

## Freaking *Talk to Her*

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The freak no longer exists.

It might seem paradoxical to start an article on freaks by proclaiming their disappearance, but already in 1984 Leslie Fiedler—author of the pioneering *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Inner Self* (1987)—prognosticated in his article “The Tyranny of the Normal” the disappearance—through surgery and other medical treatments—of the physical freak.

As its Latin roots suggest (*monstrare* means both “to show” and “to warn”), the word “monster” was associated in early times with religious omens. With the advent of the Enlightenment, the monster of religious thought—supra-natural and symbolic—became progressively abstract and lay, and began to be interpreted through two normative systems, the medical and the juridical (Canguilhem 32). In that way, the monster becomes the freak. As Garland Thomson asserts, “the freak discourse’s genealogy” is a “movement from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant” (3). The science of teratology (from the Greek *teras*, malformed fetus) was instrumental in the naturalization of monstrosity. Founded by Etienne and Isidore Saint-Hilaire—the latter coined the term in 1832 in his book *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l’organisation chez l’homme et les animaux*—teratology naturalized monstrosity by interpreting it as an anomaly explainable by natural laws and causes whose unveiling would help understand physical normality (Canguilhem 39; Wilson 173–79; Huet 108). Teratology “marked the consolidation . . . of the medicalization of the freakish body that characterizes the modern period, the moment when all forms of bodily difference were scientifically catalogued and subsumed within knowable categories” (Durbach 22).<sup>1</sup> Alongside this normalization, the term “freak”—short for “freak of nature”—began to be used consistently to designate people with severe physical deformities: “In the period between 1847 and 1914—the heyday of the modern freak show—it quickly became the most common way to refer to”

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individuals “who exhibited a congenital bodily anomaly for profit” (1). As Durbach argues, “freak shows were thus part of a much larger scientific discourse of the corporeal norm that arose around the middle of the nineteenth century” (22).

After World War I, the welfare state undertook the care of individuals with physical malformations, institutionalizing the freak, a form of social marginalization that began to be denounced in the 1960s: “Building on the claims of other civil rights movements, which aimed to eliminate discrimination based on sex or race, disability rights activists argued that, rather than eliminating the disabled from the community, accommodations needed to be made to allow those with differently abled bodies equal access to all the rights and privileges of citizenship” (Durbach 182; see also Kerchy 3–4). In recent decades, the fashion for tattoos, the advances in surgery that make feasible the augmentation and diminution of all sorts of bodily parts, and the increasing “cyborgization” of the human body have pushed the limits of physical manipulation, further normalizing the freak of nature and rendering the concept obsolete.

Simultaneously with the “normalization” of the physical freak in the 1970s, the word *freak* began to be employed at the time as a term of defiant self-definition, as attested by its use in popular culture, especially music and TV talk shows. In the rock arena, the term *freak*—with the implication of unconventional in appearance and customs—was used in 1966 in the title, *Freak Out!*, of the first album by Frank Zappa’s Mothers of Invention, in which the band sings about the “rising tide of hungry freaks,” “the left-behinds of the great society.” From the 1970s, the rising presence on talk shows of “misfits, monsters, trash, and perverts”—previously invisible in the media—redrew the lines between the private and the public, “the normal and the abnormal,” and redefined “abnormality and deviance” (Gansom 4–5, 9). Some critics referred to these TV programs as “freak shows,” a usage that substantiates the irrevocable semantic displacement of *freak* from the domain of physical deformities to the realm of moral or psychological deviance.

The two-century long transformation of the freak from the physical into the psychological, from a definition based on external features to a characterization through “internal” ones, and from a determination regulated by the social body to a self-definition grounded on the rejection of mainstream values confirms Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s assertion that “the freak of nature” is actually “a freak of culture” (xviii). This short account of the freak’s evolution and eventual normalization attests that the freak—understood as a deviation, and measurement, of the norm—has not disappeared but has simply suffered a transformation.<sup>2</sup> Long gone are the days in which the freaks were passive objects of voyeuristic contemplation.

