

Photography, postmemory and touch in Pedro Almodóvar's *Madres paralelas*

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Pedro Almodóvar's recent melodrama *Madres paralelas/Parallel Mothers* is haunted by the touch of photography. While the theme of motherhood is central to much of its narrative, Spain's unresolved legacy of historical memory also looms large in the film and is explored through its intermedial dialogue with photography. Produced and released in 2021, the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the film stars Penélope Cruz and Milena Smit as the two mothers to whom the title alludes. Not only is the character of Janis (played by Cruz) a photographer, the presence of family photographs is a crucial element of the mise-en-scene and drives the film's narrative. Almodóvar's most political work to date, *Parallel Mothers* is the first Spanish fiction film to make explicit reference to the thousands of unrecovered mass graves of Republican civilians killed during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Their memory is invoked through the film's deployment of real-life photographs that drive the protagonist's search for her great-grandfather's remains. Almodóvar has commented that, when writing the screenplay, all of the documentation that he consulted about the war and the mass graves was photographic.¹

This essay attempts to trace the ways in which Almodóvar's film uses photography as a means of thinking through Spain's intergenerational transfer of loss, at a time when debates around historical memory have become increasingly fraught and polarized. In particular I show the ways in which photographs – in both their analogue and digitized

¹ María Delgado, 'All about Almodóvar', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2022), p. 41.

2 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 39.

3 Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 1.

4 Gutiérrez-Albilla discusses Raimunda's rape in *Volver* as an oblique sign of the 'bodily and psychic wound perpetrated on Spain by Franco's regime' (ibid., p. 44), and the depiction of sexual abuse perpetrated by the Catholic Church in *Bad Education* as associated with the oppression and repression of the regime (ibid., pp. 127–28). Almodóvar's *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997) also makes brief reference to the suspension of civil liberties during the late Franco years in its opening sequence.

5 Alison Ribeiro de Menezes's ground-breaking *Embodying Memory in Contemporary Spain* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) examines several key 'memory boom' films made since the new millennium, along with novels, photographs, television and comics. Isabel M. Estrada's *El documental cinematográfico y televisivo contemporáneo. Memoria, sujeto y formación de la identidad democrática Española* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013) provides an analysis of historical memory in documentary and television production.

6 Jo Labanyi, 'Memory and modernity in democratic Spain: the difficulty of coming to terms with the Spanish Civil War', *Poetics Today*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2007), p. 106.

forms – perform Marianne Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory', in which family photographs are able 'transmit affect across subjects and generations'.² Drawing on the writings of Hirsch, Roland Barthes and Margaret Olin, as well as that of archaeologists working on the Civil War, I explore how the photographic archive raises questions around the materiality of memory and its subsequent mediation in visual and digital culture in contemporary Spain. More specifically, I discuss how photographs in the film elicit powerful experiences of touch – whether through the sensuous proximity and tactile surfaces of photographed objects, or the ability of a photograph itself to 'touch' and elicit emotion. Rather than simply depicting or reproducing the past, the pervasiveness of photography exceeds the limits of representation and historical knowledge, instead offering embodied encounters with images that are laden with affective meaning. Through its recourse to touch and embodiment, this essay more broadly offers a model of reading photographic and embodied film theory together as a means of exploring intergenerational trauma and legacies of war.

While Almodóvar's early-period filmmaking in the 1980s was characterized by a postmodern sense of play and an apolitical hedonism, much of his work since the turn of the millennium has been defined by a more sombre tone and a sustained engagement with recent Spanish history. In his landmark study *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, Julián Gutiérrez-Albilla investigates how several of the director's films from this period explore the traces of Spain's traumatic past. Films such as *Volver* (2006) and *Mala educación/Bad Education* (2004), for instance, articulate the 'toxic effects of these traces, as well as the transformative potential of encountering them in the present'.³ While these films make oblique references to the Franco regime, however, *Parallel Mothers* breaks new ground in its direct assessment of the psychic and material legacies of the Spanish Civil War.⁴ Almodóvar's turn to this period is in part a response, albeit somewhat belated, to a trend in Spanish cultural production that has sought to recuperate the Republican memory of the Civil War and its violent aftermath. Significant examples of this movement include the historical films *El laberinto del fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), *Los girasoles ciegos/The Blind Sunflowers* (José Luis Cuerda, 2008), *La voz dormida/The Sleeping Voice* (Benito Zambrano, 2011) and *Pa negre/Black Bread* (Agustí Villaronga, 2010), as well as the more recent *Mientras dure la guerra/While At War* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2019) and *La trinchera infinita/The Infinite Trench* (Jon Garaño, Aitor Arregi and José Mari Goenaga, 2019).⁵ These films form part of what Jo Labanyi has termed 'a memory boom' in Spain, a phenomenon she has critiqued for its lack of interest in the workings of memory and its assumption 'that the past can be unproblematically recovered'.⁶ Despite its depiction of the material 'recovery' of a mass

grave, *Parallel Mothers* nevertheless problematizes the recovery of memory in the contemporary moment through the persistence of the photographic image, whose presence points to the unknowability and unbridgeable remoteness of the past.

