

The Men of *Talk to Her*



Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* undoubtedly merits the attention that it has received in the past few years.¹ It is a complex and beautiful work, and part of its power consists in a peculiar tendency to upset, confound, and move the viewer all at once. This aspect of the film, its tendency to produce what we might call a tangled set of reactions, all but forces us to revisit the fictional events that it depicts, to reappraise our reactions and, perhaps, to attempt to systematize them. Some people feel that this latter project is fruitless, or worse, when its target is a work of cinematic artistry.² I think this essay, like many works of interpretation, calls such a sentiment into question.

As my title indicates, the discussion will center on the film's depiction of men and masculinity. It is striking that *Talk to Her* is almost exclusively concerned with two heterosexual male protagonists, since Almodóvar's films have been widely recognized and applauded for featuring women and gay men as major characters.³ In my view, they represent portrayals of masculine obsession, and one aim of this piece is to show how this theme structures the film and allows it to so uniquely stimulate and confound our moral reactions. In exploring this suggestion, I'll also argue that most critical treatments of the film have been guilty of a substantial and quite simple oversight. These interpretations have given too much attention to Benigno and not enough to his friend Marco. Often, Marco has been considered as a counterpart to Benigno, and as someone who learns from the kind of virtuous devotion that Benigno exemplifies—at least until his infatuation with Alicia reaches its heinous culmination.⁴ But seldom have critics analyzed Marco's own obsessive personality. This is understandable, because Benigno's actions are what most obviously give rise to our complicated reactions to the film. But in order to

gain a greater understanding of these actions, and our reactions, it is important to set our ideas about Benigno alongside an articulation of the role of his fellow protagonist.

I contend that by analyzing Marco, and the type of male figure he is, we gain insight into how to interpret Benigno's actions and character. We will also gain a richer understanding of the film's overall structure. As I'll argue, *Talk to Her* presents us with two men who are obsessive in very different ways. Marco is obsessively self-absorbed and immature—he is obsessed with his past, his youth, his own emotions, and the disturbingly young woman who was once his lover. Benigno, on the other hand, is obsessive in his devotion to the women who are special to him—first his mother, and later the conscious and unconscious Alicia.

Further, this interpretation will show how viewers' experiences of the coherence of the narrative development of *Talk to Her*, and the cathartic sense of closure that the film eventually delivers, can be understood as a manifestation of our implicit recognition of the inverted psychological trajectories of the two protagonists.⁵ As a result of Benigno's friendship, Marco overcomes his self-absorption and matures into the kind of man who can "talk to" other human beings—the kind of man, in other words, who understands that loving relationships involve stepping outside of one's own sentiments and recognizing the independent importance of someone else's.

More radically, I believe that it is Marco's friendship that encourages Benigno's deterioration into a form of obsession that is far more self-destructive and immoral than his original devotional fervor. We need some explanation of why it is *only after* the appearance of Marco in the hospital, and his increasingly frequent presence there, that Benigno's obsession with Alicia comes to find its culminating, tragic expression. My suggestion is that Marco's extreme self-absorption allows him to receive Benigno's startling confessions without condemning them, and that it is this passive acceptance that encourages Benigno to finally let loose his deepest urges.

In addition, the interpretation I offer will help to shed light on some elements of the film that many viewers find perplexing—for example, the scene in which we see the fascinating silent film entitled *The Shrinking Lover*. Finally, it will provide an interesting account of the symbolic significance of Alicia's miraculous conception, which awakens her from her coma and shrouds Benigno's actions in an even more disturbing cloud of moral ambiguity.

Marco

Marco Zuloaga (Dario Grandinetti) is a handsome, gruff-voiced Argentinean reporter living in Spain. We see him for the first time in the audience at a Pina Bausch performance (*Café Muller*). He is moved to tears, and Benigno (Javier Cámara), a stranger seated next to Marco, notes his tears with interest. By the end of the film we are in a position to understand two crucial features of this scene. First, Benigno feels a special connection to Marco, a connection that has its roots in his initial observation of Marco's particular form of sensitivity. Second, Marco's emotional engagement with the performance is emblematic of an impoverished and selfishly obsessive sensibility. This latter point is absolutely central to the film's architecture, and has been too seldom noticed. When the events depicted in *Talk to Her* have concluded, we have been given subtle but definitive evidence that Marco has succeeded in overcoming a crippling emotional immaturity. It is Benigno's influence that effects this change.

