

mind, city life gave writers a decisive impulse for creating remarkable novels such as *The Idiot*, *The Border Town* and *An Imaginary Life*.

NOTES

1. Both articles are published in the first volume of Alekseev's collections. See: Alekseev.
2. OED, <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>.
3. Emphasis in the original text.

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The Escape from Urban Neurosis in Almodóvar's Films

Notions about and definitions of "the city" are extremely diverse and have been in constant transition and reformulation from their beginnings in ancient times to our present postmodern era. Along with the temporal and topographical setting, the perspective from which a city is viewed determines responses to the central question of "What is a city?" This study explores the concept of the urban space in relation to its effect on the individuals that inhabit this physical setting—that is, the city seen as a space that molds the psychosocial experience of the human being.

In this article, the focus is on the representation of the city and the individual in Spanish film. In the case of Spain, the massive exodus of the rural population to the city began to occur during the 1960s and has continued ever since. The demographic figures reflect the rapid rise of the urban population in Spain: it was at 56.5% in the late 1960s, 75.4% during the 1990s, and 77% in 2005.¹ The city has thus become the primary living and working space for over three-quarters of the Spanish population. In light of this, it is no surprise that from the second half of the 1980s onward, many films revolving around the subject of personal crisis appear in Spanish cinema where this crisis is linked directly to the urban setting. One of the Spanish film directors who repeatedly explores this theme is the recently much-acclaimed Pedro Almodóvar. This renowned director has produced numerous films in which "Almodovarian" women (*las mujeres de Almodóvar*), such as Carmen Maura, have become the center of attention.² In Almodóvar's films, personal crisis can be seen, mostly, through the female characters.³ In these characters, a struggle is observed in relation to their urban environment: the city is portrayed negatively, and it is the source of all the problems of Almodovarian women.

The characters' crisis is evoked through a dichotomy between city life and country life.⁴ The city is a place that oppresses and alienates the human being. This alienation and oppression is the result of the impersonal and hypersensory space, which increases the urbanites' exposure to nerve-damaging situations. The lack of a slower and more stable pace of life, which can be found in the countryside, is one of the elements contributing to the city's neurotic environment. Other aspects, such as dehumanization and violence, in addition to the fast pace of life, turn the city into an inhospitable and undesirable location. Compared to this location, the village gains an idealized status, becoming a utopia. However, the longed-for countryside is not that of the farmer; rather, it is something that does not exist—as Raymond

Williams indicates, it is "a suburban or dormitory dream" (47). Furthermore, the idealization takes place because return to the countryside is impossible; the nostalgia created in the city is for a past that David Lowenthal describes as unrecoverable. This is why the village, although unrecoverable, appears as a type of mental-health retreat center, where urban characters can temporarily escape from the city's neurotic reality in order to regenerate themselves.

It is within this specific framework that Almodóvar's films, and especially his female characters, are inscribed. The tension suffered due to the urban setting, which causes the characters to search and long for regeneration, is a salient theme in two of Almodóvar's films: *Kika* (1994) and *The Flower of My Secret* (1996). In both of these films, the main characters are women, live in Madrid, and experience undesired and extreme situations.

In *Kika*, the eponymous main character is initially presented as a passive figure who does not have much control over her environment. Kika's representation connects her partially with the rural female figure. At first glance, her country-like qualities are seen in her physical appearance and her clothing: she is a plump woman with soft features who wears warm springtime colors along with a flower-print dress. Her personal qualities also tie her with the rural space since she is an optimistic and kindhearted person. As Alejandro Yarza indicates, Kika's relation with nature stresses the woman's maternal role (161). This role is also presented through the decorative objects in her home. Among these objects, we find that the armchairs and the cup on her bedside table have the black-and-white motif of a cow's hide. As Yarza points out, this visual allusion to a cow—and therefore to milk—is symbolic because it represents nature's most nutritious and nurturing substance, a substance associated with Kika's maternal qualities (161). However, Kika does not have the opportunity to become a mother. On the contrary, the traditional female role appears subverted by the fact that Kika is a sexually liberated woman living in an urban setting. The sexual relations that she has with Nicolás and Ramón, who happen to be stepfather and son, highlight her liberty, but at the same time become a source of her emotional instability. The problems resulting from this double relationship are worsened when she is incidentally raped by a man who burglarizes her home.

After the rape Kika shows great inner strength, and her words reveal her attempt to return to a normal life: "these things happen each and every day and today it was my turn."⁵ Nevertheless, a return to normality becomes difficult, since her violation is broadcast on television. Hence, Kika suffers a double invasion of privacy, first, the rape, and second, the emotional violation and invasion that results from televising the crime. As soon as the rape is televised, the main character realizes the unhappiness that she feels, not only because of the rape, but also because of her relationship with Ramón, who worries more about his cameras than about her. To make matters

worse, the two people she trusts the most, her friend and her maid, have lied to her. Kika's disappointment in the people who surround her, because of their lack of support, makes her aware that she is completely alone.