Rather than looking to the historical film, the narrative of *Parallel Mothers* takes its inspiration from the critically acclaimed documentary *El silencio de otros/The Silence of Others* (Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, 2018), in which Almodóvar and his brother Agustín are credited as co-producers. Along with the recent documentaries *La historia enterrada/The Buried History* (Jon Cuesta, 2018), *Los materiales/The Materials* (Los Hijos, 2010) and *Soldats anònims/Anonymous Soldiers* (Pere Vilà and Isaki Lacuesta, 2019), *The Silence of Others* addresses the institutional silence surrounding the tens of thousands of murdered Republicans, officially forgotten and publicly unmourned, who were hastily buried or abandoned in unmarked graves and ditches. As Alfredo González-Ruibal has written, ‘the defeated were, in fact, doubly absent: their bodies were concealed and their memory erased’.⁷ Filmed over a period of six years, several of the testimonials and interviews were a clear influence on the final section of *Parallel Mothers*. During the production of the documentary, Almodóvar was in contact with the most significant figures involved with the recuperation of historical memory in Spain, such as the anthropologist Francisco Exteberria and the journalist and activist Emilio Silva, president of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH).⁸ Almodóvar talks of how the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these victims – such as the character of Janis in *Parallel Mothers* – were preceded by generations who lived in ‘a pathological silence’, poignantly drawing the example of his own late father who lived through the war, while never speaking once of it to him.⁹

Writing about the children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch famously uses the term ‘postmemory’ to describe how their lives were dominated by traumatic memories that preceded their birth, memories they could not fully comprehend. An aesthetics of postmemory seeks to re-embodiment this past through artistic and creative mediation, and key examples of postmemorial films include *Shoah* (Claud Lanzmann, 1985), *Los rubios/The Blondes* (Albertina Carri, 2003), *Secretos de lucha/Secrets of the Struggle* (Maiana Bidegain, 2007) and *My Father’s Emails* (Hong Jae-Hee, 2012).¹⁰ In its focus on the transmission of memory to third- and fourth-generation children, the postmemory that *Parallel Mothers* performs is largely deferred, its structure of transmission even more removed and othered from the past. This deferral can in part be attributed to Spain’s Amnesty Law of 1977; while pardoning the majority of anti-Francoist political prisoners, this also granted an amnesty to the torturers and perpetrators of extrajudicial killings who were associated with the regime. The tacit agreement that the country should, in the name of national reconciliation and consensus, ‘move on’ from the Spanish Civil War was called the Pacto de Silencio (Pact of Silence) or

7 Alfredo González-Ruibal, ‘Absent bodies: the fate of the vanquished in the Spanish Civil War’, in Paul Cornish and Nicholas J. Saunders (eds), *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 174.

8 Established in 2000, the ARMH has since been responsible for the tracing, identification and subsequent exhumation of numerous graves across Spain. Their methodology of working is reflected in the depiction of recovery of the mass grave at the end of *Parallel Mothers*.

9 Paula Ponga, ‘Almodóvar: desenterrar la verdad’, *Fotogramas & DVD: La primera revista de cine*, vol. 74, no. 2136 (2021), p. 62.

10 For recent scholarship on postmemory in film, see Geoffrey Maguire, *The Politics of Postmemory: Violence and Victimhood in Contemporary Argentine Culture* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Dong-yon Koh, *The Korean War and Postmemory Generation: Contemporary Korean Arts and Films* (London: Routledge, 2021); Cara Levey, ‘Of HIJOS and Niños: revisiting postmemory in post-dictatorship Uruguay’, *History and Memory* (2014), vol. 26, no. 2 (2014), pp. 5–39.

the Pacto de Olvido (Pact of Forgetting) – thus the vanquished largely continue to be defined by their ‘double absence’ to this day.

Read within its immediate historical context, *Parallel Mothers* assumes a particular urgency that requires further scholarly attention, one whose recourse to touch serves to mobilize political affect. That the narrative of *Parallel Mothers* begins in 2016, and thus during the right-wing Partido Popular’s administration under Mariano Rajoy, is especially significant. As Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez and Adrian Shubert write, the PP’s electoral victory in 2011 brought about an ‘official amnesia that affected memory in a premeditated and measurable way’.¹¹ If Janis and the other relatives from her village are seen to encounter setbacks in recovering the remains of their ancestors, this is in no small part due to the PP’s decision to withdraw all state subsidies for the exhumation of mass graves when they came to power. While this act was carried out under the guise of a raft of austerity measures following 2008 economic crisis, it more specifically served to defund the Ley de Memoria Histórica (Law of Historical Memory), which had been created under the centre-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) in 2007.¹² The decision came under intense criticism from the UN Human Rights Council, and to date the vast majority of these graves have yet to be exhumed.¹³ The recent meteoric rise of Vox, a far-right political party that has become the third largest in parliament, along with a concomitant polarization in Spain over memory debates, provided Almodóvar with another impetus for making the film.

The action begins *in media res* with the flash and click of photography, as Janis takes a series of pictures of a prominent forensic archaeologist, Arturo (Israel Elejalde). Janis conducts the photoshoot authoritatively: she commands Arturo to look at her, and then to look at the lens. From the outset her gaze is thus merged with that of the camera lens; she is established as the film’s centre of consciousness, a consciousness that is shaped by photography. The action is swiftly integrated into the pop-art-style opening credits, where Janis and her camera become transcribed into a series of black-and-white images on celluloid film (figures 1 and 2).¹⁴ The striking appearance of the film strip, scribbled over with bold red ink, establishes the film’s fascination with the ontology of film material – a motif that can also be seen in Almodóvar’s *Bad Education* and *Abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009). As well as inviting a contemplation of surface and texture, the appearance of analogue photography also establishes the film’s concern with historical memory. The materiality of the celluloid strip intimately connects Janis to the memory of her great-grandfather Antonio, who as we soon discover was also a photographer. The continuity between the two generations, separated by a distance of some 70 years, is thus mediated by the photographic image. After the shoot has ended, the camera tracks from the placement of some kitsch ceramic skulls on the coffee table to Janis and Arturo conversing flirtatiously. We quickly learn that Arturo was invited to the photoshoot as Janis hopes that he can help

11 Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez and Adrian Shubert, ‘Sites without memory and memory without sites: on the failure of the public memory of the Spanish Civil War’, in Alison Ribeiro de Menezes, Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez and Adrian Shubert (eds), *Public Humanities and the Spanish Civil War: Connected and Contested Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 21.