Marco is presented in this first scene (and subsequently) as a curious, almost paradoxical representative of masculinity. On the one hand he is a virile and stoic man of the world, a successful writer of travelogues, a man of firmness and action. Only minutes after meeting Lydia (Rosario Flores), a female bullfighter and a powerful figure herself, he kills a snake that has terrified her. He then reassures her respectfully, saying that he is "sensitive to other people's phobias". In another scene, nurses in the hospital where Benigno works—and where Lydia and Alicia will eventually lie in comas—speculate about how Marco's face ensures that he must be "well hung". On multiple occasions, we catch Marco peeking at Alicia's naked body with evident interest. Finally, and most importantly, Marco is completely incapable of believing in the possibility of Lydia's recovery, and cannot bring himself to even touch her comatose body. This stereotypically masculine rejection of faith and blind devotion is of course contrasted explicitly with the loving ministrations that serve to introduce and define Benigno's character. But it is also set in the context of the heartfelt sadness with which Lydia's sister leaves her to return to her life after weeks spent by her side, and the desire of Lydia's lover, Niño de Valencia (Adolpho Fernández), to stay with her indefinitely.

It is important that Niño brings Lydia flowers in an early scene in the hospital; this kind of care for someone who cannot appreciate it links him sympathetically with Benigno, who brings Alicia posters and cuts her hair lovingly, and underlines the gulf between them and Marco. It is also important that Niño and Marco seem to

compete with each other in claiming responsibility for Lydia's goring. Presumably they each think that Lydia was distracted on account of them. As we later learn, they may both be right, but Marco has more reason to be sorry.

On the other hand, Marco is overly prone to tears, as we see numerous times, and he is consistently represented in the role of passive voyeur.⁶ It is especially works of art—the Pina Bausch dances, the gorgeous Caetano Veloso performance—that seem to move Marco to a kind of sadness that the other spectators do not share. But he has also cried after killing the snake in Lydia's kitchen, in a striking emotional subversion. During the Veloso song, Lydia, who has noticed his tears at the party, follows him out back, where he is smoking contemplatively. She asks him why he cried the night he killed the snake, and Marco says that it reminded him of another snake he once killed. This was, we find out in a brief flashback that takes on the tone of a primal dream, years before, when Marco was on a trip with his girlfriend in Africa. He has already mentioned this girlfriend to Lydia, indicating that the breakup left him terribly confused and alone (“When we broke up, I slept on the couch for weeks”). Lydia says, “I hate that woman”. This seemingly innocuous remark is telling. Lydia has good reason to hate her. She has transfixed Marco and arrested his emotional development.

Viewers will surely notice that we are shown one scene twice in the course of the film's narration. We see Marco and Lydia in the back of a car, *en route* to the fatal bullfight. The scene culminates with Lydia insisting that the two of them talk after the fight. Marco replies that they have been talking for the past hour. Lydia says: “You. Not me.” Her lover realizes, in some sense, that she's right.⁷

Later, we come to realize that Lydia had been hoping to tell Marco that she was once again seeing Niño (a former lover). Marco's self-absorption in the car has made it impossible for her to divulge this information. She clearly feels uncomfortable about deceiving him, but she is also frustrated by his inability to recognize her sense of urgency. Indeed, we are provided an all-important contextualization of this frustration. Both Marco and Lydia have just attended the wedding of Marco's ex-girlfriend Angela. Interestingly, while Lydia cries at the ceremony, Marco does not. In his blindness, Marco assumes that Lydia is crying because of the beauty of the ceremony, and because she believes that he is still in love with Angela—when in point of fact she is crying about her lover Niño. Moreover, Marco admits that the fact that *he* has not cried signals the end of his long obsession with Angela, an end to his solitude, and the decisive beginning of

his relationship with Lydia. This is why he ignores Lydia's request to talk after the wedding. He is so consumed by the idea of his own transformation that he is oblivious (as he presumably has been for a while) to Lydia's feelings. This is, I submit, how we are to interpret the nature of Marco's personal failures and the background for his eventual growth. He is an immature man whose selfishness makes him unable to love. He is missing the fundamental virtue of love, the desire to *talk to* one's partner, to participate in a genuine dialogue of selves.

There is one more point about the wedding scene that gives us a helpful insight into Marco's personality. Angela is strikingly young—so youthful that Lydia mentions it. This is fascinating because Marco admits that it has taken him ten years to get over their five-year romance. His point is just that the fact that he has managed to hold it together while seeing her married to another man is evidence that his feelings for her are gone. But what we should notice is that Marco admits to having been obsessed with a woman who was likely to have been a young adolescent when they began dating. Even worse, we know that the girl who had controlled his thoughts and feelings for so long had drug problems that made their relationship untenable (except when they were traveling around the world). He readily admits that their life in Madrid was a "hell". Add to this the fact that Marco has written several travel guides, and that his response to the tragic going of Lydia and the revelation of her affair with Niño is to retreat to Jordan, and we get the impression that travel is for him an escape from the painful difficulties of social relations and the consuming fixations of his own desire.

