muteness in Spanish society. These films bring the voices of women into the narrative foreground and afford them unconditional agency while reallocating the male

voice to a subordinate position always already defined by the woman. Both films make up a period many academics and film critics alike call 'early Almodóvar' (through 1988), in which the filmmaker gave cinematic expression to the overtly subversive actions and emotions arising from the countercultural, post-Francoist movement called *La movida madrileña*. As Ignacio Oliva writes, "the early Almodóvar did indeed seem to live, work, and party according to the unwritten dictates of the moment. In the Madrid of the early 1980s, Almodóvar's involvement in various countercultural groups exposed him to a range of ideas and attitudes that would prove critical to his work" (Epps and Kakoudaki 394). *La movida* in Spain during the '80s is, perhaps, most usefully likened to the so-called 'sexual revolution' that took place in the United States during the '60s and '70s for the extent to which Spanish society endured a profound shift in its views on gender expressivity, sexual behavior, and other heteronormative categories established by thirty-six years of fascist, military rule.

Through his brand of emancipatory cinema, the early Almodóvar engaged directly in what Max Horkheimer termed "critical" as opposed to "traditional" theory and took up the Marxian proposition of changing, rather than merely interpreting the world.¹ Like the Frankfurt School, Almodóvar's early films attacked institutional hierarchies that sought to enforce traditional cultural norms by wielding logical positivism under the auspices of the former authoritarian rule. *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, for example, exposes the contradictions at play within Spanish law enforcement when a policeman rapes Pepi (played by Carmen Maura) and hospitalizes his wife by beating her, in his personal life, while preserving a social order according to his Falangist politics, in his public life. In a more darkly satirical and less humorously extravagant fashion, *Entre tinieblas* directs his critical lens toward the formerly Francoist-supported, Spanish Catholic Church. The film underscores the extent to which the religious institution remains anachronous, morally bankrupt, and still ruled by intuition over reason. Almodóvar's early films, then, identify closely with the tonally direct, modernist project of a critique of authority inspired by the Frankfurt School definition of critical social theory.

Whereas the films that comprise the period of 'early Almodóvar' (through 1988) undermine normative social categories by critiquing their totality, the films of 'late Almodóvar' (1995 and later) focus their critique on what Slavoj Žižek calls a "parallax gap" to uncover its individual "subversive core" (*Parallax 4*).² A Subversive core can be found, according to Žižek, within a parallax gap, "the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible" (*Parallax 4*), through

its short-circuiting. Žižek offers the short-circuit approach, a metaphor for critical reading, as an instrument to deploy against texts that present a seemingly irreducible disjuncture, an unbridgeable chasm, or insurmountable parallax gap.

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network – faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a 'minor' author, text, or conceptual apparatus ('minor' should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not 'of lesser quality,' but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a 'lower,' less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions. (*Parallax ix*)³

Zahi Zalloua has noted that, for the Žižekian reader (the kind of reader the films of late Almodóvar privilege), "the literary text (or any text) is no longer to be conceived in isolation, only in terms of its own discourse. Appeals to other fields of study [...] are particularly welcome, since their otherness plays a crucial role in 'short-circuiting' the source text" (6). *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999), *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*, 2002), and other films that comprise the period of late Almodóvar, then, encourage a viewing that, through interdisciplinarity, perceives the symptoms, slippages, or lapses that reveal the subversive core of a parallax gap that otherwise allows a text to operate fluently. Social contexts, discussions of the suppression of desires, and subjective issues of memory and trauma, for example, afford the short-circuit approach the intellectual voltage needed to expose the heteronormative tensions still present within Spain's urban capital that lead a mother to hide from her son his transvestite father in Barcelona (*All About My Mother*), or the objectivization of women and profound lack of communication between sexes that, to varying degrees, are still accepted by a Spanish society that has too few institutional avenues in place to allow feminine discourses to be considered on par with masculine discourses (*Talk to Her*).

