

Longing for Return: An Existential Search and Identity Formation in Almodovar's *Volver*

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Abstract:

This essay explores Almodovar's construction of female characters in his film *Volver* (2006), in which the strength of the protagonists' maternal instinct foments their willpower and vital energy leading them to come to terms with past experiences of emotional and sexual abuse. At the center of interpretation of this cinematographic work is the Nietzschean term of the eternal return, developed in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, according to which, all the events of the past and present have already occurred at some time, will repeat themselves in the future ad infinitum and can be visually represented by a kind of incessant wheel or circle with no beginning or end formed by the past and future. In this vein, my reading of *Volver* examines how "the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of" events (Nehamas 1985, 146) forges the existential search and self-realization of Almodovar's characters. The analysis concludes that such reoccurrence of the traumatic events allows the female protagonists to unfold the secrets of their past, and by virtue of discovery, redemption, and reconciliation, to recover the lost family bond ultimately reviving the fractured symbiosis between these women and reasserting their will to improve their individual and collective future.

Keywords: Pedro Almodovar, *Volver*, Nietzsche' *Eternal Return*, Motherhood, Identity Formation, Abuse and Trauma, Redemption.

"Everything goes, everything comes back;
eternally rolls the wheel of being."
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

When Pedro Almodóvar presented his film *Volver* at the 2006 Cannes film festival, he emphasized that the title implied several returns: a return to the female universe, to his native region of La Mancha, but most strikingly, a return to the theme of "motherhood, as the origin of life and fiction" (Almodovar 2006, n.p.). Almodovar centers the story on three generations of women in one family – Raimunda, her sister Soledad, their mother Irene and Raimunda's daughter

Paula – who had to overcome a series of traumatic events to re-establish the family bond and re-affirm their selfhood. The events of the film take place between the La Mancha region and Madrid where the two sisters Raimunda and Soledad are reconciling with the horrible death of their parents in a fire. Almodovar's construction of his female characters, particularly of Raimunda, hinges on their maternal instincts which foment their willpower and vital energy as they come to terms with haunting experiences of incest. This essay seeks to analyze the film *Volver* in connection to the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return, developed in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. According to Nietzsche, all the events of the past and present have previously occurred, will repeat themselves in the future ad infinitum and can be visually represented by a kind of incessant wheel or circle formed by the past and future without beginning or end. “[N]othing that ever happens to us, even if it is the result of the most implausible accident and the wildest coincidence, is contingent - once it has occurred,” explains Alexander Nehamas in his study *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Nehamas 1985, 149). While repetitions of past events are innumerable, the variants of circumstances that surround them are limited. As the past repeats itself, Nietzsche views struggles as imperative for “life organization and as expression of will to power” (Granier 2005, 103; my translation) which, in turn, empower humans to strive against fatalistic attitudes and to foster creation instead of destruction. Such creation deems inseparable from “an inner transformation” during which individuals overcome pain in order to evolve multilaterally (Granier 2005, 105-108).

It is my contention that in *Volver*, the “repeated circular course of” (Nehamas 1985, 146) traumatic events that result in violence and death of the aggressor put into motion an existential search for Almodovar's characters and ultimately gives new energy to their will to power. Raimunda, Irene and Paula epitomize the type of desirable individuals – identified by Nietzsche as sinners – who challenge social decadence and “barbaric violence which characterize vulgar and mediocre individual[s]”, (Granier 2005, 100) embodied in the film by their male counterparts. By virtue of “operations on [their] souls” engendered by violence and with evolution of their “sense of strength” (qtd in Granier 2005, 31, 100), the female protagonists experience Nietzschean *becoming*. Lawrence J. Hatab in *Nietzsche's Life Sentence* asserts that this notion of “becoming” is fundamental to the understanding of eternal return and cannot be explained in terms of anything other than the immediate condition of the individual (Hatab 2005, 63, 62, 57) to overcome existing complexities and break away from impediments to progression. Such liberation, in turn, yield them “emotional possibilities [...] to create new values” (Jean Granier 2005, 33) for a more meaningful family relation and individual growth. The father figures' transgressions, on the other hand, exemplify how such decadence, embodied by their “unruly” [incestual] instincts, “demoralizes the will” (Jean Granier 2005, 30-31), resulting in their violent deaths. The reoccurrence of such transgressions, however, allows Raimunda and her mother to unfold the secrets of their past, and by virtue of discovery, redemption, and reconciliation, to recover the lost family bond ultimately reviving the fractured symbiosis between these women and reasserting their will to improve their individual and collective future.