The physical freak no longer exists, but the freak as a “disturbingly deviant” being (Fiedler, “The Tyranny” 40) has not disappeared. It has taken refuge inside “normal” bodies; it has become a psychological or a moral freak. Almodóvar’s films are full of them, “deviant” characters who push the boundaries of the acceptable. As a result, his films explore the moral limits of the human, as we will see in an analysis of his film *Talk to Her* (2002). The physical freak triggered in the spectators who crowded the nineteenth-century shows a mixture of sympathy and revulsion. In a similar vein, Almodóvar’s skillful combination of techniques of identification and estrangement makes it exceedingly difficult to render an unequivocal (moral) judgment on his freakish characters. While in the nineteenth century the medical discourse no longer classified physically deformed individuals as monsters but simply as deviations from the norm, some of Almodóvar’s characters are distinguished by extreme forms of moral and psychological behavior that takes them to the frontiers of the human and into conflict with the law—the norm that draws the limits of the acceptable—with often tragic consequences.

Extravagance, singularity, otherness, estrangement, difference, empowerment: these are some of the features that characterize the psychological freak in our times. Still, even after undergoing such a radical cultural transformation, the freak has kept its ultimate defining feature as a locus of liminality of the human, although that limit is no longer physical but instead psychological and/or moral. For this reason, any manifestation of freakness will entail an examination and a questioning of the norms that delimit acceptable behaviors. Being at or beyond the boundary of written or unwritten laws, the moral freak will always be a challenge to normalizing values. As Fiedler argues, an examination of the strangest human manifestations—he refers to cases of physical deformity, but his argument is applicable also to psychological extremes—involves a revelation of our “secret self,” which he understands as that which makes us appear as “freaks to ourselves” (“The Tyranny” 42). In an updated language, the “secret self” or interior freak could be called the stranger in us, whose examination unveils the tenuous line that delimits normality. In other words, in many of Almodóvar’s films, moral freaks act as mirrors in which the spectators are forced to contemplate themselves, to consider their own strangeness. In them, the anomalous becomes the measurement of the normal. In the words of Thomson, “[t]he unexpected body” generates “narratives and practices that probe the contours and boundaries of what we take to be human” (1).

Cinema has had a central role in the transformation and displacement of the freak, as Durbach contends:

By the 1930s, not only had the cinema driven the freak show to the margins of popular culture, but in the process it had absorbed its monsters,

thus rendering exhibitions of human oddities obsolete. Audiences were still demanding to be frightened by abnormal bodies, but these no longer appeared in the form of the “freak of nature.” Rather, by the 1930s horror movies had emerged as a popular cinematic genre. These films featured fantasy monsters that, like freaks, tapped into a variety of cultural anxieties that were being played out at the site of the deformed body. (174)

This absorption of the freak by the screen, its transformation from a living curiosity into a ghostly image of terror, entailed much more than a displacement of the freak show’s venue. Cinema does not function as a neutral medium in its adoption of the freak but modifies the way the freak is gazed upon and the ways spectators process it. The notable case of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), a display of multifarious exemplars of anomalous bodies, is actually an exception. In film, the freak is rarely a physical freak, but more often a moral or psychological deviant. Film changes not only the freak’s material manifestation (from a real person in a stall to an image on a screen) but also its effects, its relationship with the spectators. While it has some features in common with the experience of gazing at actual deformed bodies, the contemplation of moral freaks presents some radical innovations. These two novelties—the nature of the freak and the response it generates—evince that the filmic freak has imaginary, epistemological, and moral dimensions that are very different from those of the freak of nature.