12 Passed in November 2007, The Law of Historical Memory served to recognize victims of both sides of the war, to offer subsidies for the tracing and exhumation of victims of Nationalist violence, and to provide an official condemnation of the Franco regime.

13 Francisco Ferrándiz, ‘From tear to pixel: political correctness and digital emotions in the exhumation of mass graves from the Civil War’, in L. Elena Delgado, Pura Fernández and Jo Labanyi (eds), *Engaging the Emotions in Spanish Culture and History* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), p. 244.

14 The aesthetic of the opening sequence was inspired by the work of New York photographer Richard Avedon.



Figs 1 and 2. The opening shots from *Madres paralelas/Parallel Mothers* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2021).

to carry out the identification and exhumation of her great-grandfather's remains. Like the physical trace of the celluloid, the traces of Antonio's remains similarly emphasize the layered materiality of memory – and, most significantly, the film's underlying desire for the tactile.

Janis's intimate connection to her great-grandfather is further established through the frequent presence of his own photographs in the film. Janis shows Arturo an image of Antonio's self-portrait, along with the photographs of his ten friends from the village, all of which are saved as digital files on her desktop computer. We learn that these were the final photographs Antonio took before the war broke out; all of these friends would very soon be rounded up and executed by Nationalists. Known as *sacas* or *paseos*, these types of murders, where the victims were denied any kind of judicial proceedings before their hasty execution, took place frequently throughout the Civil War and the early years of the regime. According to Hirsch, photographic images, and in particular family photographs that are passed down from one generation to another, are especially powerful media in postmemory. As 'ghostly

15 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 32.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

18 Cited in Pedro Almodóvar, *Madres paralelas* (Madrid: Reservoir Books, 2021), p. 218.

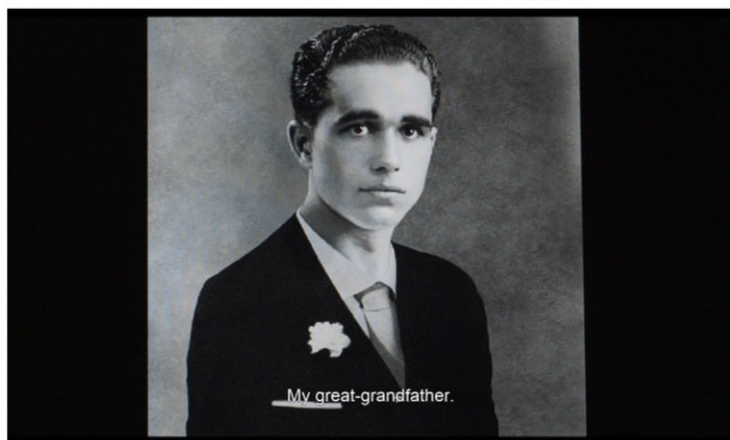
19 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Classics, 1993), p. 33.

20 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 5.

revenants from an irretrievably lost past world',¹⁵ family photographs offer a powerful attempt to bridge our separation from that world, offering a physical proximity and familiarity that public images of atrocity deny. Laying emphasis on the tangible dimension of photographs, Hirsch further writes that 'they enable us, in the present, not only to see and *touch* that past, but also to try to re-animate it by undoing the finality of the photographic "take"'.¹⁶

Hirsch's theory draws its inspiration from Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, where he recounts how his close attachment to a photograph of his late mother arises from the indescribable emotion he experiences when seeing her looking back at him. This mutual exchange of looks is defined by Hirsch as an 'affiliative' and 'familial' look, which she characterizes as 'not the look of a subject looking at an object, but a mutual look of a subject looking back at an object who is a subject looking (back) at an object'.¹⁷ A close-up two-shot of the faces of Janis and Arturo (figure 3), softly illuminated by the computer screen as they look intently at the portraits, is followed by an eye-line match cut to the photographs of the great-grandfather (figure 4) and the other victims. The subjects are mostly held in frontal poses with severe expressions on their faces, directly addressing the camera and confronting us with their gaze. As Alberto Iglesias, the composer of the film's score, has commented in the director's notes: 'This is a film full of eyes that look, not only the actors, [but] also the photos that seem to be looking at us'.¹⁸

In describing how the viewer and the photograph are connected haptically, Barthes writes that 'a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze'.¹⁹ The haptic motif of the umbilical cord is subsequently crucial to Hirsch's theorization of postmemory and the affiliative look, as it connects the materialization of first-generation memory to second-generation postmemory. Hirsch writes that 'through the image of the umbilical cord [...] Barthes makes the photograph – taking the picture, developing it, printing and looking at it, reading it and writing about it – inherently familial and material, akin to the very processes of life and death'.²⁰ While the umbilical cord illuminates the film's fascination with the photographic image, it also intersects thematically with its broader exploration of maternity. This relationship is vividly evoked through the Spanish poster for the film, which was controversially banned by Instagram only to be swiftly reinstated after a furious backlash. At the centre of the poster is an image of an eye, with a woman's nipple standing in for the iris and pupil, thereby connecting the act of seeing – and by extension, photography – with maternity. A drop of milk that falls from the nipple closely resembles a tear, alluding to the film's underlying concern with loss and grief. The theme of maternity is further established sonically in the early moments of the film, when the rhythm of the orchestral score is marked out by two tambourines. Iglesias comments that the tambourines represent 'vital force and parallelism between the two mothers', explaining that the instrument has been



Figs 3 and 4. Janis and Arturo study the photo of her great-grandfather, in *Parallel Mothers*.