In this essay, I explore how Nietzsche's eternal return theory broadens our understanding of the repeated incestual aggression in *Volver* as a catalyst for existential search, discovery, and ultimately for the self-affirmation of its female characters. Even though "[w]ayward husbands and incestuous fathers are (or have been) quickly dispatched off screen" (Kinder 2007, 6), their ghostly presence in the narrative serves as a leitmotiv to link the family's past to its present. Reading Nietzsche's eternal return, Joan Stambaugh highlights that "[i]n a determined series of recurring events the 'when' of an event is already established. The 'what' is not totally predictable, because the element of repetition enforces and strengthens the effect of the event" (Stambaugh 1980, 26). Based on this premise, I argue that the attempt by Raimunda's husband Paco to rape her daughter Paula in the beginning of the narrative produces a stronger impact on Raimunda's psyche since it forces her out of the emotional rut caused by having been raped by her own father as a teenager and her successive rejection of her mother. As the transgressions by the father figures are repeated, Paula's drama incurs the eternal return of the mother's suffering and of her grandmother's killing of her abusive husband, finally allowing the protagonists to overcome the past and to canalize the destructive energy into a new constructive vein. In *Volver*, Paula's trauma represents the eternal return of her mother's and grandmother's past *per se* even though the circumstantial differences of the tragic events vary. Here we witness, in Alexander Nehamas' words, how "if any property [of an experience] were different, its subject would be simply a different subject (Nehamas 1985, 155). In other words, while Raimunda's father managed to abuse, rape, and impregnate her, Paula saves herself from being raped by Paco stabbing him with a knife. By killing her offender, the granddaughter reintroduces the grandmother's act of taking the abuser's life into the family history circle and therefore, further foregrounds the ongoing suffering of Raimunda and Irene. Therefore, all the variations in the re-occurrence of the events in Almodovar's narrative, such as father versus stepfather, abuse versus attack/attempted rape, ignorance versus complicity of the mother, constitute acceptable formative components within the framework of eternal return of the same that are justified by the fact that the subjects of the two experiences are not identical either. They are two different victims of abuse by a father figure, which results in emotional trauma and the transgressor's death, but, in turn, espouses reconciliation between the three generation of women.

"*Volver* seems to focus on a difference within repetition that can only be mediated by (cinematic) representation" (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2017, 34). Raimunda's painful experience remains an enigma almost to the end which fosters a more meaningful interaction between the narrative and the audience as the director continues to build on the clues in the protagonist's characterization. The temporality here not only maintains the interest of the viewer, but also facilitates a deeper understanding of Raimunda's psychological trauma and the consequent abandonment of her family. Over the years, her father finds his death in a fire at the hand of his wife when she finally learns of the crime committed by her husband against their own daughter. As the audience becomes exposed to the disturbing images associated with Paco's attempt to rape Paula, the abuse

committed against Raimunda in her adolescence acquires more visuality and impact. It becomes a terrifying reality of a repeated abuse and intensifies the pain of that family tragedy. At the same time, the return of the past trauma brings about a realization for Raimunda that “each one of [... her] past actions is a necessary condition to be what [... she is] today” (Nehamas 1985, 160). Nietzsche believed that, “[b]y creating, on the basis of the past, an acceptable future, we justify and redeem everything that makes this future possible” (160). The protagonist’s acceptance of Paula’s and her own pain, cover-up of Paco’s death and the consequent fosterage of the family’s emotional and financial stability exemplify the organic principle that makes possible the very notion of eternal return: redemption.