Voyeuristic gazing at physical, moral, and psychological anomalies was a self-defining practice ingrained in nineteenth-century bourgeois society, as attested by the fashionable trend of visiting jails, hospitals, and madhouses. A paradigmatic example of the vogue is the visit Flaubert and Maxime du Camp paid in their 1849–50 trip through the Middle East to a hospital for syphilitic eunuchs, who at the command of their doctor showed their anal cankers to the curious Western visitors (Brown 244). In films about morally anomalous individuals, spectators seem able to gaze at moral freaks with impunity, but on surrendering to their scopie drive, the gaze gets turned on themselves. In film, the moral freak is not passively observed and analyzed, but returns the spectators’ gaze, not literally—if there is ever a literal gaze—but indirectly, by working as a mirror in which spectators are forced to contemplate themselves and question the foundations of their values. As Grosz contends, “the viewer’s horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of his or her own identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from one’s self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible” (65). The spectators in shows of the bodily deformed knew they were not like the freaks on exhibit, but such is not the case for the spectators of filmic freaks.

While the visitors to freak shows contemplated the results of nature's deviations from physical normality, the spectators of films such as *Talk to Her* and other Almodóvar films confront deviances from moral norms that question the frontiers of the acceptable and show the pliant limits of human behavior and morality. Almodóvar specializes in inducing in the spectator an attraction to human beings with apparently questionable behaviors, and frequently does so by exploiting the voyeurism consubstantial to both cinema and the freak shows. In his films, however, the spectators do not set the rules as the visitors to freak exhibits in the nineteenth century did. As a result, viewers of Almodóvar's films end up wavering on their moral judgments, unable to render a condemnation that a priori would seem straightforward. Filmic freaks shift the balance of power, deposing the spectators from their governing position.

Voyeurism is central to *Talk to Her*, functioning mainly as a device that sets in motion the deepest drive of the film, Benigno's longing for mimetic fusion with Alicia. "Mimetism" should be understood here as a deep-seated desire, a foundation of the subject. It is through the ability to identify with others—an ability that is "older" than any self-determination of the subject—that one becomes a subject, and visuality plays a fundamental role in that process. Although not dependent on them, the previous statements would seem to find confirmation in recent discoveries in neuroscience. At the end of the 1980s, in a lab in Parma, Italy, Giacomo Rizzolatti and collaborators discovered a group of specialized neurons—dubbed mirror neurons—that have generated great excitement and controversy in the field of neuroscience. According to their proponents, mirror neurons grant human beings the ability to predict the intentions and feelings of other humans, as well as the capacity to imitate their actions. It is as if mirror neurons, argues V. S. Ramachandran in *The Tell-Tale Brain*, were the instrument used by nature to create a virtual simulation of other people's intentions. They are indispensable to the ability to adopt another person's point of view; without them neither language, nor culture, nor empathy would be possible. In them, contends Ramachandran, the frontier between self and other is erased, and the only thing that prevents one from constantly imitating the actions of other persons, or feeling what they feel, must be circuits that inhibit a total identification. In *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar's twist—more theoretical than realistic—consists in having a protagonist, the nurse Benigno, who lacks, or loses, the necessary inhibition to prevent a total identification with another character, the comatose Alicia.

Chronologically, *Talk to Her* begins with Benigno spying on Alicia from his apartment window while she rehearses in a dancing school across the street. After following her home one day, he makes an appointment with her father, a psychiatrist, as an excuse to snoop around the house, where he finds Alicia's room and takes a hair clip as a memento. Although a bit more discreet, or perhaps just shier, Marco also spies on Alicia when he first sees her

in the hospital through her room's half-open door. And so, the spectators spy on her, following Marco's gaze and morbid curiosity. Voyeurism draws the spectators into the film and toward Alicia's body, but ultimately takes them into Benigno's mind.

As a mechanism of identification, mimesis is foregrounded from the beginning of *Talk to Her* through the ballet that opens the film. The two blind women that stumble around a room in the ballet will be later identified as stand-ins for the two comatose protagonists, while the show itself is a tool to present the two male characters, the initially self-absorbed, sentimental Marco and the caring, and daring, Benigno, who turns out to be as able a reader of the blind women in the ballet as he will be an interpreter for the comatose women in the hospital. Through Benigno's encouragement, Marco will progressively come out of his emotional shell and learn to love again. In the end, this educational process will lead Marco to make the decision to "imitate" Benigno, to live for him, to become a mimetic replacement for the dead nurse.

