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Almodóvar on the Verge of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*

Jean Cocteau's one-act play, *La Voix humaine* [*The Human Voice*], consists entirely of a monologue by a woman engaged in a final phone conversation with her lover. Alone in her room, she desperately clings to the telephone as her only link to the man who has left her for someone else. Although this agonizing portrait of abandonment and despair bears little resemblance to Almodóvar's multi-charactered comedic romp through the streets of Madrid in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* [*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*], Cocteau's play has been named as the source of inspiration for that film. In various interviews Almodóvar has explained that his original intention had been to adapt the play to the screen, but due to its brevity, he needed to expand the material to feature film length. This led him to devise a story of the forty-eight hours leading up to the phone call. In the process, said Almodóvar, "Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* had utterly disappeared from the text—apart from its original concept, of course: a woman sitting next to a suitcase of memories waiting miserably for a phone call from the man she loves" (Strauss 80). Despite this seeming dismissal of Cocteau's work, however, Almodóvar insists that the film "truly is a version of *La Voix humaine*" [es realmente una versión de *La Voix humaine*] because the play "remains in a latent form" [permanece de una forma latente] (Vidal 258). Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* provides insights into how that latent form operates within Almodóvar's film.

According to Hutcheon, the traditional view of parody as a ridiculing of artistic models through stylistic imitation does not account for the numerous reworkings of earlier texts by twentieth-century artists who do not use parody to deride their original sources. Consequently, Hutcheon proposes an expanded concept of parody as "an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inventing, and 'trans-contextualizing' previous works of art" (11). In this definition parody continues to be "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text . . . [I]t is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes a difference at the heart of similarity. . . . Such parody intends no disrespect, while it does signal ironic difference" (6, 8, 10). Hutcheon stresses that "unlike what is more traditionally regarded as parody, the modern form does not always permit one of the texts to fare any better or any worse than the other. . . . The parodied text is often not at all under attack. It is often respected and used as a model" (31, 103).

Almodóvar engages in this sort of creative reworking in *Mujeres*. He trans-contextualizes material from Cocteau's drama by placing it within a comedy format. But his genre switching does not mock any aspect of *La Voix humaine*. On the contrary, Almodóvar has stated his conviction that "if Cocteau had been able to see the film or read the script, he would have thought that it was absolutely faithful to his idea of the work and to the feelings of this abandoned woman" [si Cocteau la hubiera podido ver o leer el guión, habría pensado que era absolutamente fiel a la idea de la obra y de la soledad de esta mujer abandonada] (Vidal 258). Indeed, Almodóvar never pokes fun at the suffering of his protagonist, Pepa. He fully respects her emotions, but he bases his comedy on an inversion of the trajectory that those same emotions take in *La Voix humaine*. Whereas Cocteau's unnamed woman becomes increasingly dependent upon her lover as the play progresses, Pepa gradually achieves what critics have called an "emancipation from machismo" and an "inner liberation from a phallogocentric past," resulting in her ultimate rejection of Iván's renewed interest in her in the penultimate scene (Jessup 299; D'Lugo 65). Although both Pepa and Cocteau's anonymous heroine are on the verge of a nervous breakdown at the beginning of their respective stories, that breakdown is ultimately realized by only one of them.¹ By the end of the film Pepa has disengaged herself emotionally from Iván, while Cocteau's protagonist can only repeat "I love you" [je t'aime] over and over again as her beloved hangs up the phone for

the last time while the curtain falls on the play.

In transforming Pepa from a victim to a victor, Almodóvar draws on material from *La Voix humaine*, but he alters it to bring about the change in Pepa's situation. Indeed, far more details from the play are present in the film than Almodóvar has acknowledged in his interviews. The first of these concerns the staging of the initial scene in Pepa's bedroom. The stage directions to *La Voix humaine* indicate that when the curtain rises, the audience should see the body of a woman stretched out on the floor in front of her bed "as if killed" [comme assassinée]. Likewise, Pepa is seen for the first time in the film lying down asleep, and both her face-down position and the absence of covers over her body suggest that she too may be dead. This impression is further strengthened by the cross-cutting that takes place between Pepa's bedroom and the studio where Iván is dubbing a movie. When Iván reaches the line "Tell me you would have died" [Dime que te hubieras muerto], the camera suddenly cuts to a view of Pepa's immobile body. Hours later Pepa's possible demise seems all the more likely when she fails to stir as Iván speaks loudly into her answering machine. Suddenly, however, Pepa does awake, bolts out of bed, and rushes to answer the telephone. This frantic dash to the phone also is seen at the start of *La Voix humaine*. Both Pepa and Cocteau's protagonist are desperate to make contact with their lovers, and both are frustrated in the attempt. The woman in the play must contend with wrong numbers, party line problems, and bad connections during her farewell conversation, while Pepa never actually manages to communicate with Iván by phone at all.² She only receives messages from him on her answering machine.

