Philosophers on Film

The true significance of film for philosophy, and of philosophy for film, cannot be established in abstract or general terms. It can only be measured in and through individual philosophers’ attempts to account for their experience of specific films. This series promises to provide a productive context for that indispensible enterprise.

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Film is increasingly used to introduce and discuss key topics and problems in philosophy, whilst some films raise important philosophical questions of their own. Yet until now, dependable resources for those studying and teaching philosophy and film have been limited. Philosophers on Film answers this growing need and is the first series of its kind.

Each volume assembles a team of international contributors who explore a single film in depth. Beginning with an introduction by the editor, each specially-commissioned chapter discusses a key aspect of the film in question. Additional features include a biography of the director and suggestions for further reading, making the series ideal for anyone studying philosophy, film and anyone with a general interest in the philosophical dimensions of cinema.

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Talk to Her

Edited by

A.W. Eaton
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Robert B. Pippin

DEVILS AND ANGELS IN
ALMODÓVAR’S TALK TO HER

Stanley Cavell has written that the “dramatic mode of film is the mythological” and that this mythical dimension is actually “the typical.”1 There would seem to be little typical about a world of comatose women, a barely sane, largely delusional male nurse, a woman bullfighter, and a rape that leads to a "rebirth" in a number of senses. But comatose women, the central figures in Almodóvar’s Talk to Her, are, oddly, very familiar in that mythological genre closest to us: fairy tales. Both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are comatose women who endure—"non-consensually" we must say—a male kiss, male
sexual attention. (Siegfried’s awakening kiss of Brunnhilde in the extraordinary third act of Siegfried should also be mentioned.) Someone apparently must manifest some act of faith, must believe that these corpse-like women are not dead, and believe it strongly enough to kiss them. Then there is a kind of inversion of these fairy tales in Kleist’s story and Rohmer’s film, Die Marquise von O. Here the kiss is actually a rape, but the rapist again emerges as some sort of Prince Charming after all (he had originally saved the Marquise from rape by a group of Russian soldiers), and there are echoes of that somewhat disturbing notion of reconciliation as well in the Almodóvar film. (Alicia, after all, does awaken.) In the Kleist story, a woman must place an ad in a newspaper asking her unknown rapist (she was drugged and asleep) and the father of her unborn child to come forward. He does eventually and the story ends with their marriage and with one of the most enigmatic lines in all of literature, as enigmatic, I think, as our complex reactions to Benigno’s act: the Marquise says that she would not have thought her new husband a devil if he had not first appeared as an angel, as if one person can be both devil and angel, that, to the extent that one can be an angel, to that extent he also can be a devil.

We do not seem to recoil morally in the fairy tale cases, as if the sleeping beauties were victims of unwanted male attention, as if yet more examples of male fantasies of passive, wholly dependent women whose very waking lives depend utterly on bold sexual attention by men, regardless of considerations of equity or consent. This is probably because the narrative frame of the fairy tales suggests that such a moment is fated; it must happen, these princes are for these women and them alone. The kiss is also more like medical attention to accident victims; the princes can’t just leave the beauties sleeping there and we presumably are meant to think that Prince Charmings are universal types; that they would, by definition, be the object choice of any woman once awakened; and, given the fate theme, especially be the object choice of these princesses.

We do recoil, however, at Benigno; it is simply horrific imagining him on top of the nearly lifeless, unmovable body of Alicia. We also have a very different reaction on a second viewing. Once we know what Benigno will do, what we had first taken to be his tender medical ministrations now look suspicious. He is occasionally all too casual about Alicia’s nudity; his complimentary remarks about Alicia’s breasts might have rushed past on first viewing. They don’t on a subsequent viewing, once we know where his attention is leading. But still, all in all, I think it is fair to say that we also hesitate to place this rape in exactly the same category as the brutal attempted rape of Uma Thurman’s comatose character at the beginning of Kill Bill 1, or Terence Stamp’s imprisonment of Samantha Eggar in William Wyler’s The Collector (or I think we should, at the very least, hesitate). That very hesitation, or what appears to be something like a sympathetic treatment of Benigno by Almodóvar, is just what can generate a certain unease among some viewers.

There are several obvious elements to this hesitation, to the indeterminacy and unsettledness of our moral response to the character and the act (something ultimately essential to this being an aesthetic treatment, not an example of, or illustrative of, a moral theory). Part of it (hesitating about equating as instances of a kind Benigno and Uma Thurman’s attacker) has to do with the fact that the fairy tale context just suggested is close to the fantasy world occupied by Benigno. His act of faith (as he sees it), of keeping faith with Alicia as still a responsive, communicative subject, is for most of the film more delusional than heroic and often simply pathetic. For one thing, Benigno is presented as a figure of desperate loneliness (as is Marco, in a different way), a man who for twenty years lived in a situation crazy enough to drive him slightly mad himself, living only for his mother, attending her, we come to learn, with virtually the same intimacy and diligence required for Alicia, although, bizarrely, the mother was not an invalid but just, according to Benigno, “lazy.” And Benigno clearly imagines that he and Alicia have a deep bond because of this, that she is not so much in a “persistent vegetative state,” as she is simply someone as alone as he is, that the world he lives in is almost as dark and impenetrable as hers.