We are thus confronted with a man whose superficial characteristics stand in ironic tension with his personality. Marco appears to be the model of a leading man, an embodiment of powerful, mature masculinity. But he is really a paradigm of immaturity, of adolescent selfishness and possessive mania. He is consumed with his own emotions, and his sensitivity must be viewed as perverted or attenuated because it is so narcissistic. When Marco cries in the early stages of the film he is crying for himself, for his own pain. His refusal to talk to Lydia or even touch her when she is comatose can be interpreted as a consequence of this egoism. *Her* predicament is not of primary importance; it is its relation to him that matters. As we'll see later, this aspect of Marco's personality has catastrophic results.

These claims are borne out by the clues that I have highlighted here, but also in our more visceral reactions to the film. Marco is not a character that we identify with or particularly like—until *Talk to Her* has reached its final scenes. Before

Benigno rapes Alicia he is surely the more sympathetic of the two men, even though we are given ample evidence of the depth of his creepy obsession. The film goes to great lengths to cultivate this asymmetry of sympathies. Benigno (Italian for ‘kind’) is warm hearted and caring, a kind of holy fool with his milk-dipped pancakes and his seemingly boundless altruism. Like Alicia in her bathrobe, we react to his disturbing psychology with a perplexed and unnerved understanding, partially because we know about his “special” adolescence. Of course, this attitude is called into question later. My point here is that the emotional difficulties that I have outlined make sense of viewers’ tendency to regard Marco as a relatively unsympathetic figure throughout much of the film.

Marco and Benigno

Reconsidering the implications of the first scene with Marco and Benigno allows us to draw two important conclusions about the film. I have articulated the sense in which I think Marco is portrayed as emotionally stunted, a self-obsessed man who is incapable of mature love precisely because he is incapable of “talking to” another human being. Now we may observe how this feature of his personality (a) makes sense of the singular connection that is forged between him and Benigno, and (b) sets the stage for the central *positive* narrative development in the film, Marco’s personal transformation.

Benigno takes an immediate liking to Marco. He tells Alicia all about him, and when he catches Marco peeking in at Alicia’s naked body from the hallway he motions for him to enter.⁸ This initial sympathy quickly develops into a deeper bond. Most obviously, Benigno regards the two of them as being in similar predicaments: the objects of their affection are comatose. Furthermore, Benigno takes himself to be a kind of mentor to Marco—he has dealt with Alicia’s condition for four years by this point, years that he takes to have been “the richest of [his] life”, and he is not shy about offering advice.

In a pivotal scene, Benigno’s suggestion that Marco *talk to* Lydia is met with a healthy dose of skepticism. Marco asks Benigno, in an obviously condescending way, what he knows about women. Indeed, he repeats this question, and then asks it for a third time. Benigno says that he knows quite a bit, having spent so many years looking after his mother and Alicia. Let us pause for a moment to consider what to make of this conversation.

Presumably Marco’s indignation represents something like our own immediate reaction to Benigno’s seemingly ridiculous pronouncements. Benigno’s

thought—that the years he has spent caring for his mother, and administering to a woman in a coma, give him expertise in matters of the heart—is on the face of it silly and absurd. In one sense, Benigno seems like an innocent child who is completely deluded about the nature of adult relationships.

However, once we have really understood the sense in which Marco is (contrary to superficial appearances) deficient as both a lover and a man, this scene takes on a more subtle texture. It is not that Benigno's claims cease to be ridiculous. He is still a virgin and an obsessive product of a strange, destructive adolescence, someone who has little right to instruct others about women and their amorous needs. Nonetheless, he *does* have the standing to instruct Marco, at least in one important sense. Benigno grasps, on a deep and intuitive level, something that is a necessary precondition for adult love. He understands what it means to talk to a woman: to truly engage with her personality, to recognize her as a separate being, and to treat her as deserving of care and devotion, not merely as a repository for one's own sentiments. The clearest lesson of *Talk to Her*, maybe its central lesson, concerns the fundamentality of this virtue. Benigno is the embodiment of it, though of course he comes to represent the danger of taking it to extremes, which transforms love for another into a consuming passion that operates against the original loving impulse. (I return in a moment to a more complete analysis of Benigno's decline.)

The connection between the two protagonists is cemented as the film progresses. By pursuing their relationship, Marco implicitly acknowledges that he has something to learn from Benigno. Marco opens up to his friend, telling Benigno the story of Angela's wedding as they sit with Lydia and Alicia on the terrace. He even admits later that he likes Alicia, just as Benigno does. (It is telling that he offers this confession *right after* Benigno has admitted, in the hospital parking lot, that he wants to marry Alicia. Marco scolds him: "Your relationship with Alicia is a monologue and it's insane".) Towards the end of the film, Marco returns from Jordan when he finds out about Lydia's death, Alicia's rape, and Benigno's incarceration. He is genuinely devoted to his friend: he visits Benigno in jail on multiple occasions, finds him a new lawyer, and rents his apartment. In their penultimate conversation in the Segovia prison the two men speak through a glass partition, and at various points in the scene their faces are literally superimposed.⁹ This is calculated to highlight our identification of Marco with Benigno. The technique is evidence for one of my main claims: that Marco's relationship with

Benigno is the transformative core of the film's conception and the main ingredient in its cathartic conclusion. It is his love for Benigno that allows Marco—in some ways such a paragon of heterosexuality—to grow into maturity.

