



# Bodily Expressivity and Creaturely Life in Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*

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The opening sequence of Pedro Almodóvar's film *Talk to Her* (2002) includes no talking, only music, seemingly irrational movement, dancing—blindly—and tears. On stage, a robust red-headed woman and a pale, grey-haired woman cast their bodies around a space filled with haphazardly strewn chairs. The younger woman's dancing often resembles elegant running, and her quick, athletic movements compel an anxious male performer to thrust chairs out of her way as she crisscrosses the space. The smaller, older female dancer follows and repeats her movements a few steps behind. In contrast to the red-haired woman's stricken expressions and closed eyes, the older woman appears serene. Even while mimicking violent motions—as when the younger dancer flings herself against a padded wall—the grey-haired woman moves



**Fig. 1** (opposite) Performance of Pina Bausch's *Cafe Müller* (1978), showing male performer moving chairs out of female dancer's path (2:32).

**Fig. 2** (this page) Performance of Pina Bausch's *Cafe Müller* (1978), showing repetition of red-haired dancer's movements by older dancer (3:05).

in a quieter, more delicate manner. Are the man's actions helpful, clearing a path for the red-haired dancer? Or does his "assistance" force her into a specific path through the maze of chairs? Is the younger woman sorrowful and is the grey-haired dancer at peace, or does the former's intense expressivity signify a fierceness of will that the passive older woman lacks? In the audience of *Cafe Müller*, two men sit side-by-side watching the performance. One cries silently, while the other shifts his attention back and forth from the dancers on stage to the tear-stained face of the man in the audience beside him.

This sequence introduces themes that recur throughout the film: doubling and repetition, performing women and spectatorial men, nonverbal, bodily expressivity, and the indeterminacy of communication without words. In light of the title's admonition to "talk with her,"<sup>1</sup> viewers may expect the film to insinuate that bodily expressions provide only precarious knowledge about other beings in contrast to seemingly more transparent modes of verbal exchange. Yet throughout the film, talking turns out to be a tragically insufficient condition for reciprocal communication. Nurse and caretaker Benigno constantly talks "with" the comatose dancer Alicia, interacting with her as if her motionless body and unwilling facial expressions convey rational

<sup>1</sup> The film's Spanish title, *Hable con ella*, is best translated as the command, "Talk with her."

and emotive responses. Early in the film, Almodóvar acclimates viewers to Benigno's manner such that they come to trust Benigno's confidence in Alicia's expressivity. The film then reveals the problematic limits of this disposition, as Benigno assumes Alicia's wordless consent to partake in sexual activity. On the other hand, journalist Marco's verbal interactions with his bullfighter lover Lydia likewise do not guarantee communication. Before Lydia plunges into a coma, Marco fails to comprehend her facial expressions, bodily cues, and verbalized desires to convey the news that she has reunited with her previous lover and plans to leave Marco.

A film about talkative men and their failures to communicate with the women for whom they care, *Talk to Her* interrogates the balance between corporeal and discursive modes of interaction. Formally and narratively, the film argues that expressivity can be both bodily and verbal; however, neither mode proves sufficient for mutual understanding and ethical engagement with others.

### Embodied Women and Talkative Men

In analyzing the aesthetic and ethical conflicts that *Talk to Her* stages, this essay draws upon philosopher Eric Santner's notions of creaturely life and neighbor love. Creaturely life, according to Santner, is "the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference," a condition produced by "exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity."<sup>2</sup> This paper sets to one side the political aspect of Santner's discussion to focus on the radically altered social bonds that emerge as modern medicine sustains human existence in a comatose condition. For Santner, creaturely life is "a dimension of human existence called into being," when "a piece of the human world presents itself as a surplus that both demands and resists symbolization, that is both inside and outside the 'symbolic order.'"<sup>3</sup> For Santner, creaturely life is key to understanding "how human bodies and psyches register the 'states of exception' that punctuate the 'normal' run of social and political life."<sup>4</sup> Since verbal discourse is denied to the comatose Alicia and Lydia, they cannot participate in "normal" modes of human symbolization and become exceptions to the conventions of social encounters. Locked within their comas, they are restricted to creaturely life, a mode of existence wherein conventional human expressivity is compromised or denied. In Santner's words, the resulting ethical challenge is to remain "open to the singularity, the creaturely expressivity, of our neighbor, a figure whose 'queerness' exceeds the available categories of sociosexual organization."<sup>5</sup>

Almodóvar's narrative addresses the status of Alicia and Lydia's creaturely expressivity through issues of spectatorship and performance, while the film mounts a parallel

<sup>2</sup> Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi. For Santner, creaturely expressivity is not identical to bodily expressivity. Creaturely expressivity is a form of expressivity not merely of the body, but in which the

body is experienced as both intimate and foreign. See Santner on the creatureliness inherent to the experience of shame. *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> The use of lush primary color is also a key cinematic strategy for Almodóvar. Like many of his films, *Talk to Her* foregrounds blue and red as the two primary colors. Without going into a systematic analysis of this strategy, red is often attached to a female character as she performs or is somehow active, as Alicia is after emerging from her coma. Blue is often, though not always, associated with characters in contemplative modes.