Almodóvar's more contemporary films, which rely on subtle, more intellectually demanding filmic tropes to deploy their critiques, may seem less provocative, critical, or impactful than his earlier films. This opinion, though perhaps inaccurate, is not unwarranted and, rather, indicates that the films of late Almodóvar represent a change in the filmmaker's cinematic and intellectual approach toward what Michel Foucault called "the art of critique" in his famous 1978 lecture.⁴ Instead of leveling a critique directly on institutions and similarly broad constructs that exercise social power, Almodóvar's later

films address local manifestations of their influence to determine and destabilize the publicly obscured processes that provide their sustainability. The film *La mala educación* (*Bad Education*, 2004), for example, identifies child sexual abuse as the process that allows the Catholic Church to continue operating institutionally in Spanish elementary, middle, and high schools by addressing a local instance of molestation by a priest of a pupil rather than presenting the problem as an ongoing, system-induced epidemic of sexual harassment and forcible violation. This approach toward a critique of the Catholic Church is markedly different than, say, that of Luis Buñuel's film *Viridiana* (1961), which attacks the entirety of the institution by undermining its core principle of chastity. Hyperbolic, female-centric, and deliberately anti-Christian, *Viridiana*, unlike *Bad Education*, does not concern itself with the institutional mechanisms that keep the Catholic Church in power. Rather, Buñuel's film ambitiously takes on the fundamental contradictions at play within the institution's values and positive philosophical gestures. Whereas *Viridiana* undermines the backwards logic at the heart of Catholicism, *Bad Education* exposes the ways in which that backwards logic still functions today.

The viewer reads the film's subjects against interchangeable cultural backgrounds, yet this reading always occurs at a certain distance marked physically, on the one hand, by the film's inherent sensorial otherness and culturally, on the other, by the difference between the themes with which Almodóvar's films engage and the knowledge of them enjoyed by the Spanish film-going public. This is not to say that the films of late Almodóvar discuss a narrow subject matter about which the audience frequently knows little—though the subject of Almodóvar's latest film, *Los abrazos rotos* (*Broken Embraces*, 2009), about a director remembering the making of one of his earlier films rather, may have crossed this threshold. Rather, Almodóvar's latter films are more self-conscious than his earlier ones in that they exercise more metafictional filmic techniques and seem to better grasp the profundity of their own critique, contextually, historically, and otherwise. (One might simply say: the films of late Almodóvar are much more "personal.") The tendency toward metafictionality is perhaps best highlighted by *Broken Embraces*, which recalls Federico Fellini's *8½* in the ways in which it deals with the complexities of a directing a film, generating artistic inspiration, and experiencing the many layers of love that go with it. As Giles Hattersley notes, "It's a film about film, with Almodóvar gleefully namechecking all his faves, from Jeanne Moreau's voice to Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954)."⁵ Or, as Almodóvar himself remarks, "I think all my films represent me, but in some way there is something quite intimate in this one."⁶

Recalling Judith Butler's reading of Foucault's lecture in her own by the same title, the filmic enterprise of late Almodóvar "tread[s] here in an area of constrained generality, one which broaches the philosophical, but must, if it is to remain critical, remain at a distance from that very achievement" (Ingram 212). The effort to preserve this distance from total generality, philosophy, or dogmatism is perceptible in the ability of Almodóvar's films to practice, in Butler's words, a critique "that not only suspends judgment [...], but offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension" (Ingram 212). Judgment, for Butler and Foucault, yokes the project of critique and positivism with its most negative aspects—which include authoritarianism that can lead to the Holocaust, for example—about which Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School had warned against, providing contemporary reasons for its suspension.⁷ The idea of suspending one's judgment to pursue critique, as they acknowledge, however, dates back to the work of Immanuel Kant in *Logic* (1800), where he suggests that one should suspend judgment in order to reach it:

This [skeptical] method then is, correctly speaking, a mere suspension of judging. It is very useful to the critical procedure, by which 'that method of philosophising, whereby we investigate the sources of our assertions or of our objections and the grounds upon which they depend,' is to be understood;—a method, which affords a hope of coming at truth. (Kant 119)