Benigno’s own view of the rape (figured for us by a very strange silent film he is recounting to Alicia on the night of the rape and which portrays what he is about to do as a return to the womb) is in keeping with this presentation of his mental state as delusional, something that would obviously qualify any moral condemnation. But Benigno’s psychopathology only explains part of our hesitation, a hesitation I would describe not as an unwillingness to apply the category of rape, or as a wish to excuse what Benigno did. It rather seems a hesitation simply to leave the matter there, a hesitation about the adequacy of a moral response tout court, and so a way of raising the question of this sort of “qualification” of a moral response; that is, what sort of qualification is
it? Or, what would it mean to concede the authority of the moral point of view, but deny it the sort of absolute trumping power that, for many, comes with such authority? The most interesting dimension raised by the film is just this: how does a moral judgment lie alongside of, become imbricated in (or not), color or shadow, all the other reactions, projections, and anxieties involved in living a life and in responding to another? (This is, of course, the most interesting theme of many film noirs: something that Almodóvar is quite aware of. At the end of Bad Education—a much more noirish film than Talk to Her—Juan and Berenguer go to a film noir festival while the deadly heroin they have given Ignacio does its work. As they emerge Berenguer (the pederast priest) says, "Those movies all seemed to be about us.")

Moral philosophers sometimes distinguish between so-called “first-order” moral judgments—in this case the judgment that what Benigno did was rape and was wrong—and “second-order” judgments—in this case whether or to what degree to blame Benigno, to hold him to account—and they argue that the former judgment can be made without requiring the latter. They also sometimes distinguish between the act itself and its consequences, and in this case that might lead one to say that whatever Benigno had intended by having sex with Alicia (and it is very difficult to infer what exactly he thought he was trying to do or bring about), her recovery cannot be credited to him. In both cases, especially the former, Benigno’s delusory state seems somehow to be both exculpatory and to block an attribution of Alicia’s recovery to his actions.

I don’t wish to dispute any of this, but I don’t think our “hesitation,” as I have called it, is based on an appreciation of Benigno’s psychopathology. As noted, there is a mythic dimension to the film as well, and in that dimension Benigno’s actions are in a certain way affirmed more directly, rather than excused, even though the act is morally heinous. The way this all works in the film is by constant and explicit contrast with the very “secular,” fantasy-less Marco–Lydia parallel plot, and by its (the film’s) indubitable affirmation of Benigno’s point of view with regard to the “talk to her” advice that gives the movie its title. This highly paradoxical attitude embodied in the film gives it its power and much of its mystery. The rather conflicted state one is in at the end of the movie recalls Nietzsche’s claim in his Genealogy of Morals that it is a sign of a “higher nature,” or a more “spiritual nature,” to be able to endure great “divisions” in the soul, to be a “battleground” of incompatible commitments (I, 16).

We might also note here that Almodóvar’s films very often anticipate, solicit, direct, and then up-end or undermine expected audience reactions—including, but not exclusively limited to, moral reactions—as a matter of course. In almost everything he has done, Almodóvar clearly tries to present such issues in ways that will effect a kind of “double shock.” The first shock is the oddness of the variation on the typical itself: nuns who take heroin and psychedelic drugs (Dark Habits); a mother who sells a child to a pederast (What Have I Done To Deserve This?); kidnap victims who fall for their kidnappers (Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!); a pregnant, AIDS-infected nun, and a search for a father and husband who turns out to have become a woman (All About My Mother). In Woman on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, a soap powder commercial presents the mother of a serial killer bragging that she can get her son’s clothes so white, so free of blood stains, that it even confounds the forensic police. There are pederast priests (Bad Education), and of course the rape of a comatose woman in Talk to Her. But the second additional turn of the screw is as interesting and as unusual, for all such cases are not presented as if an invitation to a kind of prurient realism, but clearly with an eye towards some redemptive humanism, some deflection of the discomfort we feel, for example, at obsessive, often nearly insane love (as in the French l’amour fou tradition, or the love affair in Live Flesh), so that a moment of affirmation is also, quite unexpectedly, possible. In all such cases, while we seem first invited to respond within the conventions of comedy, as if slightly superior to the drag queen camp characters with whom Almodóvar populates his films, there is always also some reversal in which something like the inner strength or reserves of moral courage or great loyalty or generosity are manifest, the dedication and sacrifice of characters we might be tempted to mock or treat simply as “exhibitions.”