In their final conversation, Benigno tells Marco that some of the other inmates in the prison have taken to calling him his boyfriend. Marco cries and says that he wouldn't mind if Benigno assented to the rumor. Benigno also says that he would like to hug him, as he has “hugged very few people in [his] life”, and Marco puts his hand up against the glass partition in a compassionate gesture. He cries three more times in the film: when the director of the prison tells him about Benigno's suicide, when he visits Benigno's grave and talks to him, and at the concluding Pina Bausch performance (*Masurca Fogo*). All of these scenes demonstrate a new kind of emotional competence for Marco: an ability to feel and suffer *for* another person, and not just for what that person signifies to himself. This helps us to understand why the film's ending feels so hopeful. This masterfully constructed scene is worth dissecting.

The tonal difference between the bookended scenes of *Talk to Her* is hard to overemphasize. When the curtain rises on *Café Muller* we encounter a barren stage and an expressive landscape of despair and disconnection. Marco's tears would be appropriate in this context, if they were shed for the right reason—namely, the bare anguish conveyed by the dancers and the choreography. The final performance, which follows a very brief conversation between Marco and Alicia in which she notices his (morally transformed) tears, transmits the opposite emotions. Through various cues, the filmmakers indicate to us that we are to feel (finally and for the first time) uplifted. There are indications of emptiness made full: the image starts filling only half the screen, the other half black, and then pulls across to fill it; the empty chair between Marco and Alicia seems occupied with their exchange of flirtatious smiles. There are visual and auditory indications of hope: the uplifting music, the striking illumination of Alicia's face as Marco looks back. And the stage itself tells us all we need to know. Once a wasteland, it is now a lush, dripping forest; once filled with tortured souls, it now houses happy couples, and one in particular that seems embarked on a successful courting ritual in this surreally verdant world. We close in on these two people. The man takes off his hat respectfully, romantically, and he steps off the stage, into the new visually altered space that is occupied by his lover.

Even though the story has been an extended tragedy, and even though what

happens between Marco and Alicia cannot be “simple” (assuming, as we probably should, that Katerina the ballet instructor is correct), we are left with the feeling that Marco is now capable of responding to the emotional demands of another person. We feel that Alicia, after all her complex trauma, deserves to be loved, and that Marco may now be capable of loving her.

I have tried to show how the connection between Marco and Benigno, and Marco’s resulting personal development, is a narrative outgrowth of the shortcomings that Marco exemplifies early in the film. His immaturity explains why he comes to feel so strongly about Benigno. In embodying the fundamental virtue that Marco lacks, Benigno serves as a moral teacher and intimate friend. Moreover, Marco’s immaturity is also crucial to the coherence of the film’s *denouement*: it is only the decline and death of his exemplar that prompts Marco to actually exhibit the virtue that he has come to understand and appreciate. Even Lydia’s horrible fate cannot effect the same transformation. This is why it is so important for us to understand the clues we are given about Marco’s solipsistic obsessions. These clues form the subtle backdrop to one of the film’s main thematic arcs.

But what can this tell us about the other, overlapping narrative development? How should we interpret the difficult story of Benigno?

Benigno

Let me begin by noting the explicit contrasts drawn between Marco and Benigno. Marco is as superficially masculine as Benigno is superficially feminine. Besides being a nurse who looks boyishly effeminate, and who is completely lacking in sexual experience, Benigno is a skilled hairdresser, stylist, and makeup artist who is absurdly devoted to his patient and his coworkers and who derives deep satisfaction from the activity of caring for others. He also embodies the stereotypically feminine virtue of “talking to her” that is so important to the film’s design.¹⁰

These obvious contrasts should be considered alongside another, more global one. I have shown how Marco grows into a new maturity as a result of Benigno’s example. By contrast, Benigno’s development is a tragic deterioration. His virtuous (albeit obsessive) devotion hardens into a mania, and he ultimately commits the atrocity of rape. This act represents a complete perversion of the virtue that he has so far exemplified. In caring for Alicia, and earlier for his mother, Benigno demonstrates a willingness to put others first, to care more deeply about them than he does about himself. In raping Alicia he violates her integrity and her

separateness in a deeply disturbing attempt to *merge* their selves.¹¹

It might be objected that Benigno is never free of this obsessive character, and that my claims about him embodying a fundamental virtue are therefore suspect.¹² There is no doubt that Benigno is portrayed as psychologically troubled throughout the film. He has had an unhealthy upbringing that has clearly led to a tendency towards fixation. He stalks Alicia before she has her accident, and in an especially creepy scene he enters her bedroom and steals a hair clip. But as I noted earlier, it is telling that Alicia doesn't scream, call for help, or run away; and she seems to calm down a bit when Benigno tells her that he is harmless, and that he merely wanted to see her again. Benigno appears gentle, almost saintly. For all his obvious faults, he is, for the majority of *Talk to Her*, the film's most sympathetic figure. Thus the developments really do depict his downfall, a tragic one, as they delineate the natural progression of Benigno's mental illness.¹³