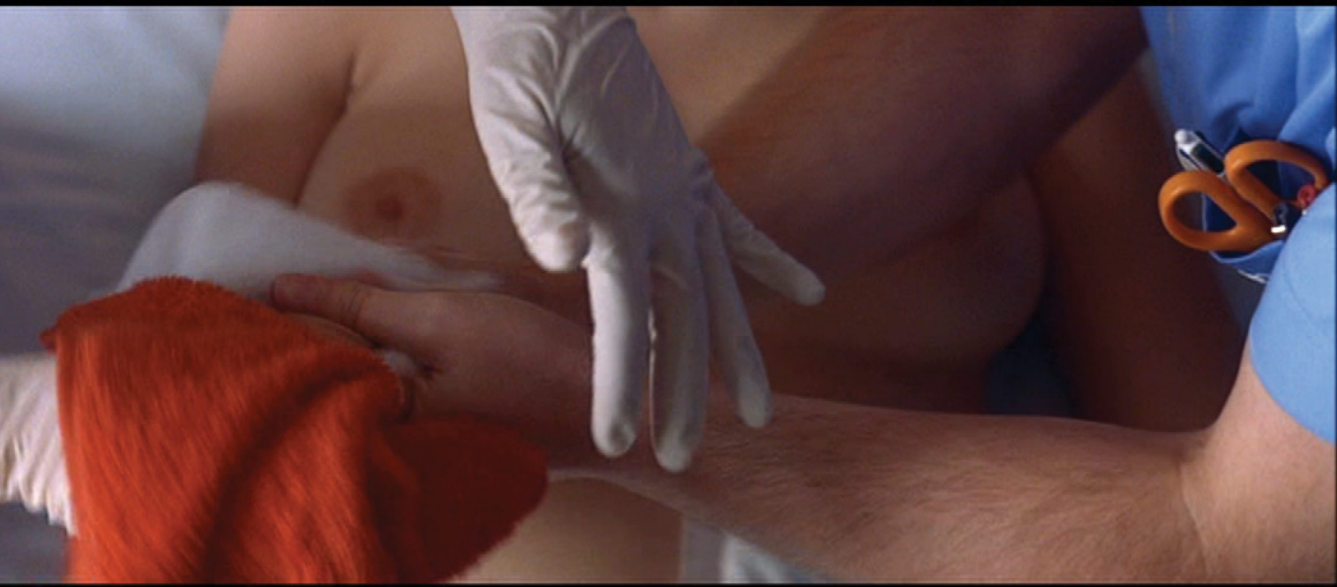
**Fig. 3** Lydia in the bullfighting ring (10:31).

formal argument by foregrounding visual qualities of physical barriers.<sup>6</sup> Like Lydia and Alicia's blank, unintentionally expressive faces, the film's recurring mirrors, windows, and screens often fail to serve their intended purpose of providing visual entry into another realm. Instead, motifs of mirroring, opacity and transparency suggest the limitations of seemingly unambiguous communication. In turn, Lydia and Alicia act as extreme examples of the strangeness and problematized expressivity that Santner's notion of creaturely life elucidates.

By introducing the two main male characters as members of an audience watching Pina Bausch's *Cafe Müller* (1978), Almodóvar visually and narratively foregrounds themes of bodily expressivity, spectatorship, and gender relations. The one-way communication in this performance parallels the non-reciprocal nature of these men's relationship to the objects of their love, as well as viewers' relationships to the characters on screen. The dance piece itself literally presents a male attempting to care for a female body, and the lyrics of the accompanying music, taken from Henry Purcell's opera *The Fairy Queen*, allude to themes of blindness,

7. There is also a parallel between the film's narrative and that of the Purcell opera. *The Fairy Queen's* lyrics are taken from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which fairy king Oberon's enchantment of his wife Titania forces her to undergo an unwanted romance with an ass. Just as Titania is blinded and forced into sexual passivity by an enchantment, Alicia is likewise rendered uncomplaining in the face of Benigno's advances during the long night of her coma. Almodóvar's choice of musical excerpt suggests a parallel between the playfully cruel Oberon and the male film characters' potentially malevolent attentiveness to their lovers, whose enchantments make their expressivity strange even to themselves. The lyrics of the section of *The Faerie Queen* depicted in the film, known as "The Plaint," are: "O Let me ever, ever weep, / My eyes no more shall welcome sleep; / I'll hide me from the sight of Day, / And sigh, and sigh my soul away. / He's gone, he's gone, his loss deplore, / For I shall never see him more." Henry Purcell, *The Fairy Queen* (New York: Dover, 2000), xviii, quoted in Adriana Novoa, "Whose Talk Is It? Almodóvar and the Fairy Tale in *Talk to Her*," *Marvels & Tales* 19, no. 2 (2005): 245n3.





**Fig. 4** Overhead view as Alicia receives a sponge bath from nurses (4:54). Note that the female nurse wears latex gloves, while Benigno works with bare hands.



**Fig. 5** Following the sponge bath, Benigno draws a sheet over Alicia (6:25).

transparency and violation within sociosexual relationships.<sup>7</sup> In *Cafe Müller*, the red-haired dancer remains verbally unresponsive, but her bodily expressions, including hunched shoulders, a furrowed brow, closed eyes, and rigid arms, offer tantalizing suggestions of emotional experience. As in the film outside of the ballet, bodily postures and movements are taken for granted as emotional markers. Furthermore, the slightly delayed repetition of one female dancer's movements by the other female dancer sets the stage for Lydia's doubling of Alicia's descent into a coma. The female dancers' closed eyes and ostensible lack of awareness of their surroundings allegorize the lack of conscious engagement with the world that comes to characterize Lydia and Alicia. Like the male performer on stage, the film's characters and viewers are left to consider potentially unwilling bodily expressivity, or what Santner calls "creaturely openness" to the world, as the only way to ascertain these women's thoughts and desires.

While *Talk to Her* foregrounds the problem of expressivity throughout, Lydia and Alicia remain the most conspicuously inaccessible to others. The film challenges each character to respond to the comatose women, as their humanity recedes into brute corporality. Santner's notion of neighbor love addresses just such an experience of encountering beings whose otherness seems to limit ethical interpersonal exchange. He writes:

The being whose proximity we are enjoined to inhabit and open to according to the imperative of neighbor love is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it.<sup>8</sup>

The condition of being comatose places Lydia and Alicia in this type of situation; not only do the women become strangers to their loved ones, but they also seem to be at odds with their own corporeal condition. Almodóvar's choice to have these two women's occupations intrinsically bound up with their bodily expressivity—as a dancer and a female bullfighter—makes their bodily stasis all the more dramatic as the two lie in comas. Repeated lingering shots of Alicia nude and corpse-like, for example, draw attention to this condition. The camera's bird's-eye view hovers above nurses drawing a sheet over Alicia's body, aestheticizing the procedure and suggesting these characters' own emotional distance from the mute being with whom they interact. In this way, Almodóvar's film stages a confrontation between most people's reluctance to engage with Lydia and Alicia as people and Benigno's refusal to think of Alicia and Lydia as strange or inaccessible in any way.

The difficulty of comprehending the comatose Lydia and Alicia in their uncommunicative and mute thingness is balanced by memories of bodily expressivity projected onto their typically slack faces and bodies.<sup>9</sup> Yet, lest we assume that a subject's ethical treatment of a neighbor is rooted in perceived similarities to remembered bodily

8 Santner, *Creaturely*, xii. The reference to Titania enamored with the ass is again a fruitful parallel, since she awoke from her enchantment to experience revulsion at her own desires.