The defining moment in the film is the unseen rape of Alicia by Benigno, which leads to his incarceration and eventually to his suicide. As a human being who deviates from the moral norm—as a moral freak—Benigno inspires in the spectators a combination of sympathy and revulsion similar to the one provoked by the freaks of nature in the nineteenth-century shows. Almodóvar elicits the sympathy of the spectator through various stratagems that make it difficult to pass an unequivocal judgement on Benigno, despite his rape of Alicia. One such stratagem is to make Alicia "wake up" as a consequence of her pregnancy. In the introductory pages to the script, Almodóvar lists among the sources for the film a real case that happened in Romania. A young man—a night watchman in a morgue—raped a dead young woman, and as a result she came back to life (she was not actually dead, but suffering from a type of catatonia). Full of gratitude, her family secured a lawyer's services for the rapist and visited him in jail. "Para la justicia el chico era un simple violador, pero para la familia, que vivía la realidad según sus sentimientos, el chico le había devuelto la vida a su hija" (For the justice system, the boy was a simple rapist, but for the family, who lived reality according to their feelings, he had resurrected her), writes Almodóvar (*Hable* 9, 10). As in the Romanian case, the positive, if unintended, consequence of Benigno's criminal act facilitates positive reactions on the spectators' part.

By restoring Alicia to the world of the living, by granting life—a life that he never doubted was in Alicia when she was comatose—Benigno has to lose his: a quid pro quo that is another manifestation, if an askew one, that the deepest form of identification with another is to give one's life so that the other can live. Obviously, Benigno's death is not as straightforward as that—he does not die so that Alicia can live again—but his suicide is another of Almodóvar's tactics to engender sympathy for the rapist. Furthermore, Be-

nigno's education of Marco about the world of feelings—Marco's sensitivity is initially misdirected inward towards his suffering ego—also facilitates the spectators' identification with Benigno. Marco's self-centeredness is apparent at the beginning of the film in the self-pity he feels for a rejection he is unable to overcome. Throughout the film, Benigno takes Marco out of his self-centeredness and teaches him to live and feel for others. Among many other things, *Talk to Her* is about the education of feelings, about giving them the right direction, about self-abnegation.

However, the key element in preventing the outright condemnation of Benigno is paradoxically the rape scene itself—or, rather, its omission from the film. Benigno's retelling to Alicia of *Amante menguante* (*The Shrinking Lover*), the silent film he had seen the night before, is arguably the crucial moment in *Talk to Her*: “Es que anoche vi una película muda que me ha dejado trastornado” (Last night I saw a silent film that has left me very disturbed), Benigno tells his inert listener. “Nunca se había sentido tan turbado por sus propias palabras” (Never in his life had he been so disturbed by his own words), points out Almodóvar in the script (142); and when Benigno concludes his tale with the words, “Y Alfredo se queda dentro de ella, para siempre” (And Alfredo stays inside her forever), Almodóvar explains: “La gravedad de su tono imprime a sus palabras un significado tan físico como metafísico” (*Hable* 143) (The gravity of his tone confers to his words a meaning that is both physical and metaphysical). “Metaphysical” might not be the most appropriate term here, but it can be surmised that Almodóvar means the act that follows after Benigno's final words—his rape of Alicia—has a dimension that takes it beyond the immediate physical sense. By making love to Alicia, by possessing her, Benigno is not moved simply by physical desire; above all, he is compelled to imitate Alfredo's utopian fusion with his lover, and penetrates Alicia with the naïve desire to finally become one with her forever. After Alicia is brought to the hospital and he is put in charge of her care, Benigno begins to devote all his free time to living for her by doing all the things she loved to do—reading, going to the ballet, watching silent films. Benigno strives to become one with Alicia, and he finally accomplishes his utopian aspiration by attempting to do literally what in *Amante menguante* Alfredo does figuratively. The size difference between Alfredo and his lover, and the fact that he penetrates her with his whole body, never to come out again, make the silent film a figurative fable, not a realistic tale, but Benigno, a naïve, literal reader, is unable to tell the difference.