So the two parallel developments of the film trace emotional trajectories that are entirely opposed. It is almost as if the characters and their respective fates are inverted mirror images of one another—or maybe, in Almodóvar's language, they are just reflections of each other through the distorting light of a glass partition. If this were true, then we might offer the following conjecture about Benigno's regression: just as his influence provided the necessary impetus for a change in Marco, it is Marco's influence that succeeds in pushing Benigno's obsessions over the edge. After all, he has taken care of Alicia for four years already without any major incidents. It is only *after* Marco appears at the hospital—and takes a few interested glances at Alicia's breasts—that Benigno's condition takes its awful turn.

This suspicion that Marco's appearance somehow precipitates Benigno's mental decline is confirmed by an analysis of the extended sequence that begins on the terrace of Alicia's room. First, we see Katerina and Benigno sitting out in the sun with Alicia. These two are the film's representatives of the virtue of talking to another, and in this scene Benigno's conduct explicitly links him to Katerina, who showers adoration on Alicia and explains to her, in loving detail, her plans for a future production. But throughout the scene we also see Marco across the way, observing them over the clear walls of glass that confine the balconies. As she is about to leave, Katerina goes into the room for a moment to put on the music for the upcoming show. The music is melancholic and unnerving; it is the score for a ballet called *Trenches* about World War One (she is using the music of Penderecki,

the “Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima”). Later, when Katerina leaves, Benigno peers in through the glass door rather suspiciously, making sure that she has gone. Only then do the intertitles appear—“Alicia and Benigno”—intertitles that are used throughout the movie to mark the onset of a relationship. Benigno begins to talk to Alicia about the domestic offerings in his catalogue, planning a life for the two of them in his apartment across from the dance studio. This is the first time we have seen him so forthcoming with such a deluded sentiment.

Marco knocks at this very moment; we see him through the glass door, but he soon comes through it to join Benigno on the balcony. He is thus present throughout the steady eruption of Benigno’s madness. More tragically, he serves as an all-important conduit for its expression. Benigno, who we have to assume has never mentioned anything about his infatuation with Alicia to anyone, is soon telling Marco the entire history of his obsession, his brief acquaintance with Alicia, and their coincidental reunion at the hospital. In the scene which immediately follows, night has fallen, and the two men are still talking, now inside Alicia’s hospital room. Benigno is embroidering a blanket (we see that it will eventually read ‘A y B’—Alicia y Benigno) while Marco smokes. Benigno describes how the years taking care of Alicia have been the best of his life. He has adopted her hobbies, especially going to the movies—silent ones were her favorite—and he derives great satisfaction from telling her about them.

What is so striking about this scene, particularly in the context of the interpretation I have offered, is how that Marco’s reaction to these extended (and presumably disturbing) revelations is *not* adverse. He continues smoking, calmly and mournfully; he says only that for him “it’s the opposite with Lydia”, meaning that he cannot muster up the will to engage with her at all now that she is unconscious. (We have previously noted that in this conversation Marco explains that he cannot even touch Lydia’s body, a symptom of his incapacities; this is when Benigno goes on to offer his laughable and at the same time profound advice.) The amazing feature of this scene is that it shows, in a way that is somehow easy to miss, how deeply and catastrophically self-absorbed Marco really is. Instead of recognizing the problematic nature of what he has been told, Marco merely assimilates it into his consciousness as an instrument of self-pity.¹⁴

For Benigno, then, Marco represents what he has never had: an individual with whom he can safely share his obsessions, a partner in their delusional grandeur. It is Marco’s selfishness, as well as his own obsessive personality, that permits him

to see Benigno's illness so clearly without worrying about it or even registering that it is unsettling. Once Benigno has found an outlet for his feelings, once he has shared them without being reprimanded, it is as if a floodgate has opened. The psychic force of his obsession with Alicia is overpowering.¹⁵ He becomes completely immersed in the fantasy of their union and severed from reality. The fulfillment of this madness is of course the rape of Alicia, which I have already analyzed as a perversion of his initially virtuous attachment to her.¹⁶ But we get another depiction of Benigno's slide into madness in one of the most fascinating scenes in the film, the black and white silent short entitled *The Shrinking Lover*.