In fact, there is also a great emphasis on the complexities of exhibition, on gesture, dress, costume, and display, and we are invited to read these signs and gestures conventionally at first, in order to demonstrate subsequently that they are elements of a much more complex drama in which the interpretative work is much more difficult, the results much less determinate. The difficulty of knowing who anybody actually is or what part they are playing, in whose narration, from what point of view, reaches a kind of apotheosis in Bad Education, which features a plot in which a
character has written a story about a person who was abused by a priest, became a transvestite and wrote a story about the abuse, with which he is trying to blackmail the priest, and the author in the story is supposed to be author of the story, the character we see on screen originally. Except that character is not the character of the story and the story within the story. It is actually his brother, who has murdered his transgendered brother (the real author), and is pretending to be the real character. This “point-of-view uncertainty” is often invoked in Almodóvar’s films as a way of reminding us how little we know about the characters who we are tempted to judge conventionally and often morally. So in Talk to Her everyone, especially Alicia’s father, thinks they know that an effeminate male nurse just has to be gay, and everyone is obsessed with the heterosexual affairs of a female bullfighter, as if her femininity in itself was hard to believe.

Another qualification or reason to hesitate in our judgment is purely aesthetic. The Pina Bausch dance, Café Müller, that begins the movie is clearly a kind of allegory of the film, a way of letting us know that the narrative frame of the story is certainly not “realistic” in the conventional or theatrical sense, that the action we are about to see has much more the logic of a dream (or a myth) than a standard plot. The silent movie at the center of things, The Shining Lover, makes this “irrealizing” point again and I will return to both the silent dance and the silent movie later. That is, Benigno’s fantasy is as strange and crazy as the silent movie, and the film we are watching is more like an expressionist silent film or an avant garde dance than a straight melodrama. But for now we can appreciate that such an unusual way of framing what we are about to see also makes a straightforward moral reaction as incomplete and inadequate as would be the judgment that the Lisa Bernidele character in Max Ophüls’s Letter from an Unknown Woman is a deluded crackpot who foolishly throws her own life away and those of her son and husband and even her great beloved; or as inadequate, say, as the final judgment that Medea was a “bad person” for having killed her children.

The judgment about Benigno also appears qualified “inside” the film by the fact that the far more realistic and sober “scientific” assessments of Lydia’s comatose condition by Marco and Lydia’s former boyfriend (“The Valencia Kid”) seem somehow connected with Lydia’s death; and it is all even more qualified by Alicia’s rebirth: her return to consciousness and eventual mobility and possible life. Marco quite properly points out at one point that what Benigno is doing is indistinguishable from “talking to plants,” but within the narrative frame created by the movie Alicia clearly seems brought back to life by what Benigno does, even though what he does clearly calls for some moral recoil. There is also an echo of the Bausch dance that is relevant to this issue in the horrific scene of Lydia being gored by the bull, and not just because Rosario Flores is so extraordinarily balletic. On the one hand what Lydia is doing is very foolhardy. She opens with a kind of pass, a pora gayola, that is usually only attempted at the very end of a corrida when the bull is very tired and weak. (She is on her knees, with her cape in front of her, and expects to make a pass just by shifting her body, not her feet.) But this pose dramatizes something we can already sense from implied comparison with the dance choreography: she has no help, as Alicia does (now or in her coma), no one to “clear the chairs away,” and that is the way she wants it; she is facing this huge animal, this agent of death, on her own, as if supremely self-sufficient. In fact, in this magnificent scene the expression on Lydia’s face suggests such defiance and hubris, such a “silent” but eloquent challenge to what seems to be the embodiment of male power, perhaps even male sexuality, in this huge bull, that we fear some line has been crossed, that she is infinitely admirable for this expression of will, but, we know, doomed. There is also something mythologically significant in the fact that both these utterly passive, inaccessible women are rendered comatose violently, forced into a state that is sometimes intimated as a figure for the “forced” role of the feminine itself, at least by Benigno, in that chilling scene where he treats talking to Alicia as an instance of the general advice one ought to follow with regard to all women—talk to them, take them seriously—as if this might not occur to us without a reminder; as if the default position of most men is to act as if women were comatose. But that is an independent topic.