Ever since Raimunda moved to Madrid, she has immersed herself in daily responsibilities, keeping up with the fast pace of a large city and perpetuating the circle of life following in her attempt to flee the anguish of the past. The past recurs eternally in this daily life as every day she finds herself in “the world as a circular motion [...] doing now what has been done in the past” (Nehamas 1985, 142) more automatically than willingly, consciously or not suppressing the pain of the wound that has not healed in fifteen years. The textural clues in a shape of circular objects and eolic wind turbines dominate in the film’s imagery ascribing to the sense of past repeating itself in the present. The film abounds with the semiotic sign of eternal return as a course of events lacking a marked beginning or an end to reinforce the construction of meaning of “[l]ife, suffering and the circle [...] which] belong inextricably to each other” (Stambaugh 1980, 36). In the scenes of Raimunda and Paula’s travelling from Madrid to the hometown, the images of the wind turbines raised along the way through the wheat fields prevail in the background, demonstrating, as Gutiérrez-Albilla well states, that “[t]he landscape also forms a passage through which the characters constantly move between rural and urban spaces” and emphasizing their “in-between’ existence” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2017, 39). The recurring appearance of these spaces of transition also symbolize continuous transformation of the protagonists’ identity which is inseparable from working through past traumas to regain self-confidence, mutual appreciation and ultimately family unity. At the same time, by means of the infinite circular movements put into action by the wind, this gigantic technology fulfils its main function: production of clean energy. The renewable energy constitutes an essential force for the continuation of the social order and self-realization. Similarly, through the willful return to their hometown in La Mancha by the end of the narrative, the circle of the protagonists’ life is re-established and enriched.

In the endless succession of daily tasks, Raimunda lives in a sort of habit wheel, ending one day to start another, fulfilling the same obligations and being absorbed by “a certain process, [... in which] there is no static content” (Stambaugh 1980, 32) as represented by the numerous sequences pertinent to the routine and the performance of duties. As Gutiérrez-Albilla insightfully remarks, “Raimunda may or may not come to terms with or move away from the compulsive repetition that forces her to ‘involuntarily and repeatedly relive her trauma’ as a belated experience” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2017, 39-40). In *Volver*, the director organizes the visual space of the screen

surrounding the protagonist with objects whose circular shape indisputably highlights the weight of a routine in which Raimunda finds herself: plates, baskets, and washing machines. Her reflection in a glass door of a washer, automatically completing circle after circle, reflects the protagonist's perpetual traumatic state. The dark circles under Raimunda's eyes and her sorrowful facial expression highlight the fatigue caused by the character's entrapment in this vicious circle, the inability to address the trauma of her past, to come to terms with it, and to attain a peaceful homecoming. Furthermore, Raimunda's voluptuousness, consistently emphasized by the camera from various angles, somatizes the circularity of her life.

One night, returning home at the end of a long day of physical work at the Madrid airport, Raimunda finds her daughter Paula pale and soaked from the rain, waiting for her at the bus stop. Paula's face expresses fright and emotional distress which Raimunda initially does not realize as she is overwhelmed from fatigue and daily life worries. After a series of routine questions from the mother and inconsistent answers from the daughter, Raimunda seems to realize the unusual nature of Paula's state. Something in this strangeness arouses the suspicion and fear that her husband Paco has caused it. Evidently the nightmare of her own adolescence helps Raimunda make the proper connection between the present and the past. She enters the apartment, where she witnesses her husband's body lying on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood, smelling of beer and with the pants fly still open since the last thing he tried to do before receiving his fatal blows was to rape Paula. The frame highlights the presence of a kitchen knife, which has previously appeared to foreshadow the traumatic interruption of the life circle. In the sequence of the evening preceding Paco's death, one of the medium-close up shots focuses on Raimunda over a kitchen sink where the presence of large knife establishes a contrast with the round shape of plates. The frame centers on a stack of dishes on top of which the knife is placed and such deformed circumference augurs a violent change in the development of the narrative discourse. The most immediate circle of the protagonists' routine is transgressed when the very next day, the same knife becomes a murder weapon when Paula stabs Paco with it in self-defense.

The events of the night before the murder introduce the audience to the theme of incest through a series of interaction between Paco and Paula in which the director makes vast use of the point of view shots. Upon returning to Madrid from visiting the family cemetery with her daughter, Raimunda finds her husband getting drunk at home after being fired from his last job. As she arrives, Paula greets her father and sits across from him, putting one leg on the arm of the chair unaware of Paco's reaction. The medium shot shows Paula with her back to the camera while Paco fixes a lascivious gaze between the legs of his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter. The focus of the camera is on the father, on his every movement. These point of view shots expose the viewers to Paco's libidinous energy towards the girl. The implication of the theme's importance is accentuated when Raimunda notices her husband's expression and, irritated, demands that Paula correct her pose. The sequence ends with Paco peering at Paula through the doorway while she is changing her clothes before going to bed. This episode undoubtedly represents an instance

of “recurrence [of] something that has run its course and occurs again” (Stambaugh 1980, 30), that is, of a daughter representing the sexual object of her father, consequently leading to his violent death.