In my view, this film is actually a "projection" of Benigno's.¹⁷ In *The Shrinking Lover*, Alfredo, hoping to convince his girlfriend Amparo of his unselfishness, drinks her as yet untested weight loss potion, which has two effects. First, it "does wonders for him" by making him more loving and affectionate. Second, it ends up shrinking him, making him smaller each day. To lighten Amparo's suffering at the hand of this unfortunate circumstance, Alfredo moves back in with his mother, who he has not seen for ten years because she is "terrible". As he is rubbing Alicia's naked body, Benigno says that what's important about the film is that after many years Amparo finds the address of Alfredo's mother and turns up there to rescue her now finger-sized lover. Reunited in a hotel room, Amparo falls asleep, and a spellbound Alfredo pulls down the sheet and navigates her body, climbing atop her bare breasts and then walking down towards her vagina. Tentatively at first, and then with greater zeal, Alfredo enters. "And Alfredo," Benigno says, as we see him stroking Alicia's legs, "stayed inside her forever". Soon after this line we observe in close-up an elongated red bubble that ruptures inside a lava lamp, which serves as the onscreen depiction of the act of rape and the resulting conception.

It is striking to note that there are several links between Benigno's consciousness and the film he has purportedly seen. First, there is the emphasis on a domineering mother. Second, there is the discovery of the lover's whereabouts. (Earlier in the film we have seen how excited Benigno was to find out the location of Alicia's home.) Third, there is the centrality of the sleeping beauty motif, and the act of removing the white sheet to expose her body.

Finally, the plot of *The Shrinking Lover* is set into motion by Amparo's accusation that Alfredo is selfish, and his attempt to refute her charge. As I have been arguing, the whole unfolding of *Talk to Her* itself can be seen as a nuanced meditation on the theme of selfishness and love. In particular, Benigno's selflessness

has by this time been transmuted into a kind of manic self-absorption, a madness that has its roots in his loving dedication to Alicia (and his mother before her). *The Shrinking Lover* is Benigno's attempt to convince himself that raping Alicia, and merging with her sexually, is a *benign* way of consummating his adoration. It is harmless, he tells himself—she will probably enjoy it, as Amparo evidently enjoys Alfredo's gentle plunge into her. This is a plausible explanation of the tone of the silent film and the metaphor of the shrunken man.¹⁸

The womb fantasy of Benigno, the longing for complete union with the object of his love, finds a relatively innocent expression in Alfredo—the tiny, putatively selfless lover who climbs into his woman as a last resort, as the only way of cementing their otherwise impossible togetherness. Alfredo violates Amparo, but he does so in a way that is less violent and dominating than mutually pleasurable and ultimately altruistic. Benigno deceives himself into thinking that his own act of violation is analogous. Whereas he has in the past been so deferential to Alicia's will—cutting her hair how she likes it, adopting her hobbies as his own—the culmination of his illness is an act of complete subjugation that masquerades as an act of reciprocal desire.

Thus Benigno's downfall is the result of a tragic expression of the very impulses that were once, in a more constrained form, emblematic of the film's central virtue. What was for years a quirky but genuinely admirable ability to engage with another person (even a comatose one) becomes a terribly confused, reprehensible, and ultimately selfish desire to possess.¹⁹ The analysis that I have offered of Marco's own personal incapacities allows us to see the ways in which he serves as a crutch for Benigno's increasing self-deception. Without a friend like Marco it is unclear whether Benigno's illness would have taken such a drastic turn. As I've noted, Benigno has had plenty of time for his obsession with Alicia to develop in this way, but it is only when Marco arrives on the scene that it happens. I think it's likely that a recognition—conscious or unconscious—of his negligence in this regard is a further ingredient in Marco's own transformation.

The Two Modes of Obsession and Alicia's Conception

I've argued so far that *Talk to Her* presents us with two modes of masculine obsession—obsession that often does (but need not) take the feminine as its object. Marco's form of obsession involves a reprehensible selfishness of a particular form: he is incapable of "talking to" others, because he is unwilling to step outside of his own emotions and preoccupations, *even when* he is in love. Benigno, on

the other hand, begins the film as an obsessive of a completely different stripe, someone whose sole concern is to care for others, to dote on them and to indulge their individuality, even when they happen to be completely unresponsive. Notice that the filmmakers do not present the moral status of these varying forms of obsession as on a par. For a while, Benigno's devotion seems a bit deranged, but we nonetheless sympathize with him and regard him as a warm hearted fool; it is only later, when this devotion transforms into a selfish desire to possess Alicia without her knowledge or consent, that we condemn him. Marco, on the other hand, only emerges as a sympathetic figure after he has been transformed by the influence of Benigno. And, as I've been suggesting, it is Marco's influence and example—most of all, his silence at the all-important moment of revelation, which is a central example of his inability to “talk to” others—that permits Benigno's once-virtuous devotion to Alicia to change in this horrible way. It will be instructive to conclude the paper by reflecting on how my analysis lends itself naturally to a satisfying account of the symbolic weight of Alicia's conception.