9 For Santner, neighbor love is rooted in Freudian discussions of the neighbor [Nebenmensch] as both a material and spiritual entity. "And so the complex of the neighbor divides into two constituent parts, the first of which impresses [imponiert] through the constancy of its composition [durch konstantes konstantes Gefüge], its persistence as a Thing [Ding], while the other is understood by means of memory-work." Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, Nachtragsband: Texte aus den Jahren 1885-1938* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 426-27 (Santner translation). Quoted in Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 80. All emphases are Santner's.

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experiences, Almodóvar provides a cautionary counterexample. Benigno's sexual encounter with Alicia is predicated on just such a memory—albeit a memory of a cinematic character. At the moment that, as viewers later understand, Benigno has sex with Alicia, Almodóvar cuts from Alicia's facial expression to a nearly identical image of a woman's mouth. This second woman is in the throes of erotic ecstasy, according to the plot of a silent film Benigno has recently watched. Instead of portraying Benigno committing this act, Almodóvar gives viewers an imagined memory of a cinematic version of erotic pleasure—not actual footage of a silent film, but what viewers are given to understand are Benigno's potentially unreliable impressions of it. Almodóvar thus doubles Benigno's visual perceptions of Alicia's ecstasy with viewers' own position vis-à-vis the silent film heroine and, by extension, Alicia. If Benigno's understanding of Alicia's pleasure is misguided, how are viewers then to understand their own vantage point upon bodily expressivity as portrayed in cinema, where the characters cannot respond to viewers' apprehensions of their inner states? If, as a viewer, one can accept the erotic agency of the silent film heroine, how can a viewer understand his or her own reluctance to take the same visible manifestation of bodily expressivity as evidence for Alicia's erotic desires?<sup>10</sup> Almodóvar offers no easy answers.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the active spectatorship of Marco and Benigno, the film portrays the comatose pair of Alicia and Lydia as unable to reflect or speculate upon their surroundings and bodily experiences. Hovering close to death and restricted to automatic bodily responses, Lydia and Alicia seem to have no reflective mediation standing between them and immersion in bodily experience.<sup>12</sup> The female characters thus most fully enjoy creaturely life, constituting what Santner defines as an exceptional state in relation to "normal" human social experience. In contrast to the discursive and reflective experience of the males in the film, Alicia and Lydia are presented as corporeal, almost animal-like beings. The core conflict of *Talk to Her*, it would seem then, is precisely the uncertainty over whether the female characters even possess an unconscious, that is, whether they remain in the realm of the human. Yet Santner insists that such creatureliness is "less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way" of being.<sup>13</sup> Lydia and Alicia thus provide a limit case for the neighborliness that should ethically govern interactions with others.

Because the male characters maintain verbal expressivity throughout the film, Santner's notion of creaturely life at first only seems applicable to the conditions of Lydia and Alicia alone, but it turns out to have much to do with viewers' relationship to Benigno. It is not merely the characters' attempts to recognize Lydia and Alicia as fully human, but viewers' struggles to recognize Benigno's humanness that thrusts the problem of creaturely life to the fore. In response to the strange-

<sup>10</sup> As A. W. Eaton points out, the silent film scene also constitutes a rape, since a sleeping woman cannot give consent: A. W. Eaton, "Almodóvar's Immoralism," in *Talk to Her*, ed. A. W. Eaton (New York: Routledge, 2009), 24, n. 5. Still, Amparo's facial expression seems to suggest a level of pleasure, that the film's edits imply, Benigno would like to believe Alicia could also enjoy. It is never clear what Benigno knows and understands about sex, though, as a nurse, he is surely aware of the material implications of his actions.

<sup>11</sup> The silent film plays a crucial role in emphasizing silence, bodily expressivity, and verbalization that is emphasized by Almodóvar's use of intertitles to mark the repeated

and doubled encounters of pairs of characters. In addition to the title at the opening of the film, the paired names of Marco and Lydia, Benigno and Alicia, Marco and Benigno, and Marco and Alicia appear on blank or curtained screens interspersed within the diegetic sequence.

<sup>12</sup> On man as condemned to "the ceaseless production of mediating representations," see Santner, *Creaturely* 1–3.

<sup>13</sup> Santner, *Creaturely* xix.



**Fig. 6** The silent film heroine, ostensibly in the throes of passion (1:08:25).



**Fig. 7** Alicia's expression the night that Benigno impregnates her (1:08:34). This image follows a cut from the silent film heroine's face.



ness of creaturely expressivity, Santner invokes neighbor love, an ethical relationship among humans based on recognizing what is strange in others and in us. According to Santner, achieving this type of ethical relationship requires exposing oneself “not simply to the thoughts, values, hopes, and memories of the Other, but also to the Other’s touch of madness, to the way in which the Other is disoriented in the world.”<sup>14</sup> Neighbor love becomes a much more difficult task indeed, when turned from characters such as Alicia and Lydia, who merely seem to have fallen away from the normal state of affairs, to Benigno. The sympathetic response Almodóvar works to elicit in viewers, not just towards the comatose characters, but also the more ambivalently impenetrable Benigno, can also be understood productively in terms of creaturely life and neighbor love.

### Modes of Spectatorship

The film’s narrative centers around themes of spectatorship, voyeurism, and performance while formally presenting analogies of false transparency, unreliable mirroring, opaqueness, and physical obstructions that hinder communication between characters. In particular, Almodóvar focuses on physical materials and surfaces that promise clear transmission or reflection, but he employs them in such a way as to deny visual clarity and comprehension. Characters appear in mirrors, through glass (dance studio windows, car windshields, hospital windows, prison barriers) or on television screens, yet Almodóvar often blurs or obscures the reflected and projected images. As the film progresses, these devices shift away from Alicia and Lydia and become associated with Benigno and Marco. At the same time, Marco and film viewers alike struggle to reconcile their initial perceptions of Benigno as an empathetic and ethical being who truly believes in Lydia and Alicia’s inner lives with what his later actions towards Alicia reveal about his inner life.