21 Cited in Sean Wilson, 'Alberto Iglesias locates the uniquely feminine sound of Pedro Almodóvar's *Parallel Mothers*', *Spitfire Audio*, <<https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/alberto-iglesias-locates-the-uniquely-feminine-sound-of-almodovars-parallel-mothers>> accessed 27 September 2023.

traditionally played by women in Spain, as well as in other cultures of Africa and Asia.²¹

The parallel between Janis and Ana is established when, after an abrupt ellipsis in the narrative, they end up on the same maternity ward some nine months after Janis and Arturo first had sex. On discovering that they are both single mothers, the two quickly strike up an intense friendship in which Janis, some 20 years Ana's senior, takes on a nurturing and sisterly role. Wearing identical hospital gowns, their initial encounters are depicted through the use of symmetrical editing, framing and composition – a pattern that is developed further as the film cross-cuts between the two women giving birth at the same time, their positions on the beds mirroring one another as they undergo the progressive stages of labour. As a visual evocation of the film's geometric title, the formal play here vividly points to how Janis's and Ana's experiences of motherhood will henceforth run in parallel. Yet as the audience soon discovers, these are not so much parallel as they are intersecting lines: unbeknownst to the women, their daughters have been

accidentally swapped at birth, an act that will force their lives to become inextricably bound up in each other.

Janis's maternal warmth provides a foil to the coolness of Ana's mother, Teresa (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón), a wealthy and self-absorbed actress. While Janis and Ana are frequently framed together in two-shots throughout the film, Teresa and Ana are more often placed in separate frames, underscoring the mother's emotional distance from the daughter. Unlike Janis, Teresa is from a conservative family that prefers not to rake over the wounds from the war, a viewpoint that Ana unreflexively repeats to Janis in a dramatic confrontation in the kitchen. Ana's ignorance of her country's past is a symptom of what Feliu Torriela calls the 'historical void' in Spanish classrooms, whereby the Spanish Civil War is rarely, if ever, taught at secondary school.²² The intersecting lines of maternity therefore bring two Spanish political universes into confrontation, a device that restages the ever-increasing polarization between *las dos Españas* (the two Spains), whose respective interpretations of the country's recent history tend to run parallel to each other. Reflecting this position, Teresa's role in *Doña Rosita la soltera/Doña Rosita the Spinster* – the last play professionally produced by Federico García Lorca, before he was killed by the Nationalists and abandoned in a ditch whose precise whereabouts are still unknown – effectively brings to the fore a cultural icon whose status has been subject to political contestation in Spanish cultural memory. As Maria Delgado has shown, the poet and playwright has become the symbolic focal point for the public face of the *desaparecidos* (missing Republicans), and his remains 'haunt the national imaginary in Spain'.²³ If his unrecovered body has been a powerful symbol for the descendants of Republican victims, Lorca has also been claimed by the right as a national playwright and poet.²⁴

Janis's decision to raise her baby without the help of Arturo continues her family's tradition of single motherhood. Significantly, this lineage of matriarchy is suggested through the arrangement of photographic portraits mounted on the wall of Janis's apartment. She explains her family's history to Ana as they stand drinking wine in front of the framed portraits, their 'affiliative look' again suggested as the photographic subjects appear to return the gaze. A recent photograph of baby Cecilia appears alongside individual portraits of the great-grandparents, grandmother and mother – the latter depicted as a tousle-haired hippy, carrying the baby Janis in a sling. Gesturing towards this photograph, Janis explains that her mother died of a drug overdose at the age of 27, just like her heroine Janis Joplin, leaving her to be raised by her grandmother. Shown in a series of extreme close-ups, the photograph used here is 'Les Festes Hippies' (1976), taken by the Catalan photojournalist Oriol Maspons, who was documenting the Ibizan counterculture at the time. As they talk, Joplin's cover of the jazz standard 'Summertime' is played diegetically in the background, dramatically rising in volume as Ana and Janis unexpectedly begin to

22 Maria Feliu-Torruella, 'The Spanish Civil War in the classroom: from absence to didactic potential', in Ribeiro de Menezes, Cazorla-Sánchez and Shubert (eds), *Public Humanities and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 225.

23 Maria Delgado, 'Memory, silence, and democracy in Spain: Federico García Lorca, the Spanish Civil War, and the Law of Historical Memory', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2015), pp. 177–96.

24 Carla Marcantonio, 'Digging up the future: Almodóvar's Parallel Mothers', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3 (2022), p. 43.

kiss. Towards the end of the film, the portraits of both the mother and grandmother are seen again, but this time within the bedroom in Janis's house in the village – an inheritance that, like photographs and the knowledge of Antonio's untimely death, has similarly been passed down through the women. As Janis falls into bed with Arturo (she tells him the bed also belonged to her mother and grandmother), the song 'Summertime' is reprised non-diegetically in the orchestral score, here transposed into another key. The song in both scenes serves as a powerful *Leitmotiv* for the film's exploration of longing and loss, one whose inheritance is depicted as singularly female.