The fact that Alicia conceives Benigno's child, and that this is what apparently rouses her from her comatose state, is one of the most troubling aspects of the film, and one which understandably makes some viewers worry that the rape has been inadequately condemned. But it would be a serious mistake to view the conception and Alicia's recovery as qualifying the filmmakers' moral objection to Benigno's conduct. Given the complicated structure and concerns of *Talk to Her*, we should expect such a miraculous event to be an indication of something fundamental about the film's narrative architecture, rather than an endorsement of a superficial and clearly wrongheaded view about the moral status of rape.

The model of obsession that I've articulated here allows us precisely this kind of understanding. For I have been suggesting that Benigno's original form of obsession, though crazy in certain ways, is nonetheless the embodiment of a fundamental human virtue, the virtue of fully engaging with another human being on his or her own terms. This virtue is one that is characteristically lacking in men, or in certain types of men, and the filmmakers seem to be suggesting that its inculcation is central to the psychic health of those who are impoverished in this way.²⁰ It is his virtuous devotion that keeps us attached to Benigno even when he betrays us, and that comes to transform Marco into a man capable of mature love. Alicia's conception can thus be viewed as the symbolic representation of the miracle of Benigno's moral gift to Marco—a gift with a terrible price commensurate

to its value.

The violation of Alicia is the despicable end of Benigno's downward spiral, a trajectory for which Marco is partially responsible. But it is also the beginning of her recovery and her presumed relationship with Marco, a relationship which is only physically possible because of the rape and only emotionally possible because of Benigno's example. So the conception should not be viewed as a qualification of the heinousness of the act of rape, but as a symbol of the sense in which Benigno's character has been a casualty of Marco's redemption. This strikes me as an especially Almodóvarian conception of the moral universe: it is a kind of harmonized balancing act, a zero-sum game.

Conclusion

In this paper I have offered an analysis of *Talk to Her* that focuses on the film's depiction of its two male protagonists. Specifically, I have argued that the film portrays two representatives of unhealthy masculine desire, and that these characters and their obsessions are united around the theme of the virtue of "talking to" another person. This is a virtue that Benigno begins the film exemplifying; it is a virtue that explains the sense in which he is, ironically, a more mature lover than Marco. But it is also a virtue that gets perverted by Benigno's madness into a crazed desire to possess Alicia. On the other hand, Marco's connection to Benigno—and, as I've argued, his negligently muted reception of Benigno's obsessive revelations, which allows these obsessions to continue on their dangerous course—is what eventually spurs him to cultivate the virtue that he has for so long lacked.

As I said at the outset, my aim here was to attempt to gain a more nuanced appreciation of *Talk to Her's* strange narrative coherence and moral complexity. But I should stress that there are many fascinating elements of the film that I have not been able to discuss. I have not spent much time analyzing its masterful use of color as a means of emotional expression; nor have I reflected on the theme of the unity of the arts, a theme so interestingly broached by this film, with all its exquisite performances and inner worlds. I have not tried to reflect on the relation of the film's concerns to the rest of Almodóvar's impressive body of work; nor have I discussed the clear sense in which *Talk to Her* represents a meditation on Spanish cinema and the foundational archetype of Buñuel's *Viridiana*. That so much of interest remains is a testament to the film's power and richness. My modest hope is that this essay will lead a few interested viewers to watch it, or to watch it again.