The filmic project of late Almodóvar and, by extension, Žižek's short-circuit approach to critical reading suggest that the modern father of critique is among their most influential precursors. Skepticism, as Kant suggests, should provide the point of departure from which critique can proceed to investigate. The skepticism itself, however, should not fall into the temptation of judgment and should, instead, be suspended for the critical method to arrive at truth. For Žižek, the truth of which Kant speaks is the subversive core at the heart of each parallax gap, the necessary, yet concealed, evil upon which the smooth running of systems rely. For Almodóvar, the suspension of judgment Kant discusses is realized through particular filmmaking techniques employed such that the film does not suffer from the director's palpable influence. To this end, the synthesis of Žižek's process to come at truth and Almodóvar's method to suspend judgment is, perhaps, best actualized in the director's 2006 film *Volver*.

Contextualizing *Volver*

Almodóvar's sixteenth film, *Volver* is set, at once, in a small village in La Mancha and in the Spanish capital, Madrid. The locational binary the film initially stages resonates with the center-periphery dichotomy that has come to define the tensions within Spanish nationality, the strive of certain communities for higher degrees of autonomy, and the project of modernity in Spanish cities.⁸ A cohesive national identity has not only eluded those who have sought to impose it—namely, the Spanish monarchy—, but also has regularly undermined the pastiche of what Spanish law now calls “historical nationalities” that comprise the country’s multilingual, multicultural, and even multiethnic communities.⁹ Since the fall of the Francoist regime, the Spanish government has sought to identify its intranational historical borders and afford certain levels of autonomy to its most nationalistic communities, including the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia. Even as the legislators in the capital attempt to consecrate these historical regions in the nation’s laws, however, the locations that provide the setting for the story that drives *Volver* expose the borders between La Mancha and Madrid, considered by the Spanish constitution to form part of the “historical region” of Castile-La Mancha, that will likely never fall.¹⁰

The center-periphery dichotomy that drives the narrative tension in *Volver* might be simplified to one between rural and urban communities. However rough and violent, this simplification leads to a narrative that dissolves national boundaries while it discusses them. Steven Marsh suggests, “although *Volver*, with all of its spirits and superstitions, is arguably Almodóvar’s most ‘provincial’ film, it is also perhaps his most universal” (Epps and Kakoudaki 340). To this widely applicable struggle between urban and rural Weltanschauung, Almodóvar’s film adds an often overlooked or purposefully silenced feminine discourse that rewrites the dyadic cultural engagement to include epistemological issues of death, incest, and gynecic sustenance. *Volver* brings the female voice again to the forefront of the cinematic dialogue after what some might call a brief departure in *Talk to Her* and *Bad Education*. The film, however, nuances Almodóvar’s discussion of the female voice within Spanish society by presenting female muteness as a problem of a parallax gap that society has naturalized.

As briefly noted in the last section, the Žižekian mode of reading—the short-circuit approach—is useful particularly when there occurs a parallax gap, a seemingly irreconcilable difference between two perspectives. In physics or astronomy, the parallax is “the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background),

caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight” (Žižek 17). In other words, a parallax occurs, for example, when a change in one’s perspective causes an object to appear to have moved in front of another object. Žižek’s “philosophical twist” on this physical definition of the parallax questions the assumption that the difference between observational positions is merely one between two subjectivities (i.e. different points of view). Instead, Žižek suggests, the subject (the viewer) and the object (the viewed) are inherently mediated such that an epistemological shift in the subject’s point of view reflects an ontological shift in the object itself (Žižek 17).

The short-circuit approach, outlined above, provides the cultural reader a critical tool to wield against power apparatuses (social, political, religious institutions, etc.) with the purpose of revealing the hidden underside of their discursive expressions. The short-circuit approach as a discursive strategy points its crosshairs toward symptoms, unavowed biases, and the disjunctions or slippages by which these are revealed. Each parallax, Žižek affirms, exists within a considerable network of other parallaxes that can extend indefinitely from many directions. For that reason, the objective of the Žižekian approach to critical reading—and, therefore, the objective of the theorization of the parallax gap—is to discern the “subversive core” of a particular parallax in order to peel back the layers that prevent one from seeing something for what it is. In other words, the objective is to show “the implicit, tacit prohibitions on which [our symbolic] universes rely” (*Parallax* 13). The repeated identification of internal fault points (or ideological symptoms) of cultural discourses exposes both their hegemony and irreconcilable contradictions. Žižek proposes that, at this point, their hegemonic order fails. The point of failure reveals the existence of a parallax gap that, as Žižek purports, one should study to discern its subversive core and, hence, the actual prohibitions or taboos on which our material reality relies.