Of course, all these sorts of questions can only arise if we assume that we can attribute intentional states, even moral attitudes to the work itself, and that prompts some very familiar issues in aesthetics. But for purposes of this discussion, I think we should just agree at the outset that Benigno and his act are partly treated sympathetically by Almodóvar. For one thing, Benigno is allowed to present most of the movie’s details to us, and this point of view is only directly challenged by Marco, who is clearly sympathetic, and this only occasionally. The last thing Benigno has done (within, let us say, the frame of relevance, salience and moral import
created by Almodóvar and Benigno) is to treat Alicia merely as an object, a thing to be used for his pleasure. Indeed, Almodóvar spends a great deal of camera time detailing the quite involved ministrations of Benigno and his fellow nurses (Rosa and Mathilde) for Alicia, clearly treating the ablutions and dressing as ritualistic in a religious sense, all in a way parallel with the long beautiful scene of Lydia (whose name means “bullfighting”) being dressed for the bullfight. (Compare with the undressing of Father Manolo’s vestments in Bed Education.) Benigno’s care for Alicia is clearly meant to be enveloping and tender (although for the most part only from his point of view, and even though we slowly begin to see that there is something dangerously obsessive and possessive in his treatment). Even (and here again our unease) the sexual assault cannot fully be understood except within such a context. And everything he does also seems continuous with the insistent humanism (the insistent refusal to allow her to slip into the status of mere objecthood) embodied in his “talk to her” advice to Marco, the journalist with whom he forms a deep bond of friendship. (Personhood, the film almost suggests, depends on the kind of affirmation and faith exhibited by Benigno; i.e., a status achieved only by virtue of such reciprocal affirmations and is not a matter of fact property of some animals.) It is this sympathy (essentially Marco’s sympathy, a reaction not unconnected with his own failings) and the hesitation it provokes that we must understand.

Indeed, in many ways the movie is mostly about this growing, awkward friendship between the two men, not so much about the two women and their fate. It is Alicia’s comatose body that initially connects them and this link is the pivot on which our ultimate reaction to the film will turn. Marco walks by Alicia’s room once when she is naked and being attended to. Benigno invites him in, and Marco is clearly extremely uncomfortable in the room with Alicia’s body (which, incredibly, remains a beautiful body) so visible. We are not really sure if he is uncomfortable because he feels sexually excited by the sight and is confused by and embarrassed by this response, or because he is quite understandably puzzled that Benigno could treat Alicia’s need for privacy so cavalierly, exposing her so calmly to strangers. Likewise it allows a measure of doubt about Benigno to enter the viewer’s mind; we are not sure if this exposure is just part of the infamous depersonalization and lack of privacy endemic to hospital culture, or if this is a sign that Benigno’s proprietary sense of his control of Alicia is already somewhat out of hand. (This dialectical relation between respectful subservience and nursing as a form of control will emerge again later.)

Later, in the crucial “talk to her” scene at the heart of the film, this same uncertainty about Alicia’s nakedness happens again, but the viewer now seems to be led away from some of these doubts and towards Benigno’s point of view. Marco remarks to Benigno that he could never touch and move Lydia in the way Benigno ministers to Alicia, that he is somewhat repelled by her barely alive physical form. Right before this conversation, he had learned that his position as principal lover and chief mourner had all been an illusion, that Lydia had turned back to Niño even before the bullfighting accident, and so, with the best will in the world, he had “read” everything wrong; that there was something almost as comic in his position as the rejected lover, dutifully attending a woman in love with someone else, as there is in Benigno thinking he will marry Alicia. Even with both women in comas, the various love triangles continue to be upset and to reform. After Marco’s remark about his distaste for Lydia’s body and Benigno’s advice—“talk to her, tell her that,” as if he is encouraging something like couple’s counseling—we also see from this moment on that Marco accepts at least some aspects of Benigno’s point of view (perhaps because he realizes that an important aspect of his own reasonable, prudent view had itself been a great illusion); accepts that however deluded and morally inappropriate, there is something in Benigno’s relation to Alicia (his keeping faith, his refusal to allow her any object status) that moral and even scientific categories alone will not capture.