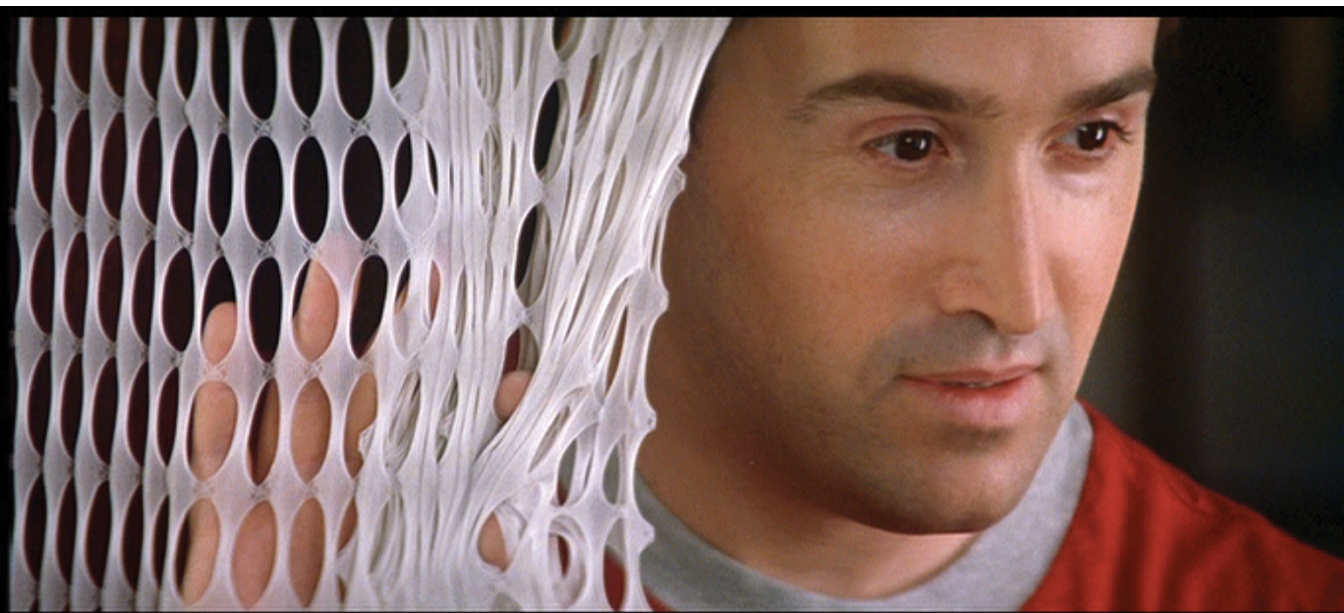
As Almodóvar presents Alicia and Lydia through the eyes of Benigno and Marco, these women become surfaces on which the male characters project their desires. This position is initially established by the women’s occupations as performers in fields characterized by wordless bodily expression: Alicia in her dance studio, and Lydia in the bullfighting ring. Once the women lose the power of speech, the body’s role in the characters’ relationships becomes all the more apparent as the men attempt to account for the women’s inner lives through recourse to bodily expression alone. The male characters in the film ostensibly demonstrate a mode of spectatorship that, in Santner’s account of creaturely life, is linked to the human capacity for reflection rather than creaturely openness.

By manipulating spatial relationships and technological mediation, Almodóvar offers the promise of augmented vision and a transparent window into another’s

<sup>14</sup> Santner, *Psychotheology*, 82. Neighbor love is rooted in Judeo-Christian monotheism, but Santner also locates the concept within modern ethical thought, such as the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig, and the novels of W. G. Sebald.



**Fig. 8** Alicia seen through the window of her dance studio (45:43).



**Fig. 9** Benigno watches Alicia from his window across the street (45:44).

inner state. Ultimately, however, the film confirms the difficulties of communication between the performing female and an observing male. Even Marco and Benigno's respective initial encounters with Lydia and Alicia are mediated, whether by seemingly transparent barriers, or through television, which offers a suggestion of intimate knowledge. In each case, while the men remain ensconced in their domestic spaces, the women are on display. Benigno, for example, first sees Alicia through windows. More accurately, he sees her through two windows: one in his apartment, which he shares with his overbearing, eccentric mother, and the other belonging to the dance studio across the street, where Alicia spends hours practicing. The camera shows Benigno from the side and then his bird's-eye view from a small paned, curtained window to the dance studio, but, crucially, viewers also remain on Benigno's side of the studio window. Only in a later scene, when the camera cuts from the back of Alicia's head to "her" memories of the studio interior are viewers allowed to enter Alicia's studio from what seems to be her point of view. Almodóvar thus keeps Benigno's images of the studio distinct from Alicia's memories, thereby further insisting on the two characters' divergent inner states. Benigno's initial view of Alicia takes place in an elevated, private space, from which Benigno looks down onto Alicia and the street below. Located above ground level, the dance studio's floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows provide Benigno with a largely unrestricted view of Alicia and the other dancers. By multiplying visual framing devices, like the edges of the windows that separate Benigno and Alicia, Almodóvar both draws viewers' attention to acts of voyeuristic spectatorship and replicates the framing that already occurs in the film medium itself.

Like Benigno, Marco first perceives Lydia in mediated form, but instead of the proximate transparency afforded by sheets of glass, Marco's encounter is filtered through the technological apparatus of television. Having gained notoriety as one of Spain's female bullfighters, Lydia's appearance on television is part of her public life performing before crowds across the country. Despite her physical distance, Lydia's fame makes her seem accessible to Marco even more intimately than Alicia initially is to Benigno. This accessibility is not dependent upon Lydia's ability to speak, however, since the personal details revealed during her television interview, including the demise of a love affair and public slights by a former lover, all emerge from the mouth of the gossiping television interviewer. Even in this venue, supposedly a platform from which Lydia can speak, she refuses the public display of inner states that the intrusive interviewer demands. Lydia eventually stalks off set with the interviewer clinging to her legs, physically demonstrating the relationship between the grasping, intrusive interviewer and Lydia's refusal to entertain questions about her personal life. Though mediated by television, Lydia's fame provides access to



**Fig. 10** Lydia attempts to leave the television show set, while the interviewer tries to drag her back to the couch (9:04).

private information about her emotional life and offers the illusion of access to her inner states.