In the other film, *The Flower of My Secret*, the main character, Leo, is alone as well. At the beginning, Leo appears as a defenseless, insecure, and overall unhappy woman. One of the reasons for her unhappiness is her marriage. The relationship with her husband is exemplified by the boots that he gives her as a gift: the boots are too tight, symbolizing a marriage which oppresses and hurts her. Leo's emotional situation worsens when her husband becomes unfaithful by having an affair with her best friend. Just as in *Kika*, we observe how both main characters are betrayed by those closest to them. Jacques Derrida, in his study of friendship, highlights the figure of the best friend as a projection of the ideal image. However, in both films, friendship ends up being unstable and the ideal image projected onto the friend is shattered. There is no place for ideal friendship or for lasting and satisfactory relationships in the urban setting where the films' main characters live.

The desperation and disappointment that Leo goes through because of her husband's lack of interest and her best friend's betrayal, as well as because of her own unsuccessful literary work, are visually represented by the dark glasses that she wears most of the time. José Colmeiro indicates that the dark glasses "act as a defense mechanism against reality" (121).⁶ Nevertheless, it could be argued that these glasses make her life darker, since they blacken her vision of reality by acting as a filter. It is precisely this darkness that prevents her from adequately solving her problems. Hence, Leo decides to commit suicide. Her suicide attempt fails, thanks to her mother's voice which symbolizes her origins and the country life. The importance of the union between the main character, an urban figure, and her origins is represented in the suicide scene. After Leo ingests a lethal dose of pills, she is lying on her bed. Here the camera shoots a detailed close-up of her eye: the eye closes slowly and at the same time a black fade-out that lasts eleven seconds is superimposed, producing a symbolic death. Nonetheless, her "death" is interrupted after a few seconds when the telephone rings and her mother's voice leaves a message. Even though the fade-out continues, her mother's voice—the voice of her origins—awakens her, and when the scene completes its fade-out, the camera is still shooting her eye which now is open. Its effect is to exemplify the power of "resurrection" embedded within one's origin.

Leo's mother, representative of country life, is one of the characters who labels life in the city as an unbearable experience. She is not happy living in Madrid and, through her comments overflowing with nostalgia about her village days, we see the city as a threatening environment: "Why should I go outside? To have a skinhead kill me or a car run over me?" Leo herself is

aware of the harm that the city inflicts on her mother when she says: "being used to the village she will suffocate here." The city is portrayed as a dangerous, depressing, and suffocating space. Besides these aspects, the film portrays an obsession with money that keeps the city moving and cancels out the importance of the individual. This dehumanization is exemplified through the conversation that Leo holds with her editor who pressures her to meet the terms of her contract for economic reasons. Her publishers do not care that she has evolved as a writer. For them, a change in her narrative orientation translates into a threat to sale figures. They do not care about Leo's emotional state, and harass and threaten her with a lawsuit for not meeting the agreed terms. They are preoccupied with money at the expense of the individual. Consequently, the relationship between the publishers and the main character remains purely within economic parameters.

In *Kika* the city is characterized by an even more explicit dehumanization, presented to us by means of a violent type of journalism that does not respect the boundaries between private and public life, guided only by the profits to be made. Once more, economic interest comes before an individual's well-being. It is within this framework that a feminine figure who personifies the lack of a natural order can be found: Andrea Caracortada, the *cyborg* woman (Smith 50). Andrea is the super-urban woman: half human, half machine. Andrea's aesthetic distances her from the organic world. The suit that she wears to obtain images for her television program truly transforms her into a machine: she is dressed in a tight black outfit and wears a helmet equipped with a video camera and a light. These mechanical objects simultaneously replace her real eye and turn her into a sort of cyclopean monster. Furthermore, she embodies all of the city's monstrosities as well as television's cruel and violent evolution. Andrea has a television program called *Lo peor del día* [*The Worst of the Day*] where all the atrocities that happen in Madrid are broadcast. Among these are suicide, murder, prostitution, rape and child pornography. The events composing *Lo peor del día* give spectators the feeling that Madrid is a totally corrupt and violent space that could perfectly connect it with the apocalyptic moment.