After finishing his telling of *Amante menguante*, Benigno, identifying himself with Alfredo, “imitates” what he has seen in the silent film. In so doing, he shows his inability to tell the difference between literality and metaphor, between reality (his and Alicia's) and the imaginary (the silent film), between self (his) and other (Alicia). A caring person, but also a rapist, Be-

nigno is a moral freak, a liminal being who is consequently characterized by “sexual and moral ambiguity” (D’Lugo 113). As a moral freak, Benigno ends up generating the same mixture of attraction and revulsion—of identification and difference—provoked by the physical freaks in the nineteenth-century shows. The spectators’ reaction to Benigno—likely neither total sympathy nor total condemnation—lies in an uncomfortable and untenable middle realm that the film establishes through the omission of the rape—an ellipsis laden with meaning—and through the depiction of Benigno as an “innocent” being who is unable to tell the difference between the figural and the literal. In an “Autoentrevista” (“Self-Interview”) published with the script, Almodóvar declares that he used *Amante menguante* as a “tapadera” (smokescreen), “[p]ara tapar lo que realmente está ocurriendo en la habitación de Alicia. No quiero mostrárselo al espectador” (in order to hide what really is going on in the room. I don’t want to show it to the spectator) (“Autoentrevista” 216). In fact, the silent film does not really cover up Benigno’s act; on the contrary, by not showing it, he gives it an added meaning that would be impossible to convey had Almodóvar chosen to show the rape explicitly. By omitting it, Almodóvar enables Benigno to depict the scene on his own terms—his innocence in attempting to imitate what he saw in *Amante menguante*—curtailing the damning gravity his act would have if Almodóvar had decided to show the physical act of Benigno’s possession of Alicia. Almodóvar’s “cover-up” is his way of restricting the spectator’s range of interpretation to prevent an emotional identification with the violated Alicia that would surely lead the spectators to an unambiguous condemnation of Benigno. Almodóvar has stated that he never judges his characters, “whatever they do” (“Self-Interview” 148), an assertion that, at least in the case of *Talk to Her*, calls for a corollary, because in that film Almodóvar not only does not judge Benigno, he also makes it very difficult for the spectator to pass a clear-cut judgment on him. In her analysis of *Talk to Her*, Ann Davies maintains that even when we learn about the “highly negative” “brute facts” (104) of Benigno’s rape, “it becomes hard for us to revise our views of the cuddly and sensitive Benigno” and, despite the rape, Almodóvar “pushes us instead towards sympathizing with the psychopath, making him seem warm and human” (105). As it has been argued, however, by omitting the rape and establishing a parallelism between Alfredo’s figurative penetration and Benigno’s literal one, Almodóvar loads the rape with a meaning that makes it impossible to talk about it as a “brute fact.” Precisely because it is not shown, the rape acquires the “metaphysical” dimension the director alludes to in his commentary on the script. Against all appearances and the laws of melodrama, emotional containment and the estrangement of the spectator are characteristic of Almodóvar’s melodramas. And, as we will see, any interpretation of Benigno in “realistic” psychological or psychiatric terms—such as psychopathy—falls short of explaining the character’s complexity.



Benigno understands “love” in its extreme meaning—the fusion with the loved one—a wish to which poets and mystics have aspired throughout the ages. He therefore wanders beyond the borders of the permissible, crossing the frontier whose inviolability guarantees the existence of the individual and of social order. Benigno’s disconnection from the *doxa* about common sense and morality is expressed repeatedly by other characters. He is deemed “sub-normal” (retarded) by the director of the clinic, and Marco calls him crazy for believing that he can marry Alicia. “Benigno, ¡estás loco!” (Benigno, you’re nuts!), says Marco, but his irate words run into Benigno’s skewed if flawless logic: “¡Alicia y yo nos llevamos mejor que la mayoría de los matrimonios! ¿Por qué es tan raro que un hombre enamorado de una mujer se quiera casar con ella?” (Alicia and I get along better than most married couples. Why is it so strange that a man who is in love with a woman wants to marry her?). In believing that he can fuse physically with Alicia or marry a comatose woman, Benigno is a naïve reader whose madness resides in believing that things, or ideas such as “love,” are what they look like, or what they are commonly said to be. With respect to Alicia, he seems to have a shaky idea of where the limits that secure social life stand. Even more significant is his ignorance that prohibitions, the drawing of limits that establish what is permissible, inflect language with a double-speak that makes human speech an inherent form of hypocrisy, because underneath whatever is said, a lot more must remain hidden—what Taussig calls “public secrecy”—otherwise social order couldn’t exist. Language is intrinsically deprived of all innocence, of ever being able to say what it says it says, of ever being literal.

