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Rewriting Rendell: Pedro Almodóvar's "Carne trémula"

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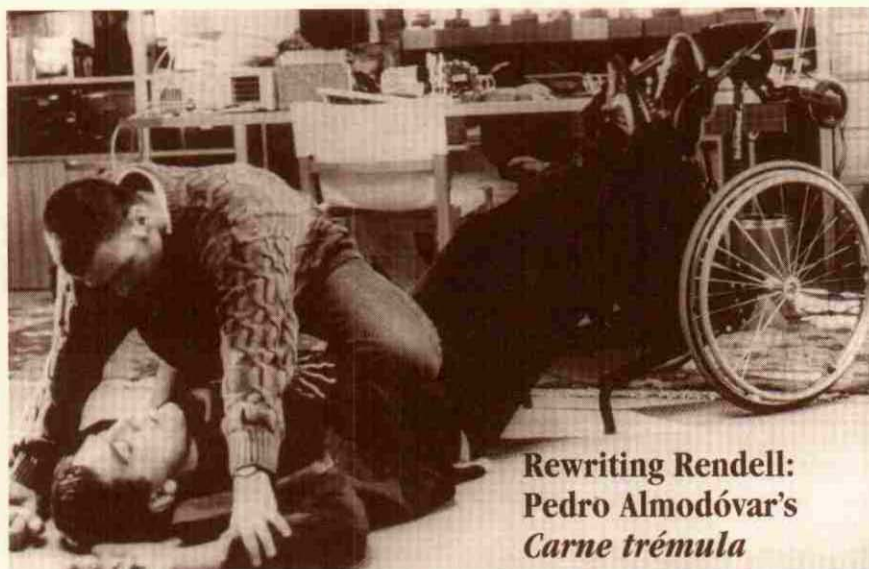
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**Rewriting Rendell:
Pedro Almodóvar's
*Carne trémula***

The 1997 film *Carne trémula* has been lauded within as well as outside of Spain as one of Pedro Almodóvar's best works. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic also have noted that this film marks a departure from Almodóvar's previous style, not only because of its tighter plotline and greater psychological depth, but also because Almodóvar's treatment of his material is more serious, less self-indulgent, and openly political. Russell Smith has suggested that the film's narrative coherence may be attributed in part to Almodóvar's use of Ruth Rendell's novel, *Live Flesh* (1998), as the basis for his script. This literary source's influence on the film also has been cited by Paul Julian Smith, who notes the strong similarities between the novel's first chapter and events which take place in *Carne trémula* (7). Almodóvar's departure from Rendell's plotline for the bulk of his film, however, has caused other critics to discount the importance of the novel entirely: José Arroyo says that Rendell's work "seems almost incidental" to Almodóvar's creation (51); Jean-Pierre Jeancolas calls Almodóvar's borrowing of Rendell's subject matter "a red herring" [une fausse piste] (52); and most film reviewers merely mention that Almodóvar's work is loosely based on Rendell's source.

What is the nature of the relationship between the cinematic and literary versions of *Live Flesh*? In the absence of any critical consensus, the director's own words on the subject provide a valuable insight. According to Almodóvar, his adaptation "has almost nothing from the novel anymore, but at least it served as a stimulus" [ya no tiene casi nada de la novela, pero ha servido por lo menos de estímulo] (Strauss 162-63). As such, Almodóvar's rendering of Rendell's text falls within the bounds of what Karen Kline calls the "transformation paradigm" of film adaptation, wherein the novel is considered "raw material which the film alters significantly, so that the film becomes an artistic work in its own right" (72). Indeed, Almodóvar's rewriting of Rendell's story is so extensive that Carlos F. Heredero speaks of Almodóvar as having "vampirized" [vampirizado] the book's basic narrative materials to create a totally new entity (22). Although Heredero does not elaborate on this statement, a comparison of the novel and film reveals that his metaphor is a particularly apt way of describing how this director makes use of the original text. That is, Almodóvar extracts the essence of Rendell's book—its premise and main theme—while leaving the rest untouched. But as useful as this metaphor is, it is valid only up to a point. It does not take into account the truly transformational spirit of Almodóvar's endeavor. What is taken from the novel is not directly placed into the film. Rather, it is subtly reworked through a process of inversion that fundamentally affects the overall development of plot and character.

The events of both Rendell's novel and Almodóvar's film unfold as a result of a shooting incident in which a policeman (David) is paralyzed while trying to save a young woman being held at gunpoint by an assailant (Victor) who has entered her apartment. The bitterness which Victor feels due to his subsequent incarceration, and his intrusion into David's life years later, form the basis of both Rendell's and Almodóvar's stories. Also common to both the novel and the film is the overarching theme of guilt, which links the characters and ultimately determines the ending of each work. A close examination of these shared elements reveals how Almodóvar has caused them to function differently in his cinematic adaptation than in its literary source.