Sam Shpall

Notes

- 1 Especially the excellent volume *Talk to Her*, ed. A.W. Eaton. From the *Philosophers on Film* series. London: Routledge.
- 2 This is one interpretation of the view of Susan Sontag in “Against Interpretation”. See *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Dell Publishing. For an extended exploration and critique of such skeptical theories about interpretation see Shpall ‘Being True to Fiction’, Unpublished Manuscript of 2012.
- 3 Some readers may worry, reasonably, that Benigno’s sexual orientation is not all that clear, but even those readers should acknowledge that the film does obviously take as its focus his obsession with Alicia. Of course, other excellent Almodóvar films (e.g. *Live Flesh*) have male protagonists, but there are many that revolve around women (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, *Dark Habits*, *All About my Mother*, *Volver*, etc.), and arguably none treat heterosexual men so exclusively as *Talk to Her*.
- 4 George Wilson’s ‘Rapport, Rupture, and Rape: Reflections on *Talk to Her*’ is an insightful and nuanced study of this theme. In *Talk to Her*, *op cit*.
- 5 See Cynthia Freeland’s ‘Nothing is Simple’, who also stresses that the ending of the film is strikingly optimistic, given the tragic events that have been depicted. In *Talk to Her*, *op cit*.
- 6 I count at least eight scenes in which Marco plays the role of watcher, fixing on things (women typically) with an intense, hawkish gaze. Most glaringly, he replaces Benigno on his balcony perch overlooking the dance academy near the end of the film. The emphasis on voyeurism connects, it seems to me, with Almodóvar’s visual motif of transparent partitions. These poetics raise complex issues of gender and psychology that I address throughout the paper but that could be the subject of extended further reflections. For now, I just register the thought that, masculine as *the gaze* may be thought to be, it appears suspiciously passive on our supposed man of action. It is of course only when Marco’s counterpart Benigno *stops* staring from his window that the action of the story gets going.
- 7 This early section of the ‘Lydia y Marco’ subplot echoes and perhaps outdoes the famous dinner table sequence in *Citizen Kane* in its narrative economy. We see an entire relationship in the span of seconds—from Marco’s “Estoy solo” to his (apparent) realization that what he calls talking falls short of real communication.
- 8 In this, their first actual meeting, Benigno makes two emblematic comments: he tells the comatose Alicia that Marco is the one who cried at Café Muller, and he laments Marco’s departure, given that they “haven’t even gotten the chance to talk”. This again constitutes a masterful economy of design. Benigno’s identification with Marco, his desire for friendship, and his exemplary virtue are all established in subtle and natural dialogue.
- 9 Above I mentioned the persistent visual theme of transparent surfaces and partitions in connection with the emotional significance of *Talk to Her*’s male voyeurism. The motif is also related to the repeated appearance of attendants, secretaries, and guards who block or permit passage—in Segovia, in Dr. Vega’s office, in the hospital. This emphasis on these instruments of separation and connection helps to confirm my interpretation of the film—as an exploration of debilitated male psychology, and as an attempt to articulate, in cinematic language, the source of this debilitation.
- 10 The other chief representative of this virtue is Katerina, the dance teacher who seems to me to be the film’s chief representative of femininity. Of course, the idea is not that men cannot have this virtue. Benigno and Niño have it, and Marco cultivates it with Benigno’s help. The claim is rather that the capacity to “talk to” another is a more paradigmatically feminine capacity, a sensitivity that men are often taken to be more prone to lack.
- 11 If you are concerned that this sounds overblown, recall that Benigno says that he wants to put himself in a coma so he can be “reunited” with Alicia. Recall also the end of the film *The Shrinking Lover*, which has so disturbed our protagonist: “And Alfredo stayed inside her forever”. I will discuss this fascinating sequence in a moment, and suggest that the film is

- actually Benigno's own "projection".
- 12 This seems to be the line taken by A.W. Eaton in 'Almodóvar's Immoralism', from *Talk to Her* *op cit*. I cannot offer a substantial critique of her claims in that paper. But I do think that she underestimates the degree to which the film portrays the rape as immoral. I think that the scenes in the hospital boardroom and the parking lot demonstrate that it has been clearly condemned. That the act is heinous is compatible, it seems to me, with its being morally complex in some ways—e.g. issuing from morally complex motivations, and producing morally complex results.
 - 13 For two interpretations of Benigno that square, in broad outline, with my treatment here, see Wilson, *op. cit.*, and Robert B. Pippin, 'Angels and Devils in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*' (*Talk to Her, op cit*).
 - 14 Freeland *op. cit.* also notices that Marco has failed to "hear" Benigno in this scene. In general, though, critics have vastly underestimated the importance of these moments.
 - 15 There is more to be said about how this infatuation is related to Benigno's mother complex, and about how this fixation—on the mother, on the past, on the overbearing figure that represents the painful reign of Franco and the church—is a theme in much of Almodóvar's work. (Careful viewers may have observed that Benigno only comes down from his balcony to meet Alicia *after* his mother has died.) For an extended and interesting investigation into this and related themes, see Ernesto Acevedo-Munoz's (2007) *Pedro Almodóvar*, London: British Film Institute.
 - 16 It is important that this claim is not misinterpreted. By saying that Benigno's attachment is virtuous, I mean only that it exemplifies the virtuous disposition that is central to the film's conception and worldview. I do not mean, as I hope is clear, that it is *wholly virtuous*. The point is that the rape represents an attack on this very virtue, a subjugation and violation of Alicia's autonomous self.
 - 17 I don't think a knock down argument for this claim can be given. However, we should note the several times in which we do see Benigno and Marco in an audience—at the dance performance, the patio concert, and the bullfight. Not showing Benigno in the movie theater is likely a conscious attempt to reinforce our suspicion that he never goes inside. Other critics of *Talk to Her* agree with this assessment of the status of *The Shrinking Lover* (e.g. Eaton *op cit*).
 - 18 I'll mention here that the lover is a pale and wide-eyed man who has the playful aura of a Buster Keaton. Just the picture of innocence that Benigno might concoct, in other words, to convince himself that it is not his own plans that so disturb him.
 - 19 Part of the tragedy of Benigno is that we (like his colleagues at the hospital) believe him when he says, after the rape, that he would never do anything to hurt Alicia. He has convinced himself that he is like Alfredo; he seems to genuinely believe that he has done no harm.
 - 20 Of course my claim here need only be that *the filmmakers* seem to think that men, more than women, lack this virtue. But I agree with their judgment.