Benigno’s “innocence,” his benignity, is such only in that he seems unable to separate himself from Alicia as morality and the law demand: he is arrested in an imaginary world, and his tragedy stems from his innocence. Of course, he is also a rapist, but only in a world other than the one he primarily inhabits, a world whose laws and limits, at least regarding love, he does not seem to grasp. Like *Amante menguante*, *Talk to Her* is a fable about (the impossibility of) love. The difference between the two films lies in the obstacles they pose to their protagonists’ unconditional love. While *Amante menguante* solves the problem through a figurative ending, Benigno can fulfill his love only by defying a peremptory social prohibition, a disobedience that will lead to the transgressor’s death. *Talk to Her* is a quintessentially romantic narrative.

“It’s very dangerous to see my films with conventional morality,” Almodóvar has said. “I have my own morality. And so do my films. If you see *Matador* through a perspective of traditional morality, it’s a dangerous film because it’s just a celebration of killing. *Matador* is like a legend. I don’t try to be realistic, it’s very abstract, so you don’t feel identification with the things that are happening, but with the sensibility of this kind of romanticism” (Kinder 42). Almodóvar’s rightful warning is also, above all, an encouragement not to

interpret characters such as Benigno as psychologically plausible individuals. Only if we read *Talk to Her* as a (very old) fable about love can we do full justice to the film, extract the full richness of its meanings. As the embodiment of an extreme form of love that seeks fusion with the loved one, Benigno cannot be judged a “real” person. It would be as absurd to interpret him only in psychological terms as it would to do the same with mystic poetry. For that reason, it is imperative to be cautious regarding Benigno’s characterization as a psychopath, as some critics have done following the doctors’ opinion in the film. “Según el forense y el padre de Alicia, resulta que soy un psicópata. Sí, un psicópata” (According to the medical examiner and Alicia’s father, it turns out that I am a psychopath. Yes, a psychopath), an astonished Benigno tells Marco in jail, before promising to do something crazy if he is not allowed to see Alicia. “¿No dicen que soy un psicópata? ¡Pues me comporto como un psicópata!” (Don’t they say that I’m a psychopath? Well, then I’ll behave like one!). Clinically speaking, psychopathy is a vague term without a clear-cut definition. It is commonly used to describe individuals who are unable to register other people’s feelings, and particularly their suffering. In other words, psychopaths are unable to put themselves in another’s place, to feel with them, to experience sympathy (in the language of neuroscience, they would have a dearth of mirror neurons). The possibility of feeling with others, or placing oneself in their shoes, is also, therefore, a differentiating mechanism that sets barriers between self and other, ensuring the existence of the individual. One can feel with the other only if the other is different from oneself. Benigno’s malaise results from his inability to differentiate himself from Alicia because he lives exclusively on her behalf, in her place. In a way, then, he is the polar opposite of a psychopath: his fault is his total empathy with her to the point of conflating self and other, of erasing the frontier between Alicia and himself.

In his first conversation with Marco in jail, Benigno gives a clue about what ails him. After telling Marco that he has read all his travel guides, he avers that his favorite is the one on Havana: “Me identifiqué mucho con esa gente, que no tiene nada, y que se lo inventa todo” (I identified a lot with those people, who have nothing, and invent everything). Any psychological interpretation will fail to fully explain Benigno because he is a figure that embodies absolute lack, extreme solitude, and from such radical dearth stems his “romantic” aspiration to totality. For that reason, Benigno’s freakiness, his deviation, resides in his being an extreme form of humanity, a magnification of normality. *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar has declared, “represents something very intimate of myself . . . something that even I feel embarrassed to talk about, some part of myself that I don’t even know how to verbalize” (Scott 167). Almodóvar’s cryptic confession does not offer many clues for interpretation. Let’s not try to verbalize it for him. Instead, let’s place ourselves in his shoes, feel for him. Only thus could we have a chance to map the intimate secret he alludes to.