As the television interviewer pries into Lydia's personal life, Almodóvar exploits visual attributes of television to afford Marco the illusion of intimacy with her. The camera zooms in for an extreme close-up of Lydia's face, while also using the framing to give subtle clues as to the limits of that proximity. Lydia's face first appears larger than life in the midst of Marco's domestic space, but the camera's close-up is emphasized as a remote image through its double framing: within the television and again within the doorway of Marco's apartment. Sitting on the interviewer's couch in an artfully arranged pseudo-domestic space, Lydia seems to occupy a space contiguous with Marco's living room. Her attempt to leave the screen is initially thwarted by the television interviewer, who draws her back into the frame and thus into Marco's line of vision as if into his physical presence, all while revealing intimate details of Lydia's life to Marco and other audience members. When Marco and Lydia begin their relationship soon after, this intensely personal information has already been communicated to Marco through the medium of television and celebrity culture.

Marco's introduction to Lydia thus to some extent parallels Benigno's to Alicia. Yet while the dance studio window and the television screen both reveal and conceal



the women presented within, each medium's conventions of spectatorship vary. By appearing on television, Almodóvar suggests that Lydia consents to her own performative act, but she wishes to restrict her participation to certain public facts about her life. The window through which Benigno views Alicia, on the contrary, exists as much as a way to permit light to enter the studio and the dancers to look out as a way for passersby to look in: being on the second floor, the dancers do not expect to be watched by passing pedestrians. Television also typically conveys verbal communication, albeit one-sided, whereas windows offer visual access without dialogue. Lydia may not be a spectator, but her presence on television in an interview situation implies an awareness of spectatorial relationships. Her refusal to participate involves not a withdrawal into creaturely dumbness, but a willed removal of her bodily presence from the camera's vision—both the interviewer's camera and Almodóvar's. In this way, Almodóvar makes visible how cinematic techniques shape viewers' perceptions of film characters' inner lives. In each case he offers the illusion of a privileged view while necessarily limiting what is shown to the verbal and visual rather than the embodied.

### The Gendered Creature

*Talk to Her* stages a central paradox between Marco's inability to comprehend either Lydia's bodily expression or her words, and Benigno's reliance on gauging Alicia's bodily responses when he should also contend with verbal assertions. Ultimately, the film denies the primacy of either verbal or corporeal communication. The latter is particularly problematic, given Benigno's fantasy that he successfully converses with Alicia in a state where her body remains her sole means of interaction with the world. After Benigno expresses his desire to marry the comatose Alicia, Marco castigates him, replying, "because Alicia cannot say with any part of her body, 'I do.'"<sup>15</sup> Does Alicia's creaturely existence preclude her participation in normal social life? Or is it through Benigno's creaturely existence that film viewers can approach the difficult task of neighbor love? Almodóvar highlights this tension by emphasizing not only the social and legal depravity of Benigno's action towards Alicia but also his character's witless mixture of deeply empathetic kindness and selfish cruelty. His ministrations to Alicia's body and his conversations with her establish his recognition of her as a fully cognizant being with hobbies and interests, but at the same time he cannot understand why desiring her as his wife is wrong. Despite Benigno's otherwise despicable actions, Almodóvar's film carefully portrays him to instill sympathy in viewers. Benigno's very namesake even suggests a harmless, benign disposition. As philosopher Robert Pippin explains, "Benigno clearly imagines that he and Alicia have a deep bond...that she is not so much in a 'persistent vegetative state,' as she

<sup>15</sup> "Alicia no puede decir con ninguna parte de su cuerpo, 'sí quiero.'" In *Talk to Her*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Robert B. Pippin, "Devils and Angels in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*," in *Talk to Her*, 29.

is simply someone as alone as he is, that the world he lives in is almost as dark and impenetrable as hers."<sup>16</sup>

Benigno's initial claim of harmlessness and his declaration of love for Alicia seem as unreliable as his taking her lax, parted lips to be consent to a sexual act, yet these verbal and bodily expressions cannot simply be taken as false. By the time film viewers see flashbacks of Benigno following Alicia down the street and gaining entry into her home as she showers, Almodóvar has already established him as a sympathetic character. Benigno's careful tending to his patients and his insistence on the comatose Alicia's rich inner life—which takes place earlier in the film sequence, though later in diegetic time—has already accustomed viewers to regard Benigno as a trustworthy character. Almodóvar works to divulge the inner states of characters that others find unreadable through flashbacks to Alicia's life before the coma and to Benigno's unusual upbringing. Film viewers may thus assume they possess a privileged point of view on these characters' thoughts and desires, but the plot still offers surprises. Both speech and bodily expression must be understood as part of a whole set of circumstances and conditions. Yet if verbal expression must finally take precedence, it is only because its bodily equivalent seems to remain out of conscious control. Almodóvar's film makes manifest this philosophical problem by foregrounding limit cases in which communication is one-sided and verbal communication in particular is superseded by automatic and ostensibly sincere bodily expression.

If Benigno's empathy were enough, if understanding could rest on substituting bodily for verbal communication, not only would the violation of Alicia come to be a more contestable incident, but Almodóvar could be seen as falling into a pernicious dichotomy of man as culture versus woman as nature. There are, in fact, suggestions in the film of this dichotomy, or of man as active versus woman as passive, where women are mysterious realms to be explored. This condition is quite literally depicted in Benigno's imaginings of the fantastical silent film interlude when a miniature man crawls into the vagina of his lover, her legs shown like canyon walls—a silent landscape available to male conquest. Almodóvar risks further perpetuating this dichotomy by constructing a film narrative that relies on male verbosity and reflection versus female embodiment and performance. Is he simply repeating what Santner calls creaturely "enjoyment of self-being in otherness" as an experiential relationship of the world uniquely available to women?<sup>17</sup> Almodóvar offers a counterexample in Benigno, whose own beliefs run counter to these dichotomies since he believes fully in reflection even within mute embodiment. Moreover, Almodóvar positions Benigno as a male who seems to embody a conventionally feminine inabil-

<sup>17</sup> Santner, *Creaturely 2*.

ity to communicate via words, thwarting easy characterizations of experience according to gender.

### Transparency and Doubling

Near the close of *Talk to Her*, the strangely transparent prison interior offers a visual demonstration of the double bind of the film, in which both verbal and bodily expression are insufficient conveyors of information. At the Segovia jail, Marco struggles to communicate with a female prison employee behind glass, who initially refuses to use her microphone and then toggles between on and off at exactly the wrong moments, amplifying her own voice when Marco speaks. The scene offers not only a humorous respite that references the microphone problems of *Singing in the Rain*, but it also offers a metaphor for the difficulty of communicating despite being able to see each other with complete clarity.