The alienation of the individual is also part of the city's negative aspect. The urban mass ignores any feelings that urbanites may have, something that is represented in *The Flower of My Secret* when Leo is knocked down by a stampede of people. After her suicide attempt, Leo, in a state of desperation, goes out into the street and ends up in the middle of a student demonstration. The camera is placed inside the mass of student protesters, making the film spectator feel disoriented and lightheaded as Leo does. The main character is unable to make her way through, surrounded by the shouts and whistles of the demonstrators, who contribute even more to her confusion. Leo feels alone and abandoned in such a big crowd, and not a single person, from all

the surrounding crowd, notices the state she is in. The camera then pans back up to shoot an aerial view of the situation, and this image shows Leo surrounded and trapped by the mass, a view that makes it difficult to discern one individual from so many others. As a result, individuals are transformed into a uniform mass.

All the negative attributes of the city—the violence, the alienation and dehumanization—contribute to the postmodern woman's crisis. With a lack of satisfaction as well as the experience of fragmentation, the urbanite needs and longs for regeneration. Both Kika and Leo have experienced specific situations that destabilize them and, therefore, the return to country life is vital in order to escape from urban neurosis and to recover their lost strength and direction. The village is the place chosen by Almodóvar as the source of regeneration. It is here that the urban figures can take temporary refuge from the chaos of the city.

In *Kika*, the return to the village remains beyond the narration although it is implicitly suggested at the end of the film. The main character experiences a series of violent events: her rape and its broadcast on television and the brutal domestic outcome where everything is death and blood. After all of this, Kika is, not surprisingly, in a state of shock. Nevertheless, she still has enough kindness left to help a stranger by the roadside. In opposition to the dark, bloody, and barred-window home that she has left behind, waits the free and natural space where she picks up the stranger. When she gets out of the car, she is surrounded by sunflower fields that fill the screen with an overflowing yellow luminosity, creating a fantastic and idyllic environment. The wedding in the village—to which the stranger invites her—is a very significant element because, as Jose Manuel del Pino indicates, it symbolizes a celebration of life (165). Kika, by accepting the invitation, achieves a new sense of hope for something much better than her relationship with previous boyfriend, Ramón, and the affair with his stepfather, Nicolás. As she herself states, the decision to return to the village works as an escape from the city's chaotic reality.

Kika's lack of direction is caused by her life in the city, which distances her from the country life and confuses her. In this manner, the village is nostalgically presented as something idealized, as something necessary that has been lost. To reaffirm that the main character's decision to return to the village with the stranger is the correct one, the last shot filmed by the camera is the road's straight dividing line. The white continuing line on the blacktop that appears at the end of the film seems to indicate that Kika is on the right road, a stable and unified path which will lead her to an adequate regeneration.

In *The Flower of My Secret* regeneration is part of the narration. The road taken by Leo and her mother to the village represents reunion with their

origins and the organic world. Their symbolic return to the village works as a type of spa in order to bring them out of their personal crisis and help them obtain a very necessary regeneration. Such a process is presented in the sequence of four scenes which begins with a close-up of wild yellow flowers—an image linked with the one in *Kika*. The lack of direction evoked in *Kika* reverberates in *The Flower of My Secret* through the words that the mother uses to describe herself and Leo as “cows without cowbells,” suggesting that they are lost. The solution proposed by the mother—which coincides with solutions throughout Almodóvar’s other films—is a return to one’s origin, to the birthplace, in order to recuperate the tie to roots and traditions.

Leo’s recovery is effected by the scene where the camera moves to a close-up on village ladies making lace. Here she has temporarily entered the countryside realm, evidenced by her clothing: a straw hat and a printed dress. She even sings a traditional folk song along with the other ladies. The lyrics of the song are significant because they stress traditional activities and the concept of belonging:

I am from Almagro,
I am from the rich river bank,
where lace is made,
and eggplants are cooked.⁷

This scene emphasizes the characteristics that give the village a sense of community—defined in the terms of Ferdinand Tönnies, where there is a direct relation between the individual and the product—here seen in the elaboration of lace. In Tönnies’ postulation, which follows Marxist ideology, one of the differences between a society and a community is that the first is composed of individuals united by artificial and mechanical means, while the second contains individuals who depend on each other and on the land, thus forming meaningful bonds. Craftwork products such as lace belong to the community realm because there is no mediator between the individual and the product. These products also tend to be handcrafted by a group, as shown in the aforementioned scene. By singing traditional songs, using traditional proverbs, and making lace, Leo enters a “dimension outside of time” (del Pino 168).⁸ The main character gains the feeling of belonging to a community, reaffirming also her rural origins. Thanks to her integration into this space, Leo experiences regeneration and is capable of returning to the city to face her predestined urban life.

The return to the city is important in relation to the regeneration taking place in the village or in the countryside. If the rural space and time were to be a possible and permanent reality, nostalgia and its associated positive qualities would be lost. Thanks to the distance produced in the individual, the liaison between tradition and origin is something positive. If that dis-

tance were not to exist, the country realm could acquire negative qualities. As a result, personal regeneration is contained under an umbrella of nostalgia, because a permanent return to that environment is impossible.⁹ The notion of impossible recovery is what allows Almodóvar’s feminine figures to obtain the much-needed regeneration. This is how the Almodovarian women, although belonging to another environment, are capable of acquiring a link that connects them with the longed-for country life, in order to gain the necessary meaning and direction to survive in their urban world.