After this introduction of Pepa in close imitation of Cocteau's play, Almodóvar's treatment of *La Voix humaine* becomes less straightforward. The theatrical material is no longer simply reproduced, but rather, it is refashioned into a new form which departs from its original context. Although details from the play appear throughout the film, they undergo a series of inversions which, when taken together, lead to Pepa's gradual assertion of her independence from Iván. Thus, Almodóvar's overall parodic enterprise is achieved through his reshaping of the following individual elements of Cocteau's play.

1. **The "Voice":** In *La Voix humaine* the "Voice" is that of the woman. Hers is the only voice heard throughout the play, and only silence accompanies the lines supposedly spoken by the man on the phone. All information is communicated to the audience through her monologue, and her voice expresses the play's entire range of emotions. Since the woman is unnamed and, as Cocteau states in his stage directions, she is just "an unexceptional victim" [une victime médiocre], her voice has a universal human quality, representing that of all such women. But in *Mujeres*, the "Voice" belongs to a man, Iván, who makes his living through the use of that voice. "In contrast to Cocteau," states Almodóvar in the pressbook to this film, "I not only have given voice to the man's absence, but I also have turned him into someone who uses his voice professionally" [Al contrario que Cocteau, no sólo le he dado voz al ausente sino que lo he convertido en un profesional de la voz] (Vidal 383). In highlighting Iván's voice Almodóvar not only wanted to make it audible, but palpable as well: "I have intended to photograph it, not just hear it, moving through Pepa's living room like the smell of cooking in the air. . . . Iván's body is his voice" [He intentado fotografiarla, no sólo oírla, moviéndose por el salón de Pepa, como el olor de un giso transportado por la brisa. . . . El cuerpo de Iván es su voz] (Vidal 383). Indeed, the audience's first exposure to Iván is through his voice. Instead of seeing him, we merely hear him in a voice-over reading aloud the words he had written on a record jacket. Later when he is visually introduced during the black-and-white dream sequence, we see him speaking into a microphone, followed soon afterward by an extreme close-up of his mouth in the dubbing studio. Even the film being dubbed initially features Iván's voice alone because Pepa isn't present to provide her part. Iván's entire character is contained in his voice. Therefore, when Pepa does arrive at the dubbing studio after Iván has left, she responds to his prerecorded voice as if he were still there and speaking directly to her. His aural presence is so strong that it causes Pepa to faint during her rehearsal.³ An even more powerful reaction to the sound of Iván's voice is later described by Lucía, who actually regained her memory

after hearing a television performance by Iván which featured the same words he had spoken to her when they were lovers over twenty years before. Iván is the sum of all the things he has ever said, either on-stage or off. As an actor, he habitually utters words he does not feel, and that pretense also extends into his real life. But Pepa's many years of working professionally with Iván has taught her to recognize the sound of his lies. As Pepa explains to her friends, "he can fool me with anything but his voice" [me puede engañar con todo menos la voz].