This is so to such an extent that by the end of the film, Marco comes more and more to re-occupy Benigno’s life, his place in the world, and that is yet another factor in our hesitation (as instructed by the logic of the film) to condemn Benigno—this fact that we begin to see him through Marco’s eyes. He lives in Benigno’s apartment after the latter’s suicide, re-occupies Benigno’s “view” of the dance studio, and begins even to live out Benigno’s deepest fantasy by beginning what we are clearly meant to think is the start of a relationship with the now recovering Alicia. And most of all, despite his earlier insistence that talking to the comatose Alicia was like talking to plants, Marco himself begins to talk to the corpse of Benigno in Benigno’s grave. This all suggests that Marco has learned something from Benigno’s craziness, so much so that the characters even seem to merge.
This happens visually. There is a Bergman-esque, or 
Persona-like scene at the end when Benigno is in prison that makes this point extremely well. Almodóvar has set up the shot so that the reflections of each man superimpose on each other in the glass partitions; they merge with each other. The scene also establishes 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. The contrast with the central “talk to her” scene will also establish what an extraordinary acting job is done by Javier Carnero as Benigno. His character changes very dramatically after the exposure of what he has done (or, one could say, after he knows he will get caught). The sweetness and gentleness of the nurse are replaced by a kind of grim determination; the effeminate features, the graceful, confident gestures, are all gone; and an almost violent, barely suppressed rage can be detected, all as if to try to suggest again that these two opposed elements can coexist, even as the monstrosity of Benigno’s violation can at the same time be an act of faith and affirmation, that it being the former does not exclude it being the latter. The echo of Kleist’s devil—angel dyad and the familiar moral complexities of film noir are again relevant. (One should note also that the transformation is disturbing too. It faintly suggests that Benigno might have been originally acting out a part, playing himself as an idealized type (“caring and innocent nurse”), and that what we see now is not a new role, but the unadorned Benigno. Whether this changes what I have been calling our “moral hesitation” is quite a complicated issue, as complicated as the question of the difference between being who one is and “playing at being who one is.”)

At any rate, Marco’s reaction to the new Benigno, beginning when Benigno tells him that he wants to marry Alicia, indicates that Marco realizes he had been treating Benigno’s obsession in too mediated, symbolic or expressivist a way, that he had not realized how deadly serious Benigno was about Alicia. And since both Marco and Benigno’s co-worker, Rosa, express what Almodóvar clearly takes to be the standard, reasonable, initially sympathetic audience reaction (the nurse says on the phone to Marco: “He (Benigno) has done a monstrous thing, but that doesn’t mean he shouldn’t be helped”), we also feel somewhat shocked, perhaps guilty in having believed in Benigno’s harmlessness; perhaps engaged too much with the literary and figurative and fantastical dimensions of the actual plot, we might say. We also clearly feel what Marco and Rosa feel: the pull of loyalty to a character in the way in which we might feel such a pull for a brother or sister or child who had done something horrible, where such an act, while a reason to condemn, is not a reason to abandon.

But still, in many ways Talk to Her, by making use of rape, takes the greatest risks with viewer reaction and an obvious question is whether this can be said to work. (There is a much more complicated dimension to this question of the aesthetic success: the fact that for all the pathos and melodrama and even horror, the movie also works as a comedy: a much longer issue.) In Talk to Her, we might say, whether it all “works” or not comes down to an interpretation both of how to characterize the rape—as a straightforward abuse of intimacy and power by a self-absorbed neurotic, or as (at least from Benigno’s point of view) a genuine act of love, even sacrifice (as it turns out); or as a mere case history, the pathological acts of a deluded ill man; or as a quasi-mythic re-enactment of a male fantasy about female dependence or male power. The question of what it means that Benigno’s rape is somehow—and it is not at all clear how—tied to Alicia’s recovery requires some decision about these alternatives, or about how to think all of them together, if they are in some sense all true, as they probably are. Put another way, the movie will sound the right tone, will end up, let us say, credible, if the clear link between Benigno’s monomanic, even psychopathological dedication to Alicia could also seem a version of love, even redemptive love (as if truly powerful or genuine love is only possible just this side of such obsession, perhaps even sometimes indistinguishable from it; or that the idea of romantic love without possessiveness, jealousy, idealization, and even some moral blindness, is all as great a fantasy as Benigno’s. This is another similarity to Ophüls’s Letter.) These are, in sum, the many different factors behind what I would suggest is our hesitation to characterize Benigno as finally belonging to the same category as the Kill Bill rapist.

Almodóvar is clearly aware that he is taking such risks and he marks the fact by opening the movie with Pina Bausch’s avant garde dance, Café Müller. The part of that dance that we see is a mime of two women who are apparently blind, dashing about helplessly and eventually into walls, always threatening to stumble over the chairs in the café, aided by a man who frantically tries to move the chairs out of the way before the dancers stumble. But that particular Bausch dance as a whole is often much more violent, depicting romantic relationships as inherently aggressive, abusive,
and catastrophic, and choreographing men and women frequently hurling each other into walls. Feminist critics have accused her of irresponsibility in presenting such dances without taking a strong position against such violence, and the dance critic Arlene Croce once wrote of Bausch’s use of the “pornography of pain.”