As has been alluded to constantly from the onset of this article, Žižek’s theorization of the parallax gap and short-circuit approach elicits his own critique of ideology. The Hegelian triad Žižek utilized in his renewal of the critique of ideology in “The Spectre of Ideology” illustrates the extent to which societies naturalize ideological apparatuses. In the article, Žižek identifies the *in-and-for-itself* of his critique of ideology as “a series of ideological presuppositions [...] that are necessary for the reproduction of existing social relations” (*Mapping* 15). From this suggestion, Žižek continues,

What thereby comes into sight is a third continent of ideological phenomena: neither ideology *qua* explicit doctrine, articulated convictions on the nature of man, society and the universe, nor ideology in its material existence (institutions, rituals and practices that give body to it), but the elusive network of implicit,

quasi-‘spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of ‘non-ideological’ (economic, legal, political, sexual...) practices. (*Mapping* 15)

Located in this domain are the issues of incest, death, and gynecic sustenance that populate the cinematic landscape of *Volver*. Around each issue circulates the network of presuppositions and attitudes that serve to reinforce the hegemonic male power over women. Disinterested in excusing a particular Spanish context from its systematic and historical silencing of women, Almodóvar’s film exposes the extent to which both rural and Spanish societies have naturalized these networks and reproduced supposedly non-ideological practices that precisely give rise to incest and death while stymieing gynecic sustenance absent of male control.

The Urban-Rural Parallax Gap and its Incestuous “Subversive Core”

Partly located in a small village in La Mancha, Almodóvar’s home region, *Volver* explores the death of the parents of Raimunda (played by Penélope Cruz) and Sole (played by Lola Dueñas). A mysterious house fire, whose origins are gradually revealed as the plot progresses, caused their death three years prior to the beginning of the film. En route to the mounting explanation of the house fire, however, Almodóvar’s film offers clues of another sort that point toward an ideological slippage that perhaps is not unique to, but originates from rural, Spanish society. The topic of incest comes squarely into focus soon after the first male presence of the film is introduced. The man that appears in the film is Raimunda’s lazy husband, Paco (played by Antonio de la Torre), who the camera almost immediately captures staring up his daughter Paula’s skirt while she slouches hoydenishly in an armchair. Sensitive to her daughter’s brazen free spirit or sensible toward her husband’s libidinal economy, Raimunda tells Paula, “sit properly; close your legs.” The scene equates Paula (played by Yohana Cobo) and Paco not only by presenting them as boyish derivatives whose essential difference can be captured by the statistics of age and sex, but, also, by having Raimunda reprimand them both. Raimunda’s decisive action posits the masculine or masculine-inspired act as requiring regulation and supervision, turning the traditional role of the submissive Spanish woman from the Franco era on its head. Raimunda, in an effort to maintain a functional household, establishes and attempts to regulate gender roles. In doing so, however, Raimunda situates Paco and Paula at a

distance from her power that is equal, suggesting that they lie on the same plane vis-à-vis authority as one another thereby collapsing whatever age difference (some twenty years) they might have had. Raimunda establishes between them a gendered, yet sexual, dialectic that materializes soon thereafter.

That same evening, the camera again catches Paco symptomatically in the act of fantasizing about Paula when he watches her undress through her slightly opened bedroom door. This is the last we see of Paco, who is killed by Paula after he attempts to rape her and tells her that he isn't her real father. Paula's act of self-defense is followed by her mother's act of self-responsibility when she proceeds to conceal Paco's corpse instead of calling the police. The remainder of the film witnesses the transportation of his corpse to a freezer at a neighbor's restaurant she is looking after and, finally, to location in the countryside. This authoritative act, however, is not merely one that draws attention to a subversion of male power. For Raimunda, at least, the act suggests something profoundly personal; as the film's title implies, the act constitutes a "return." Steven Marsh indicates, "Raimunda 'returns' to her own highly charged past—or rather, Raimunda's past returns to her—and attempts to set right, as it were, her prior inaction as a young woman by acting decisively on behalf of her daughter" (Epps and Kakoudaki 341). In a different sense of the word that affords her more agency, Raimunda also "returns" stability to a family that has operated through unsettled interfamily tensions with Agustina's (played by Blanca Portillo) family for at least the past three years.