Visual transparency in this case does not, however, result in a privileging of bodily expressivity. Trapped in a maze of glass, Benigno's body is visible, but his inner state is not apparent until he speaks. Pippin concludes that "Benigno's environment now perfectly mirrors the profound isolation of his life: in a glass cage, able to see others but almost as cut off from them as his beloved Alicia."<sup>18</sup> However, Pippin's statement contains an ambiguity: is Benigno cut off from everyone, including his beloved creaturely Alicia, or does his inaccessibility parallel the way his beloved Alicia is cut off from others? Ultimately, Benigno is not simply estranged from Alicia. Instead, the glass makes him, like Alicia, visible to the world, but with limited ability to communicate with its inhabitants. This shift mirrors his creaturely condition throughout the entire film, and it is in this climactic scene that Almodóvar come closest to offering viewers access to Benigno's state of mind. Without access to Alicia, Benigno both verbalizes his desperation for contact with her and embodies his own anguish: at first, simply with unkempt hair and a scruffy beard, but later with a resolution to take his own life.

During the prison scene, Almodóvar's cinematography further makes visible the way in which the doubling of narrative arcs and visual motifs shifts attention from characters' interactions with Alicia and Lydia to the relationship between Marco and Benigno. Images of the two men seem to merge on the reflective glass that divides them from the other visitors' cubicles and from each other. Like the comatose Lydia and Alicia, Benigno is thus masked by what should be transparent material. This scene thus makes visible Benigno's doubling of the comatose women, as his similarly impenetrable inner states fail to be elucidated by visual communication alone. In another twisted doubling, just as the television broadcast of Lydia offered the illusion of intimacy but only a unidirectional flow of information, Benigno's final phone



**Fig. 11** The images of Benigno and Marco's faces merge on the glass of Segovia prison (1:28:29).

message to Marco denies dialogue at the moment the two men share their greatest intimacy. Benigno's entry into the glass cage denies physical contact but marks the point at which verbal communication between the two men takes on greater complexity and depth, as Benigno finally describes his emotions about Alicia and, eventually, his decision to end his life.

By merging the images of Marco and Benigno on the panes of prison glass, Almodóvar emphasizes the connection between these men. However, at the same time, he shows how Marco quite literally begins to take over Benigno's life, moving into his apartment and encountering Alicia at a dance performance. The opening performance of *Café Müller* thus reflects not only the delayed repetition of the lives of Alicia and Lydia, but also Marco's repetition of Benigno's life once Benigno himself is gone. Yet Almodóvar's doubling is never uncomplicated: he stages the initial dance performance encounter between Marco and Benigno, who are sitting side by side, while Alicia must turn away from the stage to acknowledge Marco's presence behind her. This active assertion of interest fully marks Alicia's emergence from passivity. Furthermore, although the closing scene mirrors the opening scene with



a fateful meeting, Alicia and Marco meet not as performer and spectator, but both as spectators, on equal footing in terms of the available modes of communication.

### Creaturely Life and Neighbor Love

To appreciate the relevance of creaturely life in analyzing Almodóvar's film, it is useful to consider how Santner's philosophical approach responds to arguments about various modes of human and animal "openness" broached by Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben. Heidegger is critical of conflating unreflective animal life with freedom, rejecting the idea that human modes of spectatorial, representational thought remain a curse fettering basic human existence. He decries the resulting "monstrous humanization of the 'creature,' i.e., the animal, and a corresponding animalization of man."<sup>19</sup> Instead of reflective spectatorship as an additive quality that pollutes pure human Being and limits openness to the world, Heidegger sees the reflective, world-forming aspect of human Being as fundamentally distinct from the relative poverty of animal Being. He explains that, "the animal possesses...being-open [openness] in its essence. Being open in captivity [a sort of instinctual relationship with the world] is the *essential possession* of the animal."<sup>20</sup> For Heidegger, animal Being is structured by a condition of captivity. While this condition somewhat resembles the human experience of captivity as an indeterminate state between consciousness and unconsciousness, animal captivity is not a temporary or permanent state, but rather the very condition of possibility for animal Being.<sup>21</sup>

As Agamben explicates, what is at issue for Heidegger is an animal openness that is not reflective and intentional. Instead, openness is something unwilling and not able to be willed, thus not truly human:

The animal is at once open and not open—or, better, it is neither one nor the other: it is open in a nondisconcealment.... Heidegger seems here to oscillate between two opposite poles, which in some ways recall the paradoxes of mystical knowledge—or, rather, nonknowledge. On the one hand, captivity is a more spellbinding and intense openness than any kind of human knowledge; on the other, insofar as it is not capable of disconcealing its own disinhibitor, it is closed in a total opacity.<sup>22</sup>

Human openness, then, must be openness as *disconcealment*—as intentional revelation or sharing. With regards to Benigno's perceptions of Alicia and Lydia, the women's presumed openness to others and to the world is closer to animal openness as *nondisconcealment*, an instinctual condition that cannot be willed. Locked in the captivity of autonomic nervous sys-

<sup>19</sup> Here, Heidegger is responding to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richar Rojewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 152 (translation modified by Santner). Quoted in Santner, *Creaturely*, 6. The primary point of overlap between Santner and Heidegger is that both discuss this animal or creaturely life via Rilke's poetry, and a key text for both is Rilke's eighth Duino Elegy: "With all its eyes the natural world [die Kreatur] looks out into the Open. // Never, not for a single day, do we have / before us that pure space into which flowers / endlessly open // ... that pure / unseparated element which one breathes / without desire and endlessly knows. // And we: spectators, always, everywhere, / turned toward the world of objects, never outward." Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 269.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 59.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger writes, "in its captivity, as having the possibility for the manifestness of beings withheld, the animal essentially cannot have world at all." Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 269.

tem responses to the world, Lydia and Alicia cannot choose to withhold their manifestness; they become locked in the total opacity of spellbinding animal openness.<sup>23</sup> If bodily expressivity is mere instinct, according to this logic, it cannot then be taken as the foundation for ethical human sociability.