The female line of transmission here is illustrative of how, according to the archaeologist Layla Renshaw, the mass killing of Republican men left behind thousands of matriarchal households, in which newly bereaved women were responsible for the survival of their children and dependants.²⁵ Renshaw observes how investigators and oral historians in Spain have noted the profound and almost unutterable forms of grief, guilt and anger being uncovered amongst the children of Republican families, particularly when the focus of testimony has moved onto the mothers and grandmothers who raised them.²⁶ If the 'memory' of Antonio's suffering has been transmitted across four generations of women, so too have a shared life-force and resilience, a trait that can be seen in Janis's steely determination and independence. Elsewhere Janis is seen reading, on her computer, an article from the newspaper *El País* about a mass grave in Alicante, whose headline states that the real heroines of the Civil War were the widows of the victims of Nationalist reprisals. In an echo of Janis's search in the film, the article is accompanied by a photograph of a woman standing next to a disinterred grave, holding two black-and-white photographic portraits of her grandfather towards the camera.

Digital technology is omnipresent in the film, with the screens of Janis's computer, iPhone or baby monitor appearing in several scenes. The digitized archive of analogue photographs taken by the great-grandfather, along with the photograph of his burial site on Janis's computer desktop, illustrates how the transmission of collective memory has in recent years been shaped by the role of digital technology. The photographs are thus examples of what Ferrándiz calls the 'digital memoryscape' in the historical memory movement, both in Spain and globally.²⁷ He writes that 'the arrival and increasing accessibility of digital technologies have radically changed and accelerated the memory-construction process with regard to the Civil War, projecting it into the global arena'.²⁸ Indeed, Janis's digital archive of photographs has been shared and recirculated among the other members of the village's local Association of Historical Memory; as she tells Arturo in an early scene, the archive contains a detailed dossier on the mass grave – information that will be crucial to its subsequent identification and exhumation at the end of the film. The way in which the memory of Janis's community is shaped by digital technology is an example of what

25 Layla Renshaw, 'Unrecovered objects: narratives of dispossession, slow violence and survival in the investigation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2020), p. 437.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Ferrándiz, 'From tear to pixel', p. 252.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Cited in Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 22.

30 Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 2.

31 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xi.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Andrew Hoskins has termed ‘connective memory’, whereby memory is constituted ‘through the flux of contacts between people and digital technologies and media’.²⁹ The computer screen also becomes a crucial site of dramatic revelation later in the film, this time relating to the identification of the daughter, Cecilia. With a click and a scroll of the mouse, Janis opens the results of the DNA maternity tests that confirm that she is not Cecilia’s biological mother.

Cecilia’s image, like that of the great-grandfather, is frequently mediated through digital technology. Not only is her image revealed on the baby monitor in several cutaway shots, but Janis takes her photograph at several points throughout the film. When Janis, devastated, discovers that her biological daughter, Anita, has died from cot death, she looks intently at a photograph of the baby on Ana’s iPhone. An extreme close-up shot of the iPhone screen fills the frame, as Janis gently enlarges the image of the baby’s mouth and eyes with her fingers, as if it were a caress, almost an attempt to reanimate her image with touch. The script describes Janis as being ‘immersed’ in the photograph, where she finally recognizes Arturo in the baby’s face. The close interplay between sight and touch encountered in Janis’s gesture here is a vivid example of what Olin calls ‘tactile looking’, a term she uses to explore the intimate, often physical, relationship that is forged between viewers and photographs. If Janis’s physical attachment to Anita’s image is a literal illustration of how photographs are able, in Olin’s words, to ‘keep those who have died within our grasp’,³⁰ it also recalls the ‘affiliative look’ generated by the great-grandfather’s photographs. Like his black-and-white portrait, Anita’s photograph now also suggests both proximity and absence, haptic attachment and the impossibility of recuperation.

Olin’s ‘tactile looking’ provides a photographic counterpart to the ‘haptic visuality’ described by Laura U. Marks, who in exploring the sensory reception of cinema shows how the film image can powerfully elicit the sense of touch. Described by Marks ‘as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes’,³¹ haptic visuality arises when the viewer finds themselves immersed in the distinctive surface and texture of the image, or the materiality of the film itself, in particular with instances of degraded film stock or video. Through the repeated presence of the glossy touchscreens and the textured grain of analogue photographs, *Parallel Mothers* similarly offers up a series of haptically charged surfaces, several of which are presented in extreme close-up. Marks shows that memory can be encoded in objects through touch: ‘Senses that are closer to the body, like the sense of touch, are capable of storing powerful memories that are lost to the visual’.³² Marks does not seek to deny the power of vision per se, but to interrogate the limits of visual knowledge, thereby exploring what the visual archive cannot tell. Significantly, the instances of haptic visuality in the film, as discussed, are also those that most powerfully evoke a structure of loss and transgenerational transmission. Through the tension between looking and touching, the photographs point to the impossibility of recuperating the

33 Cited in Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 39.

34 Olin refers to this relation as a 'performative index' or an 'index of identification', in *Touching Photographs*, p. 69.

35 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 38.

36 Almodóvar became fascinated by Vieitez's photography after seeing an exhibition of his work – a huge archive of photographs in sealed boxes that had been discovered by his daughter after his death. His photographs were taken in his native rural Galicia, with many originally commissioned for the identity cards that had been made compulsory by the Franco regime.