The next evening, as his body lies face down on the floor with his legs wide apart, a medium-long high-angle shot shows Raimunda standing between them looking down at her dead husband. Her dominant pose and erect body staged as a phallic symbol reemphasize the power dynamic between the two as a couple and their roles in it as individuals. Paco was a failure, unable to keep a job, an indolent and perverse human being. Raimunda, on the other hand, is a strong and willful woman, who possesses what Nietzsche defines as “plastic power,” that is, “the ability to develop oneself individually, to transform and incorporate within oneself the past and the alien, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken molds” (Nietzsche 1997, 62). Raimunda epitomizes the “so little affected by the worst and most appalling disasters that they can feel tolerably well and be in possession of a clear conscience even in the midst of those or somehow soon after” (Nietzsche 1997, 62). Finding herself in this calamity, Raimunda almost immediately recovers her judgment and shows clear conscience, when she rolls up her sleeves to clean the bloody puddle that has formed on the floor and then decides to take advantage of the restaurant key left by his neighbor Emilio to keep Paco's body.

The camera follows Raimunda's movements focusing on rolls of paper towel, whose whiteness stands out in the extreme close-up against the crimson blood as the paper absorbs it. This use of contrasting colors alludes to Raimunda's tragedy, caused by the violent loss of her virginity, the cruel assault on her innocence and happiness by the one who carried the same blood in her veins, her father. White is stained and absorbed by blood and yet it comes out triumphant because paper, which, although a fragile material, is the means by which order and cleanliness are restored. Thus, in her adolescence Raimunda replaces what she has lost and heals her wound with the life that is generated within her body despite the atrocity committed against it.

Motherhood becomes the means of her emotional purification and re-affirmation of her inner force to heal in this new phase of her existential journey. The strength of her “deeper roots” (Nietzsche 1997, 62) is manifested in the power of the protagonist to use the past in the service of life, use her previous experience in order to get ahead, continue to live or overcome another return from the perpetual difficulties of the life that comes her way. Raimunda “embraces destruction [that is] ... essential to the creative openness that animates life” which symbolizes the Nietzschean concept of “becoming” (Nietzsche 1997, 62). After having been victimized, the adolescent Raimunda assumed her immediate condition of rape and pregnancy and embarked on the journey towards her future far from her family, from pain, from the constant memory of abuse and humiliation she suffered at home. Years later, in Madrid, she is forced to embrace the destruction caused by Paco's animalistic instincts and channel Paula's and her life into a new vessel. With Paco's death Raimunda is forced to use all her strength and ingenuity to find an additional source of income. When her neighbor leaves her a key for his restaurant, she is presented with an opportunity to re-invent herself. Raimunda takes charge of preparing food for a group of thirty people

who are filming a movie in the area. Within the sequence of the event preparation, the protagonist is surrounded by a great diversity of fruits and vegetables. As Steven Marsh observes, “[t]he sense of an organic cycle is furthered, subtly, in Raimunda’s peasant earthiness and the brightly colored fresh food she prepares in her restaurant. Such elemental connections also enable, it seems, a restoration of origins, the curing process of reconciliation and forgiveness, a genuine return” (Marsh 2009, 351). An opulent palette predominates in the frames, in which the red of various shades reigns symbolizing the beginning of a new life cycle, galvanized by violence and death.