Benigno's "psychopathy" stems from his extreme lack and solitude, and manifests itself as an absolute commitment to the care of the beings he loves. That is what makes him a moral freak, an extreme form of the human, both a deviation from the norm and its confirmation, in the same way that the freaks of nature were interpreted by the nineteenth-century medical discourse as extreme manifestations of bodily characteristics that still obeyed the laws of nature. Among many other things, Almodóvar has suggested, *Talk to Her* is a film "sobre la locura, ese tipo de locura tan cercana a la ternura y al sentido común que no se diferencia de la normalidad" (*Hable 7*) (about madness, that type of madness that is so close to tenderness and to common sense that it cannot be told apart from normality). Benigno's madness is a radical form of tenderness, the embodiment of an absolute love that he lives so literally that it can be represented only allegorically—by *Amante menguante*—in the same way that in many of Plato's dialogues, when Socrates's words reach their explanatory limit, he is forced to resort to an allegory to represent his ideas.

In one of the takes in jail on Marco's first visit to Benigno, the reflection of Marco's face overlaps with Benigno's on the glass partition that separates them. In their farewell after Marco's last visit, Benigno extends his right hand over the partition after kissing his fingertips, and Marco extends his left hand on the other side of the glass, so that the two hands are superimposed and would touch were it not for the glass partition. In these scenes of Marco's and Benigno's superimposed heads and hands, we find two new images of the fusion of lovers in total love, a new version of *Amante menguante* and Benigno's possession of Alicia. *Talk to Her* is a poetic experiment on love taken to the extreme, an idea that cannot be represented "realistically," but only hinted at through images. The glass partition that prevents Marco's and Benigno's hands from touching is a fitting metaphor for the prohibition to cross a border beyond which a human being becomes a deviant, a moral freak.

"Te dejo la casa que preparé para Alicia y para mí" (I am bequeathing to you the house I prepared for Alicia and myself), writes Benigno in his farewell letter to Marco, who will follow in Benigno's footsteps and replicate his life. While watching the dancers in the studio across the street—as Benigno used to do—Marco discovers the revived Alicia, and later on, on the occasion of another ballet performance, Almodóvar intimates that Marco and Alicia will complete Benigno's love story. And so Benigno's interrupted dream eventually resumes, with Marco as a willing substitute—as a double—for the dead nurse, for his longing for absolute love, for his half-naïve, half-deranged wish to be with Alicia forever. Toward the end, Marco visits Benigno's grave and talks to him, as Benigno had asked him to do: "Te metí en el bolsillo la pinza del pelo de Alicia y también las fotos de ella y de tu madre, para que te acompañen para toda la eternidad" (I put Alicia's hair clip in one of your pockets, along with her picture and your mother's, so that they will keep you

company for eternity), says Marco matter-of-factly to the dead Benigno. Two pictures and a hair clip, stand-ins for the two women in Benigno's life whom he loved absolutely. With this gesture, Marco fulfills Benigno's utopian dream and brings a symbolic happy closure to his abnormal love story, ensuring that Benigno and Alicia will always be together, in the only "place" they can be: eternity.

## Notes

1. According to Camille Dareste, the founder of teratogenesis ("the controlled production of monsters in the laboratory" [Huet 111]), the monstrous was simply "the extraordinary result of purely natural causes" (109).
2. In fact, the displacement from the physical to the psychological, from the outside to the inside, began in the nineteenth century, when, once science had divested monstrosity of its diabolical halo and had normalized it, monstrosity became a characteristic of criminals, who began to be described as moral monsters (Demartini 69).

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