37 For monographs on the films of Almodóvar that discuss the influence of melodrama on his work, see Paul Julian Smith, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (London: Verso, 1994); Gutiérrez-Albilla, *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma*; Ann Davies, *Pedro Almodóvar* (London: Grant and Cutler, 2007); Peter Evans, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996); Marvin D'Lugo, *Pedro Almodóvar* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Mark Allinson, *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar* (London: IB Tauris, 2001).

past; as such, they serve not to reconstruct or narrate history but instead to enable a re-embodiment of affect. Hirsch, in exploring this, draws on Jill Bennett, who writes that 'Images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to *touch* the viewer who *feels* rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion'.³³

As doubts grow over whether Janis and Arturo are the biological parents of Cecilia, the indexical status of the photographs in which the baby appears emerges as a site of uncertainty. Janis nonetheless continues to take pictures of her obsessively – in one scene even deciding to delay carrying out a pre-ordered DNA test in order to spend more time photographing her on the bed. Olin has shown how 'tactile looking' can often be mistakenly diagnosed, whereby the viewer's overwhelming desire to be 'touched' by the photograph can lead them to misidentify with the image – in other words, to see what they *need and desire* to see, rather than what is indexically accurate. As such, Olin shifts the emphasis away from the relationship between the photograph and its subject, and instead onto that between the photograph and its viewer.³⁴ Hirsch subsequently writes that 'photographs thus become screens – spaces of projection and approximation, and of protection', which tell us more about our desires than the world they depict.³⁵ If the opening credits, in which celluloid photographs fill the entirety of screen, serve as a *mise-en-abyme* for this projection, then so too does the film's deployment of real-life photographs. Antonio's photographs are depicted by a series of portraits taken by the late Galician photographer Virxilio Vieitez.³⁶ That these photographs were in fact taken during the late 1950s and early 1960s – and thus over 20 years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War – does not detract from their affective power, with which they eloquently serve as 'screens of projection and approximation' for Almodóvar's fictional world.

The tactile and affective role of photography more broadly becomes an integral part of the film's melodramatic mode of expression. After Janis gives birth, Almodóvar returns to the familiar melodramatic territory of the domestic sphere, with much of the central action contained within her Madrid apartment.³⁷ Largely devoid of the complex camera set-ups and movement found in his other films, *Parallel Mothers* is more austere and pared down in its construction – something owing in no small part to the chronic mobility issues from which Almodóvar was suffering during the shoot, as well as the constraints of filming during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the domestic sphere has occupied a central role in his previous female-centred films, such as *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of Nervous Breakdown* (1988) and *Volver*, here it is presented as progressively more claustrophobic and hermetic as the narrative advances, the confined use of space more readily recalling the chamber films of Ingmar Bergman than Almodóvar's earlier work. Indeed, the film's limited spatial economy lends itself to expressing Janis's increasing sense of isolation, the intensity of her emotions

frequently signalled by the use of *chiaroscuro* and dramatic lighting. In one of the film's most visually striking moments, a profile shot depicts Janis standing silently in front of Julio Romero Torres's 'La Primavera', a painting depicting two reclining women next to large, overflowing bowl of fruit (figure 5). While the painting invokes the themes of female kinship and sensuality, one of the female subjects of the portrait remains out of the cinematic frame – a visual symbol of Janis's introspective state of mind and failure to communicate with Ana.

As is typical of an Almodóvar film, the production designer Antxón Gómez describes the set of the apartment as 'another character',³⁸ and the carefully selected collection of tasteful modernist furniture, ornaments and ceramics (including iconic designs by Pierre Jeanneret, Vista Alegre and Marcel Brueur), paintings (Joaquín Sorolla) and photographs (some by Irving Penn) serve as markers of Janis's high level of cultural capital. Through the deployment of deep-focus cinematography (Almodóvar's regular director of photography José Luis Alcaine used an unusually high diaphragm for the shoot),³⁹ the decor is held as sharply in relief as the actors. In discussing the metaphorical significance of objects, surfaces and furniture in Almodóvar's films, Mark Allinson draws attention to Thomas Elsaesser's influential article on Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, whose domestic melodramas similarly influenced the director's own filmmaking.⁴⁰ Elsaesser attributes melodrama's sophistication to the 'restricted scope for external action [...] and because everything, as Sirk said, happens "inside"'.⁴¹ For much of the middle section of *Parallel Mothers*, the 'external action' concerning the recovery of the mass grave tends to recede into the background, as the film homes in on the inner emotional world of Janis, silently navigating the loss of her child. Yet the significance of historical memory is never entirely far from view, in as much as the theme is sublimated onto the intimate space of the home.

As an illustration of what Elsaesser terms the 'aesthetics of the domestic',⁴² the plastic expressiveness and formal complexity of the film's mise-en-scene reveal the broader social and historical tensions that lie beyond the apartment. Despite Janis's urbane cultural tastes, her Madrid apartment betrays a nostalgia for rural Spain, and specifically for the village where her great-grandfather's remains are buried. Here the ubiquity of technological devices sits in contrast with the natural stone floors, green- and turquoise-coloured walls, the ceramics of Sargadelos (whose design is strongly associated with rural Galicia) and the apartment's central patio, festooned with plants and featuring a lemon tree. Bathed in sunlight, this inviting patio not only bears a close resemblance to one that belongs to her cousins in the village, but also appears to be a homage to Pepa's Madrid balcony in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, where the greenery and the menagerie of animals similarly evoke the rural within the urban. The apartment's location within the cosmopolitan neighbourhood of Conde Duque, a *barrio* popular with well-heeled creative professionals like herself, more broadly reflects what Gómez describes as the film's 'dialogue between

38 Cited in Carlos Primo, "La decoración es un personaje más": los interiores madrileños de Almodóvar, *El País*, 16 October 2021, <<https://elpais.com/icon-design/arquitectura/2021-10-16/la-decoracion-es-un-personaje-mas-los-interiores-madrilenos-de-almodovar.html>> accessed 27 September 2023.