2. **The Telephone:** In *La Voix humaine* the telephone is of paramount importance, not only because it is the physical link between the woman and her lover, but also because it provides the pretext for the monologue to take place. In *Mujeres* the telephone remains an important prop, but its impact is diminished significantly by the presence of an auxiliary apparatus—the answering machine. The woman in Cocteau's play is afraid to leave her room lest she miss the call from her lover. But Pepa's answering machine frees her to travel around Madrid at will, thereby extending the boundaries of the film beyond the four walls which make up the set of *La Voix humaine*. Furthermore, Almodóvar's use of the answering machine allows him to invert the very structure of Cocteau's play. *La Voix humaine* is a dialogue—a conversation between two people—that takes the form of a monologue by a single woman in front of an audience. This process is reversed, however, when Pepa plays Iván's message on her answering machine after returning from her dubbing session. Here Almodóvar takes a monologue—Iván's message—and turns it into a dialogue, with Pepa responding to Iván during his pauses. This same format is continued for Pepa's subsequent scenes with the answering machine. Each time, Pepa comments on the insincerity of Iván's words, and as the film progresses, she is less and less tolerant of his lies. Indeed, the theme of verbal deception is taken directly from *La Voix humaine*.⁴ The most dramatic moment in that play occurs when the woman catches her lover in a lie. The audience does not actually hear him lie, however. Rather, we simply see the woman's reaction to her discovery of the truth. But in *Mujeres* we do hear Iván's lies in blatant opposition to what we see on the screen. For example, just before Iván and his new mistress are about to go to Stockholm together, he calls Pepa and hears her message urging him to tell her how she can get in touch with him. Ignoring the content of Pepa's message and hiding the truth about his activities, Iván first accuses Pepa of trying to avoid him and then says, "I'm not taking a trip or going away with any woman" [no me voy de viaje, ni con ninguna mujer]. When Pepa hears this message, she knows Iván is lying, but rather than forgive him, as does Cocteau's character, Pepa severs her ties with him by destroying the answering machine.

3. **The Sleeping Pills:** Midway through *La Voix humaine* the woman confesses to her lover that she had attempted suicide the night before by taking sleeping pills in what she thought was a fatal dosage. Sleeping pills also are featured in *Mujeres*, but Pepa does not use them to try to kill herself. Rather, she puts a handful in a batch of gaspacho—Iván's favorite food—in an attempt to keep Iván from leaving her by putting him to sleep. Over the course of the film, however, the gaspacho is drunk by virtually all of the characters except Iván, and it ultimately plays a role in freeing Pepa to go to the airport to save Iván's life. Thus, in Almodóvar's treatment of the sleeping pills, they cease to be a vehicle for the heroine's self-destruction. Instead they become the means by which Pepa successfully works through her feelings for Iván. Although she first intends to use the pills to keep Iván from leaving her, she eventually uses them to ensure his safe departure with another woman.

4. **The Cigarettes:** Early in Cocteau's play the protagonist assures her lover that she is not smoking, a statement which she immediately qualifies by saying, "I've only smoked three cigarettes" [Je n'ai fumé que trois cigarettes]. Pepa engages in a similar struggle with her smoking habit, trying to quit for the sake of her unborn baby, but tempted to smoke to calm down her nerves. As she lights up a cigarette in her home, she suddenly stops, and declaring "I shouldn't be smoking" [No debería fumar], she throws the lit cigarette on her bed along with the remaining pack and a box of matches, thereby starting the blaze that will reduce her bed to ashes. As she stares into the fire, Pepa holds in her hand a ridiculously phallic flower—a gift from Iván—that comically wilts as the intensity of the fire increases,

thereby presaging Iván's ultimate loss of sexual power over her.⁵

5. **The Love Letters:** In *La Voix humaine* the man indicates his desire to distance himself from the woman by telling her that he plans to burn the love letters that she has saved for him in his suitcase. She responds by asking him to make the sentimental gesture of storing the ashes from the letters in the tortoise shell box she had given him as a gift. Thus she shows her continued affection for her lover by treating the ashes as if they were sacred relics. In *Mujeres* Pepa shows no such reverence for the momentos of her past with Iván. After she burns her bed—and the amorous associations attached to it—she angrily stuffs Iván's suitcase with what she refers to as his "shit" [mierda]. Having packed all his possessions, along with the gifts he had given her, she turns her attention to a stack of love letters, which she rips in half. Later in the film Pepa shows no sentimentality whatsoever as she unceremoniously throws a photo from Iván on the ashes of the burnt bed and comments about having to clean up the mess.