After Paco's death, the film departs from the city narrative that concerns Raimunda and her quasi-family nucleus to embrace a markedly different narrative that reallocates the death of Raimunda's parents to the cinematic forefront. Sole returns to the village of her upbringing to attend a funeral only to find her mother, alive and well, who was assumed to have died in the blaze. Sole's encounter with Irene (played by Carmen Maura) stages a narrative about death that, like the house fire mystery, gradually unfurls in lockstep with the film itself. Presumed dead by Sole and Raimunda, Irene explains to the latter in one of the final scenes of the film the series of events that transpired immediately before and the day of the house fire that killed her husband (Sole and Raimunda's abusive father) and Agustina's mother: Irene's notoriously adulterous husband had a relationship with Agustina's mother that Irene could no longer tolerate; Irene became enraged after learning that her husband had raped her daughter, Raimunda—thereby producing Paula—, and lit the house on fire while her husband and his mistress were sleeping inside.

Almodóvar's film clearly critiques Spanish masculinity. The men in this film, with the

ironic exception of the film crew that eat at Raimunda's restaurant, act on perverse, primal instincts solely driven by sexuality; they completely disregard female agency and the feminine voice. Of Paco, the first man that appears in the film, the audience sees and knows very little apart from his incessant and perverse sexual desires. He watches soccer, fantasizes about his "daughter," and begs Raimunda for sex. His sustenance relies on outlets for sexual desire. His unemployment, however, does not allow him to inscribe himself into the Spanish capitalist economy and suffice these desires through other means—porn, toys, prostitutes, etc.—so he must submit himself to his wife (or, perversely, his "daughter") if he is to fulfill them.

Of the other man in the film (the men in the film crew excluded), Sole and Raimunda's abusive father, the audience sees nothing, but hears plenty. Adultery, murder, and incest surround the legacy of this man who destroyed not one, but two families through his escapades. As Raimunda learns about her parents' relationship, Agustina tells her that she overheard a discussion between their mothers. "Your mother told her (Agustina's mother) she could have your father, she didn't care," Agustina says. "And she didn't envy her because he'd been born to hurt the women who loved him." Though this father's actions are similar to those of Paco—the man who supplanted his role as "father" of Paula—the agency the movie affords each is considerably unequal. Raimunda and Sole's abusive father, as Irene notes, was born to hurt the women who loved him whereas Paco hurts (or, rather, attempted to hurts) women out of a mixture of a need to suffice his sexual fantasy and an inferiority complex linked to not being Paula's biological father. In a different light, the abusive father possessed a certain free will to do as he pleased with the women in his life while Paco's psychobiological desires and pseudo-parental situation determined the actions he would take against these women. The abusive father, to boil it down further, chose to engage in incest by raping his daughter whereas Paco's attempt at incest via rape was engendered by his socio-psychological circumstances.

The two pronged critique offered by *Volver*, however, distinguishes itself from typical generalizations leveled on Spanish masculinity by offering it in two contexts: urban and rural Spain. Paco, the film indicates, embodies the branch of masculinity prevalent in an urban context while the abusive father embodies the masculine disposition found in rural Spain. There exists between these branches of Spanish masculinity, Almodóvar's film suggests, a fundamental dissonance that does not allow the discourse of rural free will to operate with the urban discourse of determinism. Both masculine discourses function on different planes—within antithetical contexts—that makes them seem to inform one

another, yet maintain a basic, unmediated schism between them. How is it that masculinity, according to Almodóvar's film, functions asymmetrically in urban and rural Spain while producing similar, if not the same, outcome?