This new beginning, however, is predicated on yet another return to the past as it coincides with the reappearance of Raimunda’s mother, Irene, whom everyone believes to have died in a fire, next to her husband. On the night of Paco’s death, Raimunda receives the news about the death of her aunt Paula, her mother’s sister, who lived in their hometown. Without giving any explanation, Raimunda insists that Soledad go alone to their aunt’s funeral. After the funeral, their mother Irene who was allegedly dead for five years but has been living with Paula, takes the main step to reunite with her daughters after fulfilling the duty to care for her sister. Hidden in the trunk of her daughter’s car, the mother arrives in Madrid to make her appearance in front of Soledad. Irene remains to live with her youngest daughter, while Raimunda is completely ignorant of the fact that her mother has returned and is waiting for an appropriate moment to re-enter her life and apologize for “not having [realized] what [...] happened” to her eldest daughter, for “being blind” and not seeing “that the similar monstrosity could occur before [her] eyes” (*Volver*). We discover that, upon learning of the lawlessness her husband had perpetrated against Raimunda some fifteen years ago, Irene took justice into her own hands and set on fire a barn where he was napping with his mistress. The grandmother’s killing of the abusive father figure finds its return in the granddaughter’s taking the life of the one whom she believed to be her father. Although Paula’s case is self-defense while her grandmother’s is revenge, neither actions were premeditated but both resulted in the violent death of the offender in lieu of his incestual sexual instinct. Therefore, as Kinder well puts it, “in *Volver*, Eros is replaced by death” (2007, 6) and while she considers such “turn from Eros to Thanatos, as quite a loss” due to Almodovar’s “sacrifice of sexuality” in favor of “a new mature serenity” (2007, 9), I view it as beneficial on the diegetic level as it allows to reinforce the dialogic relations between the thematic content of incest and trauma within the dramatic arc and to further focus on the characterization of the three generations of protagonists. By bridging Freud’s libidinal energy and Nietzschean concept instinct, both of which constitute “the basis of the unconscious attitude towards the world” (Granier 2005, 52), Almodovar foregrounds how the unconscious suffering becomes a source for a conscious effort to address and overcome past traumas which we witness in Irene’s return to her daughters’ life and Raimunda’s acceptance of her mother, as well as the death of her father and husband. As Nietzsche explains, the strength of instincts which form vital energy, depends on individual capacity and reasoning (Granier 2005, 98). While the paternal figures’ unconscious behavior speaks to their “chronic illness of instinct” (Granier 2005, 98) and results in an end for their livelihood,

three generations of women turn their deaths into a new beginning, an opportunity to grow and move forward through a joint effort.

Circling endlessly through the routines of everyday life, Raimunda expresses no desire to change or erase her past despite enormous pain experienced due to sexual abuse and consequent estrangement from the family. The attitude that guides her behavior is not that of a victim of circumstances, but of a survivor in control of your life. "Accepting the present is, of course, accepting everything that has led to it" (Nehamas 1985, 160) and this acceptance of each aspect of the past experience as a constitutive element in the totality of a life lead to redemption. Likewise, Raimunda's redemption towards the end of the story is accomplished through her understanding that all past events have been necessary. In Nietzsche's words, she has had to "patiently go through all the necessary steps till the decisive moment where the sense of imminent danger [...] help to discover a lifesaving decision" (Granier 2005, 33). The suffering of her mother, her daughter and her own has formed a large part of this process of redemption and has allowed them to reach a higher level of intimacy, of finally being themselves. The redemption also empowers Irene to aspire for a better future as she yearns to eliminate the silence that began between her and Raimunda about fifteen years ago. Thus, *Volver* offers a story of hope when it demonstrates how the eternal return of all things does not condemn individuals to paralysis and stagnation but rather presents them with an opportunity to redeem their past by.

By accepting the present fact that Paula, her daughter conceived through her own rape, has committed a crime in self-defense, that her mother is responsible for the death of her father and has returned after five years to be with her daughters, that her father's death was not an accident, Raimunda accepts and surpasses her past trauma finally achieving peace and reconciliation with her family. Despite the female protagonists' fear, pain, and suffering, this film offers a hopeful ending as Raimunda returns to her hometown, from which she escaped fifteen years ago due to her father's abuse and her mother's lack of support. Now it is returning to her roots, to the mother's womb, which helps her achieve peace with her past and provides her with the strength to follow the incessant existential wheel. Raimunda is no longer alone in this fight; now her mother has returned to give her unconditional love and emotional support – everything Irene was unable to offer her daughter as she was unaware of her family's tragedy. Despite the return of Raimunda's nightmare due to her daughter/sister tragic incident, Paula's future is assured by the presence and wholehearted support of her mother, grandmother and aunt. As Paula manages to save herself at the cost of committing a crime, the circumstances of the eternal return deviate from her mother's experience while, at the same time, allow to intertwine Paula's and her grandmother Irene's traumas caused by the fathers' instinct for Eros resulting in their death. In *Volver*, we also witness how incorporating the past, a new present and future are being molded. At the end, a new cycle of relations between Raimunda and her mother starts to take shape, inseparable from their redemption and will to power for a more meaningful future.

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