The silent language of dance also introduces the main abstract theme in the film: the relation between speech and silence; the main thematic terrain where the question of the film’s credibility plays out. Speech and silence, both in themselves and as figures (often ironic ones) for agency and passivity or objecthood, must be considered within the many other such images associated with that theme—Alicia’s comatose silence; the struggle against (silent) animals, brute “dumb” beasts (snakes and bulls); Lydia’s silence with Marco about her resumption of her relationship with her former lover; the meaning of Marco’s “expressive” tears (at both the beginning and end, and when he first meets Lydia and is reminded of his former girlfriend, Angela, a particularly angelic-looking actress); the silent movie, The Shrinking Lover, that images in some way the rape itself for Benigno; and then a final Bausch dance (Maura Fogo), this time with a woman rising up from and floating above a line of reclining men, as if a soul set free from the body.

In such a context, it is clear that part of the point of the parallel plot with Marco and Lydia seems to be to emphasize the necessarily incomplete and even deceptive character of spoken conversation, how little gets communicated despite the conversations, especially in comparison with how much can be communicated in silent means. All of this emphasis tends to reduce our confidence that there is such a clear contrast between silence and speech, even “consensual” speech. In the central conversation between Lydia and Marco after the marriage of Marco’s ex, Angela, at an extraordinary Andalusián baroque church in Córdoba, Marco is desperately trying to tell Lydia, finally, everything he had held back about Angela. But they are not really listening to each other. Lydia is herself trying to find a way to confess about her resumption with Niño, Marco realizes he has prevented something and covered something over by, ironically, for once trying to be so honest, by hogging the conversation and so forth. And there are several other examples that are meant to demystify the unquestioned value of speech itself as a vehicle of communication or sign of consent. This contrasting plot suggests that while it is mostly, it is not entirely ironic when Benigno says that his relation with Alicia has got a lot more going for it than most married relationships.

The bizarre silent movie is worth a bit of a digression here too. Originally Almodóvar had included more of the plot, which tells the story of the man’s mother as a great villain. She had murdered the boy’s father and kept him a virtual prisoner, until he was shrunk and liberated by the female scientist. This indicates even more clearly that Benigno views himself as liberated from his own mother by Alicia, even though she has caused him to diminish in stature, and that the scientist asleep figures in his imagination for Alicia in her coma, and that when he enters her vagina in a kind of reverse birth, he means to be there permanently, to die and merge somehow with the scientist.

Almodóvar, as he frequently does, cannot resist presenting some of this story as also an allegory of film and the relation of film to fantasy. There is a shot of the sleeping woman’s face in close-up and of the little man in front of it that echoes almost exactly the scale of thirty-feet-high movie screens to normal persons, suggesting at once that Benigno’s fantasy is an idealization and mythic exaggeration in a filmic sense, and that Almodóvar wants his own film to be viewed like that (expressionistic) silent film: somewhat surreal, more expressive than directly communicative, not a case study, as much at the very edge of moral intelligibility as the attempt to judge the acts of the shrunken lover. We have to be careful here, because it is easy to mis-state the importance of this invocation of the inevitable role of fantasy in love, which all clearly has to do with the contrasting subplot. That is, Benigno is indulging a fantasy, projecting a movie in which the real Alicia can play no real part, contribute nothing. But—and this is the difficult point to state properly—in a more ordinary, less fantastical sense, so is Marco. Lydia is merely a character in Marco’s re-playing the role of Angela, and in which Lydia’s continuing love for Niño is not noticed, is ignored, even by her. She is in that sense, almost as “mute” as Alicia. None of this, of course, means that what Benigno does is the same as what Marco does, but this theme—Marco’s repetition of Angela, Benigno’s repetition of his relation to his mother, Lydia’s repetition with Marco of her relation with Niño, Marco’s repetition of the role of Benigno—is worth an independent discussion.

That Benigno thinks of his rape of Alicia in terms of the silent movie also helps us understand more of the pre-rape scene before Almodóvar
cuts away. On Benigno’s reading, Alfredo, the tiny lover, is entering his beloved’s body forever, in some way merging with her. And we sense some unease as Benigno begins to form the intention to consummate his love of Alicia, something that clearly happens as he is massaging her thighs and recounting the movie. We don’t sense any moral qualms on his part; just that he realizes that he is crossing an absolutely decisive line—after four years when it must have occurred to him often—and that there will be no going back. We don’t exactly know why he thinks things have come to this, why just now they cannot go on as before, but he clearly realizes that now nothing will ever be the same. Given how meticulously he and the other nurses chart Alicia’s periods, he might even know that she is likely to be ovulating and be intending to impregnate her, something that will clearly be discovered. If that is so then he sees himself in some fantasy as sacrificing himself for her, as if he knows, as he says later when he is in prison, “how it will come out,” that she will have the child and re-awaken (but his life will be destroyed).