The elemental incongruence posited by *Volver* invites Žižek's short-circuit approach in an attempt to discern the "subversive core" at the heart of the parallax gap constituted by the ideological chasm between urban and rural Spain vis-à-vis masculinity. The epistemological shift from urban Madrid to rural La Mancha, to follow Žižek's analysis of the parallax view, requires an ontological shift in masculine violence against women. *Volver* ostensibly differentiates between masculine violence against women that occurs in urban and rural Spain. In the Spanish city, Almodóvar's film suggests, the violence against women occurs seemingly haphazardly. Upon closer inspection, however, the urban brand of Spanish masculinity suffers from a culture that has already determined its increasingly subordinate and primitive state, leading Paco to act almost thoughtlessly on his instinctive sexual desires that, because of his unemployment, must be met by women. Because the women take a stand against his masculinity, Paco resorts to violence to meet these animalistic sexual instincts, leading him to attempt to rape his "daughter" and ultimately die at her mercy. The culture that determines Paco's actions is supported by naturalized institutions that have shaped masculinity throughout the course of modern Spain, including, but not limited to, the Catholic Church, soccer, and Spanish beer. These institutions, in different ways, have shaped and promoted a similar stereotypical masculine identity—a sports-oriented husband that perpetually parties—that indicates the realm of possibilities for men who, upon submission, become powerless and act according to the underlying message they collectively support. *Volver* indicates that this underlying message that unites these institutions is one solely promoting sexual desire and, eventually, incest. Raimunda's sarcasm, when she discusses their history, suggests that Paco's sexual desire may have come up earlier and that his attempted rape of her daughter, Paula, was at least somewhat predictable or at least as predictable as the message of the institutions that inform his violent masculine identity.

In rural Spanish society, however, the calculus that determines masculine violence against women fundamentally shifts toward an ontological definition rather than a culturally constructed determinism. Raimunda and Sole's abusive father—a man "born to hurt women who loved him"—may have encountered masculine definitions from institutions, such as the Catholic Church, however, his actions suggest a congenital origin that had little to do with, as Althusser would indicate, the Ideological State Apparatuses that

permeated the countryside of La Mancha where he lived and was raised (*Mapping* 100). The agency from which the abusive father profited allowed the him to maintain several relationships and manage a complex of emotions and desires. His understanding of networks of women within a rural community of La Mancha gave him the capacity to manipulate his relational position among them, leading to infidelity, rape, and incest, the last of which also occurred in the urban Spanish context.

The parallax gap in *Volver* opens a discursive link between the taboo of incest and rural, superstitious, conservative Spain. Incest, the activity that drives Irene to kill her husband and his mistress, constitutes rural Spain's subversive core. That is, incest is the prohibition upon which rural Spain relies for the continuity of superstitious beliefs—the belief that Irene's ghost is caring for Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave)—, conservative politics, and oppression of the female voice. Throughout Almodóvar's film, perceptible ideological symptoms that subtly construct the subversive core of incest surface as exclusively masculine problems. The symptoms, perceived only by women, eventually short-circuit the cultural hegemony that has long suppressed the female voice by exposing incest as the link that unites all Spanish masculinities regardless of whether they are urban or rural, chosen by free will or constructed by society, ontological or epistemological.

This article's epigraph by Sigmund Freud highlights a keen cultural observation about incest that has been underscored, in different ways, by today's anti-postmodern cultural critics that include, among others, Fredric Jameson, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and, of course, Slavoj Žižek. These critics note the lack of normative grounding upon which postmodern culture is based and, similarly, Freud implicitly notes the failure of Western society to erect cultural barriers against incest owing to the temporal distance between itself and the society of the savages. Or, to put it in Baudrillardian terms, the layers of simulacra in our society are such that incest is obscured, tolerated, and naturalized in ways with which society is comfortable. In our postmodern culture as opposed to the culture from which Freud's "savages" originate, incest no longer poses an immediate threat to the hegemonic power structure by which our culture is organized. The savages, as Freud notes, were more sensitive to incest precisely because its permission disrupted the power dynamics at play within their social structure. Viewed in this light, *Volver* is perhaps the most provocative of Almodóvar's critiques of a postmodern society that is further distancing itself from its own internal contradictions and "subversive cores." Almodóvar's films suspend judgment during their critique to elucidate these and other flaws in society. For this suspension of judgment, a view from a distance becomes crucial

for critique and the practice of metafictionality becomes imperative for cinema.