Yet, as Agamben builds upon Heidegger, human Being is not a state of uninterrupted reflection. Instead, one is rendered human through the process of awakening to one's own entrancement, which encompasses both animal captivation and human boredom.<sup>24</sup> In a literal sense, Almodóvar's film shows Alicia awakening to discover her own entrancement, in the form of her four years in a coma, though she is not immediately made aware of the unintended pregnancy that brought her to consciousness.<sup>25</sup> As Agamben explicates Heidegger, this awakening to one's own entrancement is furthermore an awareness of and insistence upon continued openness to others who remain resolutely closed and opaque. Interpreted in this way, the character who ultimately awakens from entrancement is not Alicia but Marco. While Marco fails to adopt this openness towards Lydia's opacity, the return of Lydia's former lover spurs him to follow Benigno's lead in remaining open towards Alicia's opacity.

As the film ends, it seems that Marco's continued openness to Benigno most contributes to Marco's own awakening. By ending the film with an encounter between Alicia and Marco, Almodóvar suggests further efforts in this vein. Instead of doubling the initial encounters between Marco and Lydia or Benigno and Alicia, this final meeting repeats Benigno's opening encounter with Marco at *Café Müller*. In lieu of a male watching a female performer, both Alicia and Marco are spectators at the dance performance. Crucially, Marco's tears become the object of Alicia's attention during an intermission. The tables are turned, and it is the male Marco's bodily expressivity that opens him to Alicia's verbal inquiry. Just as the comatose Alicia has awakened, so too does Marco emerge from his own entrancement. Has his openness toward Benigno in fact paved the way for this final awakening, the possibility of friendship with Alicia?

How, too, should characters communicate going forward following the repeated failures of various modes of interaction? As George Wilson claims of *Talk to Her*, "the success or failure of shared understanding between characters turns upon whether meaningful visual or tactile contact has been established and upon whether or not the contact is mutually acknowledged."<sup>26</sup> However, if verbal acknowledgment is insufficient or unreliable, embodiment is similarly ineffective. No form of an unachievable, utterly transparent speech or bodily expressivity could ensure the ethical treatment of others. As Santner

<sup>24</sup> George M. Wilson, "Rapport, Rupture, and Rape: On Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*," in Eaton, *Talk to Her*, 50. Cynthia Freeland also emphasizes the crucial role of the body in *Talk to Her*: "The idea that subjectification involves the animation of a body and communication through the body's movements is clearly exemplified in the arts of ballet and bullfighting. These arts reinforce the idea that understanding another person as a subject involves more than just magical mind-to-mind telepathy between two Cartesian thinking substances." Cynthia Freeland, "Nothing is Simple," in Eaton, *Talk to Her*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Santner, *Creatively*, 7. See also Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969).

<sup>24</sup> Santner, *Creatively*, 11–12. See also Agamben, *The Open*.

<sup>25</sup> In considering the coma as a form of entrancement, it is telling that several commentators have addressed *Talk to Her* as a retelling of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. Among others, see Pippin, "Devils and Angels," Adriana Novos, "Whose Talk is It? Almodóvar and the Fairy Tale in *Talk to Her*," in *Marvels & Tales* 19, no. 2 (2005): 224–48, and Despina Kakoudaki, "Intimate Strangers: Melodrama and Coincidence in *Talk to Her*," in *All about Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, ed. Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (Mimeapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 193–240. Kakoudaki points out that the name of the clinic in which Alicia and Lydia reside—*El Bosque*, *The Woods*—reaffirms this reference to the sleeping beauty story. Kakoudaki, "Intimate Strangers," 228.

explains, “for Heidegger, only human beings can be said to be ‘on to’ things in a way that is responsive, indeed beholden to, what and how they are—in a way...that necessarily includes the possibility of being right or wrong about them.”<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Benigno’s convictions about Alicia’s inner states—his belief that she reciprocates his feelings—preclude any possibility of a response that could have refuted his presumptions.

Equivalent to several characters’ failure to fully account for Alicia and Lydia as fellow humans, film viewers may find themselves failing to be responsive and beholden to the character of Benigno. Almodóvar portrays Benigno as emotionally underdeveloped: damaged, childlike, immature, and naïve. Viewers may perceive his extended youth in thrall to a sickly mother, his uncertainties and evasiveness about his own sexuality, and his difficulty in developing emotional relationships with others beyond pleasant banter. One might feel that Benigno is, perhaps, not quite responsible for his actions in the same way others are. While characterizing Benigno as emotionally stunted and psychologically not-quite-fully adult may seem to condemn his actions, it can also serve as a free pass if viewers simply dismiss him as unintelligible and evil, or as unable to understand and control his actions. It does, in fact, require work to grasp Benigno’s unconscious, and moreover to love him, as a character if not as a human being. Viewers are left with the moral quandary not only of how to interact with someone in a coma, but also how to respond to Benigno. How can one resolve the initial sense of him as a tender and generous soul with his rape of Alicia and his failure to understand it as a violation?

Thus, the creaturely life that Santner describes as a state at the threshold of humanness and animality is relevant not only for Alicia and Lydia, but for Benigno’s character as well.<sup>28</sup> Santner’s exhortations to respond with neighbor love take on added difficulty when directed towards Benigno. Santner claims that, “the only way to truly understand the concept of love of neighbor is to grasp what it means that he or she has an unconscious.”<sup>29</sup> Specifically, within Santner’s discussions of creaturely life, the problem of understanding modes of expressivity in creaturely life comes down to grasping Freud’s crucial distinction between animal and human sexuality, between *instinct* and *drive*. One of Freud’s great insights was that human sexuality, precisely that dimension of human life here we seem to be utterly reduced to animality, is actually the point at which our difference from animals is in some ways most radical.<sup>30</sup>

On the one hand, Benigno’s crime lies in his inability to grasp this distinction with regards to Alicia. On the other hand, Almodóvar’s staging of this ethical challenge around a case of sexual violation is suggestive. It is precisely this case, where Alicia’s face seems to portray the same expression of erotic pleasure as the silent film heroine, in which viewers most strongly perceive the dangers of trusting in

<sup>28</sup> Again, Santner elaborates such notions of creaturely life through the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.

<sup>29</sup> Santner, *Creaturely*: xii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.

bodily expressivity. In service of this reading, Almodóvar further suggests that film viewers go beyond the work of evaluating how characters ascribe an unconscious to Alicia or Lydia in order to do the harder work of trying to grapple with Benigno's creatureliness.