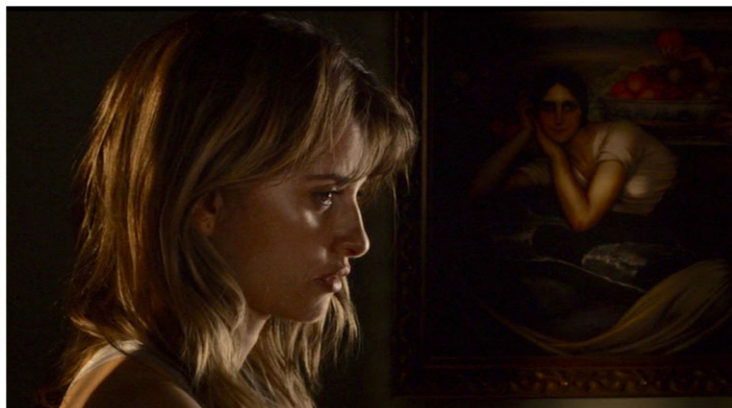
39 Cited in Almodóvar, *Madres paralelas*, p. 214.

40 Mark Allinson, 'Mimesis and diegesis: Almodóvar and the limits of melodrama', in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 147.

41 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury: observations on the family melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), p. 52.

42 *Ibid.*

Fig. 5. Janis's and Ana's lack of communication is reflected in the painting, in *Parallel Mothers*.



43 Cited in Primo, “Le decoración es un personaje más”.

44 Labanyi, ‘Memory and modernity in democratic Spain’, p. 100.

45 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

46 ‘Directo Con Pedro Almodóvar’, *SensaCine*, 18 October 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rY45V9HKF4>> accessed 26 September 2023.

47 Elsaesser, ‘Tales of sound and fury’, p. 66.

modernity and tradition, the present day and historical memory’.⁴³ This dialogue is nowhere more apparent than in the framed family portraits on the wall: as affective and symbolic objects, their presence serves to connect domesticity to the public sphere, the personal to the political. Writing about postmemory in the context of democratic Spain, Labanyi has observed that ‘the “affiliative look” generated by family photos also reminds us of the importance of the private sphere in keeping alive the memory of what cannot be discussed in public’.⁴⁴ Labanyi’s observation has a particularly urgent resonance with the film’s immediate political context, given the conservative government’s suppression of public debate around the remembrance of the unrecovered Republican dead. Silenced within the public sphere, the anxieties surrounding historical memory thus resurface in the film’s melodramatic mode of expression, where Janis’s emotional crisis frequently ‘speaks’ for the broader social crises at play.

If for Barthes, the photograph is indescribable,⁴⁵ then the melodramatic mode has been similarly theorized in terms of the failure of language and the impossibility of speech. Almodóvar has commented on the important role that silence plays in *Parallel Mothers*,⁴⁶ an element that is most explicitly felt in Janis’s frequent absence of dialogue, particularly in the moments when she is depicted alone. While the emphasis on silence evokes the ‘silenced’ memory of the mass graves, it can also be understood as a residual symptom of trauma – a motif that can similarly be witnessed in the female characters of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, 1959), *India Song* (Marguerite Duras, 1975), *Persona* (Ingrid Bergman, 1966) and *El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (Víctor Erice, 1973). An illustration of Elsaesser’s description of ‘silence made eloquent’,⁴⁷ Janis’s muteness is substituted by the heightened emotionality and complexity of Iglesias’s orchestral score. Lending expressive colour to Janis’s unspoken emotional world, the score shifts fluidly between a simple string quintet to a larger string orchestra, joined occasionally by

48 Cited in Almodóvar, *Madres paralelas*, p. 215.

49 Ibid.

50 Delgado, 'All about Almodóvar', p. 42.

51 Marcantonio, 'Digging up the future', p. 45.

52 Paloma Aguilar and Leigh A. Payne. 'Unsettling bones, unsettling accounts: Spanish perpetrators' confessions to violence', in Ofelia Ferrán and Lisa Hilbink (eds), *Legacies of Violence in Contemporary Spain* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 168.

woodwind and piano. Iglesias cites as a key inspiration the composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold,⁴⁸ whose expansive orchestras greatly influenced the sonic texture of the classical Hollywood scores of the 1930s and 1940s. Korngold's legacy can be heard during the close-ups of Janis as she discovers the results of the maternity tests and subsequently keeps them secret – moments that, according to Iglesias, provoke 'a more dense and complex sphere of sounds' in the score.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, when Arturo and Janis end up in bed with each other, the music recalls the expressionistic scores of Bernard Herrmann. A cutaway exterior shot of curtains billowing out in the wind is accompanied by an ominous *ostinato* played on violas, a theme that simultaneously conveys both passion and danger.