Notes

1. Horkheimer posits this difference in his 1937 essay titled "Traditional and Critical Theory," republished in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Marx's famous statement is the Eleventh Thesis of his work, "Theses on Feuerbach," which reads: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (from the original German: *Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern*).
2. The periodic groupings of Almodóvar's films are clearly and, in my view, accurately described and delineated by Leo Robson in his piece, titled "Almodóvar vs. Tarantino" for *The Times Literary Supplement*. He writes, "Almodóvar's work is a landscape of shifts, ruptures, competing currents. It is generally agreed that the films of the 1980s – culminating in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) – form a unitary mini-oeuvre; that the films following (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, 1990, *High Heels*, 1991, *Kika*, 1993) display stiffening formulae; and that a conscious change took place at some point in the 1990s, either with *Live Flesh* or *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), though arguably the seeds were planted earlier still in *High Heels*, the first of Almodóvar's films to hinge on flashbacks and the first to suggest a shift from farce and kinky, voyeuristic noir to melodrama, from Sturges and Hitchcock to Douglas Sirk." Robson also writes that Almodóvar's latest film, *Broken Embraces* (2009), "is both the final part in the quintet marked 'Late Almodóvar' and a compendium of the period's most troubling habits."
3. Žižek continues by providing historical examples of theorists engaging in a tradition of short-circuiting: "This is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion (short-circuiting philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, that is to say, economic speculation); this is what Freud and Nietzsche did with morality (short-circuiting the highest ethical notions through the lens of the unconscious libidinal economy). What such a reading achieves is not a simple 'desublimation,' a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its 'unthought,' its disavowed presuppositions and consequences" (*Parallax ix*).
4. Foucault's lecture, titled "What is Critique?," can be found in David Ingram's edited volume, *The Political*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.
5. For Hattersley's thorough article that interweaves an interview with a discussion of *Broken Embraces* and the filmmaker's career, see "Pedro Almodóvar's passion for *Broken Embraces*," *The Sunday Times* 9 August 2009.
6. Almodóvar continues, "It is a little embarrassing to talk about but definitely present. Of course, the people that I work with have become that, but there is a part of me that longs for a blood-related family. Perhaps that is madness, but nevertheless, the longing is there." For the entirety of the interview, see Rebecca Ascher-Walsh's article, "Pedro Almodóvar's 'Broken Embraces' gets personal," *Los Angeles Times* 12 December 2009.

7. For a thorough discussion of Foucault's lecture, intertwining Butler's rereading and addressing two fundamental implications of Foucault's view of critique – namely, that critique suspends judgment and, at the same time, critique also means re-composition, invention –, see Gerald Raunig, "What is Critique? Suspension and Re-Composition in Textual and Social Machines," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., London: MayFlyBooks, 2009, print or online (www.mayflybooks.org).

8. Joan Ramon Resina's book, *Barcelona's Vocation of Modernity: Rise and Decline of an Urban Image*, explores this final tension in depth vis-à-vis the Catalan capital and illustrates my reason for describing this phenomenon as a tension between center and periphery.

9. Each "historical nationality" ("nacionalidad histórica") has written in their constitution what are called Statutes of Autonomy (Estatutos de Autonomía) by which the Spanish state must comply. These statutes give limited governmental autonomy to several of Spain's Autonomous Communities (Comunidades Autónomas). As of 2009, the autonomous communities that are defined in their statutes of autonomy as "historical nationalities" and, therefore, legally recognized by the state as such are: Andalucía, Aragón, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Valencia, Galicia, and the Basque Country.

10. The Community of Madrid (Comunidad de Madrid) was declared in the 1978 Constitution an autonomous community in "the nation's interest" by a prerogative of the General Courts (Cortes Generales). All information regarding Spanish law and the 1978 Constitution was obtained from the government's web site (www.la-moncloa.es).

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