Almodóvar both provokes and complicates this effort by contrasting a generous portrayal of Benigno's character with the moral gravity of his actions. As Santner elaborates, the ethics of neighbor love "locates our responsibility in our capacity to elaborate forms of solidarity with this creaturely expressivity that makes the other strange not only to me but also to him- or herself."<sup>31</sup> The obvious way to interpret this comment with regards to how characters interact with Alicia and Lydia, is to ask how they form bonds of solidarity with these comatose bodies who have become beings strange not only to us, but to themselves as well. Benigno represents one extreme response since he treats Alicia as if she possesses inner states equivalent to his own, and imagines her responses to normal social interactions. Marco, who flees the hospital and the country when Lydia's former lover returns, represents the other extreme.

Empathy and neighbor love can reside neither in delusional faith in one's ability to comprehend another, nor in complete avoidance of interaction. While *Talk to Her* initially raises questions about the threshold for humanness on the basis of the comatose women, Benigno's character comes to be the more problematic case. Benigno's inability to judge what others are thinking and feeling, save through obvious (and perhaps disingenuous) manifestations like Marco's tears, is matched by the inability of others to understand him. Benigno fails to comprehend expressions like Alicia's nervous anger as he follows her along the street, and he himself provides inadequate or opaque expressions. For example, his dishonesty to Alicia's psychiatrist father regarding his sexuality can seem, at different points in the film, like simple insistence on privacy, self-consciousness about his sex life, or a scheme to stay close to Alicia.

Benigno ultimately occupies both possible poles of the condition of neighborly love, as a person who finds himself at once strange and at pains to comprehend the strange, creaturely expressivity that surrounds him. While Almodóvar's portrayal of Benigno has been criticized as too sympathetic, it is only by evoking empathy that *Talk to Her* can instill ambivalence towards Benigno.<sup>32</sup> In some ways, he is the person who treats the comatose Alicia most like a human being, rather than a lifeless doll, through his constant verbal communication and physical ministrations. Yet paradoxically, Benigno is the one who sexually violates Alicia, leaving viewers to scrutinize their previous reactions to his tender care. Thus it is not Alicia but Benigno who becomes most inscrutable.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii. One might understand the neighbor's proximate strangeness and the creaturely as resonant with Freudian notions of the uncanny. On the uncanny, see Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003). For further explication of Freud on the neighbor, see also the Introduction in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–10.

<sup>32</sup> For this type of criticism, see Novoa, Adriana, "Whose Talk Is It? Almodóvar and the Fairy Tale in *Talk to Her*," *Marvels & Tales* 19:2 (2005): 224–248.





**Fig. 12** Marco watches Alicia from the doorway of her hospital room (35:25).

### Awakening from Enchantment

The closing sequence of the film returns to another performance of a Pina Bausch dance, this time, of *Masurca Fogo* (1998), and doubles the motifs of spectatorship that shape the opening scene. The formerly anxious movements of the male performer have become the gentle undulation of a female dancer atop a sea of male bodies. This scene foregrounds the music's lyrics as the female dancer holds a microphone at her lips, but does not speak or even lip-sync the words to the song. Instead, the microphone amplifies her ragged breaths. The difficulty of communicating persists even in a performance that mixes verbal, aural, gestural, embodied, and collaborative forms of communication. Although Marco again begins to cry softly, it is only when he sees Alicia in the theater that he becomes visibly shaken, however—significantly, in light of Almodóvar's problematization of bodily expressivity—not teary-eyed. In turn, the music accompanying the final dance reaffirms the potential to misconstrue such bodily expressivity. Over the woman's ragged breaths, k. d. lang sings about the presumed demise of a romance, as one partner wakes to find her lover gone and believes that he or she has left for good. As the male dancers lift a female dancer, the singer recollects the sadness in her lover's



**Fig. 13** Alicia, her eyes involuntarily open, as Marco watches her (35:36).



**Fig. 14** Marco and Alicia in the theater at the film's close (1:47:37).

eyes she concludes that the affair is over, packs her lover's bags and places them at the front door, only to find that the lover just stepped out for cigarettes. The irony of the lyrics is that both the singer and her lover have utterly misconstrued the status of their relationship: "Ain't it funny," goes the refrain. Almodóvar's choice to close the film with this song affirms his interest in the ways that bodily expressivity—stepping out for cigarettes or placing someone's belongings outside the home—can be construed and misconstrued.

The film ends as Alicia turns from the stage to face Marco. Seated in the theater audience one behind the other, they each turn their heads away from a spectatorial relation to the dance performance in order to face one another. Unlike the initial scene, in which Marco did not see fellow audience member Benigno observing him, Alicia responds to Marco directly, both with words and a smile. In this moment, released from the grip of one-sided visual interaction, Almodóvar's characters for the first time open the possibility for a relationship built on reciprocal dialogue and, perhaps, both verbal and bodily communication.

Yet is Almodóvar's ending quite so optimistic? It is a strange lacuna in the criticism of *Talk to Her* that Marco's own inappropriate behavior goes largely unremarked.<sup>33</sup> Like Benigno, Marco also engages in multiple voyeuristic interactions with the comatose Alicia, including peering in on her in a semi-nude state, without even the pretense of a job requiring him to attend upon her. The apogee of these interactions comes in a truly bizarre scene in which, after finding that Lydia has reunited with her former lover, Marco barges into Alicia's hospital room and tells her half-naked body that he is single. Finally, the film chronicles a process by which Marco begins taking over Benigno's life, as he moves into Benigno's apartment and develops his own interest in on Alicia.<sup>34</sup> Almodóvar's doubling may not, in the end, point to the dual awakening of both Alicia and Marco, but may instead propose the repetition of Benigno's captivation in Marco's own life. If viewers can take solace in any detail, however, it is the shared status of both Alicia and Marco as spectators during the final scene, and their acknowledgment of the other's presence. Perhaps the reciprocal gazes between Marco and Alicia presage a relationship in which neither is relegated to the mute expressivity of bodily performance without speech. *caj*

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<sup>33</sup> George M. Wilson is one of the few who highlights the impropriety of Marco's relationship with Angela. See Wilson, "Rapport, Rupture, and Rape," 125, 50.

<sup>34</sup> The overlaid faces of Marco and Benigno in the prison visit scene visually thematizes this process, which viewers can only hope results in Marco taking on Benigno's kind and generous personality traits, and not his more nefarious ones.