The mass grave is finally visualized in the last section of the film, when Arturo has finally been given the go-ahead for the exhumation, three years after their initial encounter. Almodóvar has commented that the approach in the final 15 minutes of the film is almost like a documentary.⁵⁰ Indeed, in its methodical representation of Arturo's interviews with the relatives, DNA sampling and identification of the remains, this section of the film is most explicitly informed by the material in *The Silence of Others*. In a reversal of the opening sequence, Arturo is now the photographer and the subject of the look, painstakingly documenting the process of exhumation with his camera.⁵¹ Despite the supposed scientific detachment of forensic photography, Arturo is visibly moved by the process. The site of the open grave, dug in the shape of a horizontal cross, is depicted through several high-angle shots. As the excavation progresses, overhead tracking shots reveal the gradual uncovering of the remains, the physical proximity of the camera to the ground emphasizing the tactile materiality of removing the earth and exposing the bones. As in previous depictions of photographs of Janis's great-grandfather and the baby, the haptic visuality of image provides a sensuous encounter with traces of the past. During the process of excavation, Arturo's camera registers the evidence of the material suffering of the victims, whose fractured craniums reveal gunshot wounds and whose skeletal hands still retain the barbed wire with which they were tied. As Aguilar and Payne observe, it has been the recent exhumation of the graves led by private associations such as the one for which Arturo works, and not the Spanish state, that have 'exposed the skeletal framework of brutal, extralegal, and illegitimate violence perpetrated during the Civil War'.⁵²

After the exhumation is complete, the victims' relatives walk silently to the side of the grave. The camera tracks back to register them all together in a long shot, with Janis's friend Elena (Rossy de Palma) and another woman carrying blown-up copies of the portraits taken by the great-grandfather. If the framing here eloquently situates Janis's individual story within a broader community united by a moment of deferred grief, the prominence of the portraits reminds us of the connective role that photography plays in shaping and sustaining this

53 Olin, *Touching Photographs*, pp. 1–2.

54 Layla Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss: Memory, Materiality and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), p. 140.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

56 Almodóvar comments to this effect in *Madres paralelas*, p. 212.

57 Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss*, p. 157.

58 Ferrándiz, 'From tear to pixel', p. 258.

community. As discussed above, through photograph's ability to 'touch' us, Olin shows that photographs do much more than represent the world; they 'establish and maintain relationships between people', thereby helping distant relatives and families to stay close and to keep *in touch*.⁵³ The scene cuts to a tracking shot of the exhumed grave, where the skeletal remains have finally been identified by numbers. Layla Renshaw has written of how photographs are key to conferring a 'powerful sense of agency' to such remnants, so that rather than just materializing bodily remains, the archaeologist manages to materialize *individuals*.⁵⁴ This process of individuation is further aided through the uncovering of intimate artefacts that belonged to the victims. The typical significance with which objects are attributed in Almodóvar's treatment of *mise-en-scène* here takes on an urgent political register, as we witness how the recovery of a false eye, a pair of clogs and a rattle becomes crucial to the process of identification. These are examples of what Renshaw calls markers of 'ordinariness and bodily intimacy', which, like the photographic portraits that also populate the film, foster a fuller sense of the individual who owned the objects.⁵⁵ The (post) memory of these objects features heavily in the interviews with relatives that Arturo carries out in the days before the excavation, the script here drawing on real-life testimonials.⁵⁶ Janis's two second cousins (and granddaughters of Antonio) recall their grandmother's memory of Arturo wearing clogs. He did not have time to change his footwear, one of them adds, because he was taken by the Falangists so suddenly. The fact that victims were in possession of these kind of mundane objects at the moment of death 'emphasises the dramatic insertion of extraordinary horror and violence into the ordinary fabric of existence'.⁵⁷ This feeling of suddenness is conveyed here by the rhythm of the editing, as an unexpectedly abrupt cut from this scene is immediately followed by a shot of the village at night, evoking the time at which the victims were rounded up.

In the film's moving final scene, archaeologists and some of the relatives lie in the empty graves, their bodies held in the approximate positions in which the skeletons were found. This scene recreates a ritual that has been carried out by relatives after the completion of some exhumations in Spain. As Ferrándiz has noted, these rituals 'encourage emotional identification with exhumed victims', and in occupying the very same place and position of the dead they serve to 'reverse the transition from flesh to bone, of returning to the very moment the grave was created'.⁵⁸ Like the tactile and postmemorial acts of viewing family photographs throughout the film, theorized by Hirsch, their act here more literally suggests the search for an embodied link to an un-lived past. The transgenerational dimension of this emotional identification is evoked for one last time just a few moments earlier, as the three-year old Cecilia is depicted looking down at the grave, rubbing her eyes with her hands as if to imitate the crying of the accompanying adults.

That the final materialization of the mass grave provides the film with a cathartic climax, as well as a resolution of sorts, might be regarded as

an overly tidy simplification of the way in which historical memory works. Yet as I have shown, the persistence of the photographic throughout the film throws the neatness of this recovery into doubt, given its frequently ambiguous, unstable and tactile status. In a direct echo of the opening sequence, the final credits run against the image of a strip of celluloid film. Like the layers of the archaeological site that the viewer has just witnessed, the analogue photograph brings to the fore questions of materiality and presence, while again evoking the haptic intimacy of touch. Yet while the bones of the dead have been recovered, the photograph rematerializes the past at the same time as it also reminds us of its absence, for the subjects in the photographs that populate the film are no longer.

The end of the film is supposed to take place three years later, in 2019, when the centre-left PSOE have returned to government. At the same time as Almodóvar was writing the screenplay, the government was debating the shape of the newly proposed Democratic Memory Bill, which sought to establish an official register of Republican victims and make the government responsible for identifying them, as well as to ensure that schoolchildren are taught about the Civil War and the dictatorship. Yet this ambition has run into fraught conflict with the far-right Vox party's revisionist history, which blames the Second Republic for starting the Civil War – a 'parallel' narrative that has increasingly gained ground. *Parallel Mothers* shows us that while the indexicality of the image should not be taken for granted, the affective power of photography to touch and mobilize in moments of political and social crisis has never been so urgent.