6. **The Vigil and the Photograph:** Although *La Voix humaine* takes place entirely within a single location—the woman's bedroom—actions occurring off-stage are mentioned during the monologue. Two such incidents become part of the plot of Almodóvar's film. The first involves a plan by the woman to take a taxi to her lover's house during the night in order to sit outside of his windows and wait for him to appear. The second pertains to a photograph which she had seen in a magazine, and which had revealed to her the identity of her lover's fiancée. Almodóvar incorporates both of these elements into the scene where Pepa sits outside the apartment of Iván's former mistress, Lucía.⁶ While waiting for Iván, Pepa learns the identity of Carlos—Iván's son—through a photograph of Iván and Carlos which Lucía throws out of the window. Later, Pepa's identity becomes known to Carlos through a photograph of her and Iván which he sees when he comes to rent her apartment. Thus, when Pepa and Carlos meet soon afterward, they are able to recognize one another. The resulting friendship allows Pepa to transfer her affection from Iván to Carlos—she even mistakenly calls him Iván at one point—while encouraging a romance between Carlos and Candela.

7. **The Gun:** In *La Voix humaine* the woman's attempted suicide with sleeping pills prompts her lover to ask if she has a gun in the house. Although the audience does not hear the question, it is assumed by the woman's answer: "I wouldn't know how to buy a revolver. You can't see me buying a revolver" [Je ne saurais pas acheter un revolver! Tu ne me vois pas achetant un revolver]. This minor point in the play becomes the vehicle for the film's denouement and for Pepa's final break with Iván. All of the story lines come together when Pepa, Lucía, Carlos, Candela, and two police officers meet in Pepa's apartment. During the police interrogation, Pepa figures out that Iván and Paulina will be leaving for a romantic getaway on the plane to Stockholm that Carlos and Candela have warned the police will be hijacked by Shiite terrorists. After the police become sedated by the gaspacho, the mentally unbalanced Lucía steals their guns so that she can use them to murder Iván. Lucía's actions stem from her inability to come to terms with Iván's abandonment of her decades ago. As she explains to Pepa, she can only forget Iván by killing him. Pepa, however, has already eliminated Iván from her life emotionally, so she has no need for revenge. Indeed, her feelings for Iván have altered to such a degree that she can go to his rescue not out of love, but out of a disinterested impulse to help someone in danger.

All of these elements from *La Voix humaine*—the voice, the telephone, the sleeping pills, the cigarettes, the love letters, the vigil, the photograph, and the gun—are drained of their original meanings and ironically repositioned in *Mujeres* in order to permit the most important reversal of all: Pepa's rejection of Iván. Despite Pepa's similarity to Cocteau's heroine at the beginning of the film, Pepa's final situation is not the same because details from *La Voix humaine* function differently in the film than their counterparts in the play. Taken together, these reworked elements redefine the course which Pepa can take. The ending to Cocteau's drama is sad because the woman loses the man that she loves. The ending to Almodóvar's comedy is happy, not because Pepa gets her man back, but because she realizes that she no longer wants him.

In citing *La Voix humaine* as the source of inspiration for *Mujeres*, scholars have been content to take at face value Almodóvar's statement that little more than the original concept of the play remained by the time he had completed the film.⁷ But a close examination of both works yields evidence to the contrary. Ironically transposed elements from the play permeate the film and form a rich intertextual network of connections that goes beyond what Almodóvar has admitted. Despite the extent to which Almodóvar has relied upon Cocteau, however, *Mujeres* is not an adaptation of *La Voix humaine*.⁸ Rather, Almodóvar uses parodic imitation—what Hutcheon calls repetition with a difference—to create something new out of that play.⁹ As such, Almodóvar pays homage to Cocteau's art while simultaneously displaying his own artistry.

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Notes

¹ The change in Pepa's attitude toward Iván is reflected in the two songs, *Soy infeliz* [I'm unhappy] and *Puro teatro* [Nothing but pretense], which play over the film's opening and closing credits, respectively. In the first, a woman laments the recent loss of her lover, while in the second, the singer speaks of her lover's "well-rehearsed falseness" [falsedad bien ensayada] and states her refusal to tolerate his lies any longer. The link between the opening song and Pepa's situation is clearly established in an early scene through a close-up on a record jacket listing the song. The title is circled, and Iván's voice-over reads the note he had scribbled in the margin: "Pepa darling, I never want to hear you say, 'I'm unhappy'" [Pepa cariño, no quiero oírte nunca decir, "soy infeliz"]. Significantly, Pepa's decision to throw Iván out of her life is accompanied by her act of throwing the "Soy infeliz" record out the window. For a discussion of Almodóvar's use of this song both diegetically and non-diegetically in the sequence leading up to and including this scene, see Deleyto 57-58. Also, the visual aspects of this entire sequence are examined by Smith 99-110 and Edwards 192-93.