To return to the choice of the Bausch dance: it is in the face of this particular silent drama that the action of the movie begins. Marco weeps at this spectacle of the futile attempts of men to save women from their blindness and apparently great sorrow; perhaps by this point in the dance, he is also weeping at the futility of any hint of a successful romantic duet. But his tears appear to be an aesthetic response, evoked by admiration of the beauty of the attempt, not prompted by a sadness at the tragedy of failure. This intrigues Benigno, who happens to be sitting next to him, and who looks on in wonder as the tears stream down Marco’s face. And all of this is a preview of sorts, since the dance is clearly meant as a foreboding account both of the suspended state of the two women in the story, Alicia and Lydia, dreamy, blind, as if floating in a void; as well as of the futile but passionate attempt of the male dancer, Benigno, to steer them away from harm, to continue attending to them. That Marco finds all of this so moving is an immediate attraction for Benigno, who has spent the last four years of his life spending all day and many nights ministering to Alicia’s every need and, of course, talking to her.

The next day, he eagerly tells the story of this encounter to Alicia, clearly as moved by the tears as by the performance. And the film is off and running, creating the viewer’s odd but undeniable strong bond with Benigno, and so the hesitation I have been discussing.

I conclude two things from these brief remarks. First, while Benigno’s world is a pathological and ultimately destructive fantasy, aspects of his care for Alicia highlight, in a “mythical” way we might say, dimensions of the status of subjectivity itself. The premise of his actions seems to be that such personhood (and often gender itself) is a normative status, actively conferred rather than found, and that no “scientific” fact settles who is and who is not worthy of such status, and no mere performance can succeed in establishing such a role. As such, it is a status that can be denied or conferred, within social practices and in contexts too complex to allow for easy rules for guidance. Benigno’s act always seems mostly altruistic, dedicated to Alicia, but as we all know, the fantasy that a vegetating person is still a subject, that she merits such status, can also be a destructive and self-serving, self-indulgent fantasy, and of course there are times when we end up not so sure about Benigno in this respect. (It seems to me an open question whether one could characterize this film, for all of Almodóvar’s anti-clericalism, as still profoundly “religious.”) We normally expect that such conferrals must be mutually recognizable to be successful, but the film works both to undermine our natural confidence that the verbal and explicit signs of mutuality, consent, and reciprocity are altogether trustworthy, and at least to suggest that such conferrals and sustained commitments are often required without the availability of such signs and that these acts of faith are dangerously extreme; they can easily tip over into the kind of unintended but real brutality of Benigno’s rape. Love itself is sometimes treated as a species of this type, a “commitment” to another not driven by reflection or reason, something that can have a grip on one even if not reciprocated, never certain or securely established even when the commitment is mutual and “spoken.” This is why the coma image also functions mythically: it raises the similar question of keeping faith with a beloved who has “gone away” in some way, has “become someone else,” but who might return, go right again. (References to theatre, movies, and performing run throughout most of Almodóvar’s movies, and have a lot to say about this theme. Such theatrical exhibitions are not treated as egocentric displays, manipulative forms of emotional control or phoniness, just by being theatrical; but rather as provisional forms of a kind of social address, vaguely interrogative, as if the characters are asking for a response that will confirm the role they want very badly to play. As in “if you treat me as a woman, I will be one,” and the clothes and
feminized behavior are therewith more interrogative, more aspects of a striving, than declamations; are requests to be so treated, sometimes requests offered plaintively, with a kind of pathos. Sometimes of course the external display is a mere disguise, quite unreliable an interpretive guide, as with police badges in *Live Flesh* or nun's habits in *Dark Habits.*

The question of how socially instituted roles, even personhood itself as an instance of such roles, could be said to function successfully (or not) introduces an unwieldy number of large issues. But, in the same uncomfortable way in which Almodóvar is trying to render credible the idea of both condemnation of and solidarity with Benigno, he is deliberately trying to confound a number of the distinctions on which many such roles are founded. The most confounding involve his treatment of the dense, mutually implicating relations between subservience to (obsessive dedication to) another, and such subservience as also a form of mastery or domination. This comes out especially in the gender issue, as those roles are traditionally understood: that is, “womanly” men who function very much as males (“male” nurses) and masculine women who are also very much beloveds, fought over by men (“female” bullfighters). Or, of course, men with breasts, as in *Bad Education.*

Secondly, I have been suggesting that Almodóvar’s treatment does not undermine a moral judgment of Benigno, but qualifies its utimacy. This is a difficult point to make. First, we tend to mean a great many things by “morality,” but I mean the modern residue of Christian humanism (systematized by Kant), where moral injury to another amounts to treating another as a means or object, making oneself an exception, and where moral agency requires a could-have-done-otherwise power of initiating action “because one decided to,” and so where guilt or remorse at having failed to so treat others is the most typical or appropriate reaction. We tend to think of such considerations as so decisively trumping all other sorts of evaluation of acts or persons that any raising of such considerations can sound like a claim for diminished responsibility or a plea for excuses.