As seen in this exploration of the city and the urban women portrayed in two films by Almodóvar, the city is a space that adversely affects the human beings that reside there. Seen in these terms, the city is stripped of the positive qualities that were attributed to it in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. Instead, the city is negatively depicted as a space where the pace of life is accelerated, where violence persists, and dehumanization characterizes interactions among people. The urban space re-molds and transforms traditional rural human relationships and is an obstacle to the creation of necessary and long-lasting social bonds. As a result, the city causes individuals to experience a fragmentary and unsatisfactory life. However, this space is also the one in which individuals are destined to remain. Ultimately, the filmic portrayal of the city in such a way causes its audiences to reflect upon the society that we have created and in which we live.

NOTES

1. These statistics have been obtained through the webpage of the Global Virtual University which employs the United Nations Common Database. See “Works Cited” for full details of this source.
2. Most recently, of course, Almodóvar has worked with Penélope Cruz in his latest film *Volver* (2006).
3. This kind of crisis is a generalized phenomenon that appears not only in Almodóvar’s films but also in the work of other Spanish directors such as Julio Medem, Pilar Miró, and Benito Zambrano.
4. The relevance of the dichotomy of city/country in a character’s crisis was also a common feature in the Spanish literature of the so-called “Generation of 98.” For the writers of this generation of 1898, the country embodied apathy and intellectual stagnation; however, it was also the space that contained the essence of tradition. On the other hand, the city represented the desired but feared European modernity. Even though this dichotomy is still present in today’s cultural sensibility, the values attributed to each term have been altered. The city, along with progress, no longer shows favorable characteristics but rather has been converted into a space that alienates and oppresses the human being. Hence, the country acquires an idealized position. For an extensive analysis of the reformulation of the values of the “Generation of 98” see

José M. del Pino's study.

5. All translations of the film dialogue are my own.

6. Author's translation.

7. The lyrics in Spanish are as follows:

Soy de Almagro,
soy de la rica ribera,
donde se hacen los encajes,
y se guisan las berenjenas.

8. Author's translation.

9. The impossibility of a permanent return to the rural environment is twofold. On one hand, the real situation of Spanish villages, especially in Castile and Aragon, is one of desolation since many have been abandoned because of people moving to the city where there are more services and job opportunities. Overall, villages are places to spend the weekend or a summer vacation. On the other hand, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the country space longed for is one that never existed because it is an idealized image fabricated by urban inhabitants. Hence, the country has been stripped of all its negative qualities and is able to function as a restorative space.

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Circumscribing Urban Space and Its Connotations in J.R. Léveillé's *New York Trip* and *The Setting Lake Sun*

As well-known Canadian architect Étienne Gaboury wrote in an email:

[A] city is clustered architecture. Public exterior, as opposed to private interior space, is organized to foster human interaction and well-being. Like architecture, a city is successful when it functions well, when it has order and proper scale, and is full of delight. Its beauty is contingent on the beauty of its buildings and structures as well as their sensitive and dynamic juxtaposition. Unlike its rural antithesis, urban space has physical and social density as its essential characteristic. A successful city is one that is intellectually and emotionally enticing, generates a sense of comfort and security and allows for the greatest range of environmental and human experiences. It makes you feel good, it enhances human interaction and fosters economic, cultural and social development. Cities are organic structures that grow from a region and its environment and reflect the values and customs of its citizens, and beautiful cities are as much a result of inspired politicians as they are of creative planning and talented designers.

This particular definition of a city correlates well with an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing what a city could represent and how it might function in literature, and more specifically in fiction. The city—seen as real, imaginary, virtual or symbolic space—can be a very physical or abstract entity, as countless authors have shown over the course of many centuries. Utopian mythical visions such as El Dorado, or futuristic cities such as those often proposed in science fiction, offer remarkable insights into the mindset and ideology of their creators. These invented places, alluring and wonderful as they may be, stand in stark opposition to dystopian visions, such as the notorious soulless city described in *1984*. However, hovering in the middle ground between the best and the worst of all possible mindscapes, are very realistic portraits of places that actually do exist. When such environments are described, it is always fascinating to explore the *Weltanschauung* that an author shares with his or her readers. One of the early theoreticians of social criticism in literature, Lucien Goldmann posits that both philosophy and literature, while being "on different levels, [are] expressions of a vision of the world (*vision du monde*) and . . . that these visions of the world are not individual facts but social facts" (46). In certain novels, authors can choose to be