Rendell's shooting scene centers on the question of whether or not the gun in Victor's hand is real. Victor insists that it is. The inspector, who remains outside during the entire scene, contends that it is not. David, who is unarmed and speaking with Victor in the apartment, is unsure. The question is answered when Victor fires the shot which cripples David and sends Victor to jail. There is no doubt that Victor has pulled the trigger because only he has held the gun throughout the entire scene. But although the *fact* of Victor's guilt is clearly established, Victor's recognition of his guilt is not. In addition to having shot David, Victor is a serial rapist, a thief, and a murderer, but he continually excuses himself of his crimes by placing the blame on others. Through a series of free indirect thought passages which permeate the novel, the reader is made privy to Victor's mental deliberations concerning his various actions. He mentally constructs *if/then* scenarios which absolve him of his guilt: if his girlfriend had been more sexually responsive, then he wouldn't have had to rape anyone; if a barking dog hadn't angered him during one of his attacks, then he wouldn't have had to beat his victim so severely; if his aunt hadn't disinherited him, then he wouldn't have had to steal from her; if his uncle hadn't owned a gun and his aunt hadn't made it easy to steal, then he wouldn't have been in possession of the gun he used to shoot David; if the girl in the apartment hadn't screamed, then he wouldn't have had to hold her hostage; and most importantly, if David hadn't taunted him by saying that the gun was a fake, then he wouldn't have had to fire it in order to prove that it was real. These rationalizations are accompanied by Victor's conviction that he is incapable of restraining himself because his body produces spontaneous responses to the situations he has been placed in by others. Live flesh—the involuntary muscular twitches of Chorea—functions in the novel as a metaphor for what Victor regards as his blameless and uncontrollable behavior. Secure in his belief that David is at fault for his having spent fourteen years in jail, Victor keenly resents David's hero status and comfortable life in a nice house with a beautiful girlfriend (Clare). The pivotal scene in the novel occurs in chapter eleven when Victor confronts David with his version of the truth, only to find out from David's transcript of the court proceedings that it was the inspector and not David who repeatedly referred to the gun as a replica. Victor is stunned by the news—"It was something that had hardly ever come to him before, to understand that he was wrong, that he was at fault"—and Clare's comforting of him in his anguish eventually leads to a night of intimacy, which in turn results in Victor's obsessive attachment to Clare. When Clare ultimately rejects him by reaffirming her love for David, Victor attempts another rape and sustains a wound which causes his death in a tetanus-induced convulsion that grotesquely plays off of the live flesh metaphor.

In Almodóvar's rendering of Rendell's material, the entire issue of Victor's guilt is inverted through the addition of a sub-plot concerning David's affair with the wife (Clara) of his supervisor (Sancho). As a consequence, the pivotal confrontational scene between Victor and David now hinges on the revelation that it was Sancho, and not Victor, who fired the shot that paralyzed David. In an ironic twist on Rendell's live flesh metaphor, Almodóvar made Victor literally unable to control the movement of his trigger-finger due to Sancho's pressure on it. Since Victor is revealed to be the innocent victim of the jealousy that David had caused in Sancho, it is now David who must accept his guilt in this matter. The guilt theme is further complicated by Almodóvar's choice to increase the role of the woman held hostage by Victor during the shooting. Whereas in Rendell's novel she is unknown to Victor and disappears after the first chapter, Almodóvar establishes a prior relationship for her (Elena) with Victor, and then has her marry David in what Almodóvar calls an act of "self-

punishment" [autocastigo] that helps her to expiate her guilt over her role in David's paralysis (244). Her feelings of guilt also extend to Victor, whom she allows to remain at the children's shelter when he says that he had been sent to jail "por tu culpa." The translation of this statement is worthy of attention because in the filmscript Almodóvar specifically notes that it contains Elena's "key word" [palabra clave] (149). In Spanish the word *culpa* has a broader meaning than the English word *guilt* because it also can be translated as *blame* or *fault* in idiomatic expressions. Thus, *echarle la culpa* is translated as *to blame*, but it literally means *to throw the guilt on someone else*. Similarly, *tener la culpa* translates *to be at fault* but actually means *to have guilt*. Thus, the translation of Victor's statement "por tu culpa" is *because of your fault*, but it also attaches the literal meaning of *guilt* to Elena. It is this vague feeling of guilt for having caused the entire shooting incident which is at the heart of what Almodóvar calls Elena's "guilt complex" [complejo de culpa] (244). Thus, when she later learns that Sancho's wounding of David was based on a personal matter between the two of them and had nothing to do with either her or Victor, she is freed of her feelings of guilt toward David and transfers them completely to Victor. Consequently, she grants him a night of lovemaking so that he can enact his "revenge plan" [plan de venganza] against her for having insulted his sexual prowess years before. But revenge on his part and atonement on hers are soon forgotten as they find sexual and emotional fulfillment in each other's arms.