But the question is not excusing or forgiving Benigno, certainly not by appealing to any diminished capacity on his part or just by calling him beautiful or aesthetically successful. But what does anyone uncomfortable with what I have called our “moral hesitation” about Benigno really want? That Benigno be punished more? That Alicia remain comatose? That Marco abandon his friend in disgust? Would that make our response more acceptable? The question has more to do with de-coupling a moral judgment from the reaction with which it is deeply linked—blame, itself a kind of sanction that in most contexts seems inevitable, but here seems finally beside the point.

The movie works, I think, by concentrating a good deal of our attention on Marco’s point of view and his reasons for neither abandoning Benigno nor, it is crucial to add yet again, excusing him at all, but for expressing some sort of solidarity with, even partly merging with, Benigno; and those reasons do not rest simply on pity for Benigno’s deluded fantasy world. He seems to have learned that there is something redeemable at the core of Benigno’s fantasy, that his care for Alicia, and especially his desperate attempts to “talk to her,” were acts of faith that he was not capable of, much to his detriment, and that the rape, horrible as it is, still cannot be fully understood except within this pattern of daily, intimate four-year care.

But perhaps the crucial point is much more simple: that Marco has become Benigno’s friend, indeed his only ever friend. And friendships, like erotic love, are not subject to some sort of moral filtering, cannot simply be trumped by moral judgments about the “worthiness” of friends or lovers. (What would the world be like if they were?) What we are to make of this complication is not easy to see. As Marco, in the last scene, senses a future relation with Alicia, he knows he must eventually tell her the whole story of Benigno, and is naïvely convinced that it will all be, as he says to Katerina, the ballet teacher, “simpler” than one imagines. Almodóvar admits his own perplexity about all of this when he has Katerina, his filmic alter ego in effect, respond “I am a ballet teacher, nothing is simple,” as we hear yet again an echo of those Kleistian angels who can also be devils.14

Notes
2 Perhaps the Smiths’ song from the 1980s, “Girlfriend in a Coma,” also deserves a mention. (I am indebted to Jessica Burstein for this reference.)
3 We only hear the story about the mother from Benigno in the office of Alicia’s father, a psychiatrist. He certainly could be lying or exaggerating; by telling the doctor that he washed his mother “front and back,” he could already be trying to create his “cover” for stalking Alicia: that he is harmless because gay or has somehow been rendered asexual.

5 There are of course other fantastic elements in the film drama itself, not the least of which is the way Alicia looks—her muscle tone, weight, complexion and so on—after four years in a coma.

6 Cf. Almodóvar’s remarks: "Benigno is insane, but he has a good heart," and: "he’s a gentle psychopath." Of most obvious relevance for tuis discussion: "His moral sense is different to ours, he’s an innocent who, in his parallel world, has yet to reach adulthood." Almodóvar on Almodóvar, ed. Frederic Strauss (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 213.

7 All this is according to Almodóvar’s commentary on the DVD version of the film.

8 There is also an amazing shot, a kind of close-up of the bull after the goring, that says something like: "I know I am supposed to lose, but you shouldn’t have tried to show me up like that."

9 Again according to Almodóvar’s commentary on the DVD soundtrack.

10 In fact, the relationship of the two men is more like a love affair than a friendship, romantically charged, if not physical. It is by taking to Alicia that Benigno finds something he has clearly never had—a deep friendship, but with Marco.

11 The role of friendship is stressed in another, related way in Almodóvar’s comments: "I treat the character of Benigno as I would treat a friend," and: "It’s like when a friend has done something terrible and you decide to turn a blind eye, just so as to keep them as a friend." And finally: "Deep down I like Benigno’s moral ambiguity. I think he’s one of my best male characters; and Javier Camara, one of my best actors." Almodóvar on Almodóvar, p. 219.

12 The same scale is shown in Bad Education, as the two boys and their first sexual intimacy is shown from the back of the movie house, with the huge melodrama dwarfing the real characters.

13 This raises another issue worthy of an independent discussion: why Marco agrees, at Benigno’s lawyer’s request, to lie, not to tell Benigno that Alicia has awakened. I don’t think we are meant to believe that keeping this news from Benigno provokes his suicide (it might have been much worse for Benigno to know that Alicia was alive and that he was locked up and could not be with her). But it does raise as a question why, from Marco’s point of view, he does not “talk” to Benigno about this.

14 Cf. Almodóvar on Almodóvar, in which Almodóvar says about Teik to Her, quite rightly I think, "But he [Benigno] falls in love with Alicia and that changes him, literally. As it would a child unprepared to live an adult love. In Teik to Her, Benigno is a kind of angel" (p. 213).