² Technically, Pepa does speak to Iván while she is in Paulina's office, but no actual communication takes place. When Pepa inadvertently answers a phone call from Iván to Paulina, Iván immediately hangs up, leaving Pepa uncertain as to the identity of the caller.

³ Almodóvar's use of a clip from Nicholas Ray's 1954 film, *Johnny Guitar*, in both dubbing scenes compounds the intertextuality of *Mujeres* by creating an externally and internally duplicating *mise en abyme*. In the first dubbing session with Iván, the concept of human speech is foregrounded through the contrast between the silence that accompanies Joan Crawford's moving lips and the sound that follows Sterling Hayden's. As in *La Voix humaine*, a conversation is taking place between two characters, but the audience only hears the words of one of them. In the second dubbing scene with Pepa, however, the dialogue is completed through Pepa's reading of Joan Crawford's part. The presence of both Pepa's and Iván's voices establishes a parallel between the characters of *Mujeres* and those of *Johnny Guitar*. Thus, when Pepa says "I've waited for you all these years," "I'd have died without you," and "I love you as much as you love me" [Todos estos años te he esperado; Estaría muerta si no hubieras vuelto; Aun te quiero tanto como tú a mí] she is not merely speaking her lines, but also is expressing her feelings for Iván. Whereas this second dubbing scene uses the *Johnny Guitar* clip as an embedded *mise en abyme* alluding to Pepa's situation in the surrounding narrative, the first dubbing scene uses the *Johnny Guitar* clip to stylistically replicate an external referent—*La Voix humaine*—thereby extending the *mise en abyme* beyond the frame of *Mujeres*. For additional comments concerning the *Johnny Guitar* segments see Deleyto 55-56; Smith 95; Edwards 184-85; Eng 152; and Jessup 308.

⁴ Mendacity permeates *Mujeres*: Candela's Shiite boyfriend lied to her for political reasons; Lucía thanks her father for being such a good liar when it comes to flattery; the *portera* of Pepa's building is a Jehovah's Witness who reluctantly obeys her religion's proscription against lying; the *Johnny Guitar* film being dubbed by Iván and Pepa features Sterling Hayden asking Joan Crawford to lie to him about her feelings; and a TV commercial advertises a detergent that cleans stains so well that "it seems like a lie" [parece mentira].

⁵ Jessup 305 misidentifies the music accompanying this scene as Manuel de Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance" from *El amor brujo*. Although Falla's music would have been appropriate in this context due to its themes of obsessive love and magical disenchantment, the music that actually is playing during the bed-burning is Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Capricho español*.

⁶ For a discussion of the influence of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* on how this scene is staged, see Deleyto 53-54 and Evans 17-18.

⁷ See Vidal 258-59, Strauss 80-81, Jessup 306, Deleyto 55, Edwards 182, and Evans 14. Although Evans recog-

nizes Cocteau's play as the initial source for the film, he also sees traces of Dorothy Parker's story "A Telephone Call," because it features a female narrator who "becomes increasingly frantic as she awaits her lover's promised but never materializing phone-call" (15). Evans's only justification for this assertion, however, rests on Almodóvar's mention of Dorothy Parker in connection with the creation of his Patty Diphusa character. Consequently, it is not clear whether or not Almodóvar is acquainted with this particular story by Parker.

⁸ For a true adaptation of *La Voix humaine* see Roberto Rossellini's *Una voce umana*, starring Anna Magnani. Due to its thirty-five minute length, it was coupled with another short film, *Il miracolo*, and released under the title of *L'amore* in 1948.

⁹ In *Ley de deseo*, the film immediately preceding *Mujeres*, Almodóvar uses *La Voix humaine* more directly. The protagonist, Pablo, is a director who is staging Cocteau's play while Juan, the man he loves, is in the process of leaving him. Thus, *La Voix humaine* serves as an intertextual referent to echo the relationships within the film. Pablo's continued desire for Juan parallels that of Cocteau's heroine in that both prefer their lovers' lies—spoken to her, written to him—rather than the truth.

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