Both *Live Flesh* and *Carne trémula* are about *culpa*, and Almodóvar's repositioning of that *culpa* profoundly affects the dynamics of the relationship between all of the principle players. Who is guilty/to blame/at fault differs from the book to the film, and consequently, who is rewarded and who is punished at the end of each work also differs. Rendell's Victor is solely responsible for David's injury, but even after he comes to realize this fact, he continues to blame David for the unpleasant events which subsequently occur in his life. Furthermore, he not only continues to rape and steal, but he also adds murder to his repertoire of crimes. Victor's inability to control his actions or take responsibility for them leads to his own violent death. This ethically formulated conclusion to the novel has its parallel in the film, albeit in a completely opposite way. Here it is David who continues to blame Victor for his problems even after finding out that Victor was the unwitting victim of the love triangle that he himself had caused. Motivated by revenge for Victor's relationship with Elena, David devises a plan to get Sancho to kill Victor. But the plan fails, and David's role in it becomes known to Elena. David's behavior severs all remaining ties with Elena, and his confession in the film's epilogue officially recognizes his culpability for all the events involving Victor. Thus, in a stunning overturning of the novel's conclusion, it is Victor who now "wins the girl," thereby reversing Rendell's ironic use of his name. Whereas Rendell's Victor cannot triumph in the end because he is guilty, Almodóvar's Victor must triumph in the end because he is innocent.

Almodóvar's reformulation of Rendell's guilt theme rests on Victor's innocence, but the viewer is not immediately aware of that innocence because the shooting of David occurs off-screen. Moreover, various false clues in the film lead the viewer to believe that Victor is guilty, thereby increasing our surprise when we learn that he is not. For example, the song, "Mi perro," playing at the opening of the contemporary segment of the film features a woman singing about her beloved guard dog. This song seems to be non-diegetic background music, but we suddenly become aware of its diegetic status when Sancho comments on its lyrics. This jarring shift in our expectations, coupled with Sancho's remarks, focuses our attention on the words being sung. Sancho explicitly equates the dog (perro) in the song with the police, and the lambs (corderos) he guards with the junkies and hustlers on the street. Sancho's analogy is later strengthened when we see the drug-addicted Elena for the first time with her blonde and tightly curled hair that is reminiscent of a lamb's fleece. When the singer of the song comes to the line "there was no wolf who would approach the lambs on the shore" [no había lobo que acercara a los corderos en la ribera], the camera pans to a shot of Victor entering a building. This association between Victor and the wolf is later reinforced when Victor dons a wolf mask to play with the children in Elena's shelter. Thus, these visual and auditory clues in the film lead the viewer to consider David (the

guard dog) as the protector of Elena (the lamb) from the dangerous Victor (the wolf).

But despite these subtle indicators of Victor's guilt, Almodóvar also inserts a hidden clue suggesting Victor's innocence. He does this through the use of Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* [*Rehearsal for a crime*], also known as *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*.¹ This film tells the story of a man (Archibaldo) who plans to kill several women but doesn't actually succeed in murdering any of them due to their untimely deaths beforehand. He never gets beyond the rehearsal stage for his crimes, therefore he is not really a criminal. Thus, both of the film's titles are ironic. But despite all of Archibaldo's foiled attempts, he considers himself to be guilty of each woman's death. This concept of innocence disguised as guilt is presented to the viewer of *Carne trémula* through two clips from *Ensayo de un crimen*, which are played on Elena's television set. The first clip, which shows a woman being struck by a bullet through a window, coincides exactly with the firing of Elena's gun during her scuffle with Victor. This clip ends with a view of the woman's dead body on the floor while the young Archibaldo stares in fascination at her legs, certain that he caused her death by willing it to happen. The second clip shows an adult Archibaldo dragging a mannequin across the floor and burning it in an incinerator after he reattaches the leg which fell off in transit. Since both of these clips feature legs, the viewer who has read Rendell's novel may simply consider these clips as foreshadowing the eventual loss of David's use of his legs. But those who are familiar with the guilt theme of Buñuel's film will become wary of placing guilt on any character without seeing the proof of his crime. Thus, the viewer's intertextual knowledge of Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* is used by Almodóvar to counterbalance the audio-visual associations raised by the "Mi perro" song. Buñuel's film clips serve as a form of secret communication that hints at the eventual overturning of Rendell's story without letting the viewer know how it will be achieved.

In creating *Carne trémula*, Almodóvar drew on material from Rendell's novel, but he altered it to bring about a change in Victor's character, thereby redefining the course that the plot could take. The key to the transformational nature of Almodóvar's cinematic adaptation lies in his shrewd inversion of Rendell's thematics. His rewriting of the relationship between guilt and innocence results in a truly original text which is indebted to its source material while standing apart from it.

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Notes

¹J. Hoberman misidentifies this film as being Buñuel's *El*, and consequently, he mistakenly criticizes Almodóvar for setting up a system of allusions to male sexual jealousy that the movie never satisfies.

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