

# Talk to Her! Look at her! Pina Bausch in Pedro Almodóvar's *Hable con ella*

ANETTE GUSE *University of New Brunswick*

When Pina Bausch's work appeared in two brief excerpts in Pedro Almodóvar's film *Hable con ella* ('Talk to Her'; 2002), it was very likely seen by a much wider, not specifically dance-oriented audience than previously. *Café Müller*, one of her earlier pieces (1978), and *Masurca Fogo* ('Mazurka of Fire'; 1986) were used by Almodóvar to frame his narrative about two women in a coma, one a dancer, the other a bullfighter, and their relationship to two very different men who form a special friendship as a result of their care of these women. According to Almodóvar, Bausch's ballet *Café Müller* served as a perfect way of communicating the limbo in which the story's protagonists lived – the limbo between life and death (*Talk to Her: Press Book* 13). Conversely, the final scenes from *Masurca Fogo* convey the hope that follows loss. On an aesthetic level, the dance segments reflect the musical rhythm and language of the film, and at the same time become part of the film's language (Strauss 222–23).

Both Bausch and Almodóvar are linked to artistic transgression in regard to genres and subjects, and both reflect on performance as such in their work. In addition, both invoke themes such as solitude, loss, gender identity, the "impossibility" of relationships between man and woman, and the existential need for communication and love. Taking Almodóvar's comment as a point of departure, this article's intention is twofold: it investigates stylistic affinities between his work and Bausch's dance theatre, and it sheds light on the strategies at work in her use of visual language. It stresses the visual element to argue that both Bausch and Almodóvar point to perception and questions about perception as the crucial factor in their critique of cultural norms and conventions with regard to gender and gender relationships. Furthermore, the intersection of gender issues and universal issues about the human condition not only offers a social commentary on modern society but also probes facilely conceived victim-perpetrator constellations and thus constitutes the philosophical common ground between the two artists. This collaboration between them in *Hable con ella* has received little scholarly attention. Drawing on this film makes it possible to go beyond a discussion of general characteristics of Bausch's theatrical language, and it affords readers unfamiliar with her work an insight into dance performance through the medium of film – a medium that conveys a far better impression of performance than photographs alone.

Bausch's work as choreographer and director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal has transformed contemporary modern dance in the German-speaking world and beyond. She has challenged the boundaries between dance and theatre, as her dancers are also simultaneously actors, singers, and comedians, and, by using different media at her

disposal, she has transformed dance craft into a unique form of visually strong performance art. She is internationally acclaimed by critics and dance practitioners, and she enjoys immense popularity with dance aficionados. She has become one of Germany's most renowned modern cultural icons. Now in the third decade of its existence, the Tanztheater Wuppertal boasts a repertoire of over thirty works. Each year the company produces a new work, frequently commissioned by public institutions for special occasions, and it continues to tour the world. With her creative selection of music, often drawing on world music, her signature choreography, and her inventive staging, Bausch has an undiminished power to impress, entertain, puzzle, provoke, and annoy. The subjects that she represents on stage – fear, loneliness, frustration, age, relationship between men and women, the exploitation of humans – all resonate with her audience.

The sensual treatment of these themes through a fusion of various art forms is reminiscent of “large-scale opera or ballet – theatre productions or even cinema,” as Ciane Fernandes aptly observes (5). One might even think of a “revue” when experiencing the sequence-character and visual glamour of pieces such as *Masurca Fogo*. Elements of theatre are apparent in the way the dancers sing and speak and wear costumes that are regular street-clothes rather than dance costumes. Carole Kew ascribes the effect of Bausch's dance theatre to its theatrical gesture of grandeur and its sophisticated and innovative combinatory techniques:

Is it the sheer spectacle that attracts? Everything about Pina's work is big. Big subjects (love, anguish, struggle, loss). Big company (twenty-plus dancers). Big sets (based on nature with leaves, water, or earth). And her works are complex. Mixed media (in Danzon and *Masurca Fogo*). Many scenes (of montaged dance fragments and snatches of text). A collaged soundtrack (folk, classical). (5)

The fundamental structure, however, is musical: Bausch makes use of melodies, leit-motifs, themes, counterthemes, repetitions, fugues and variations, and the result can be described as an optic symphony (Schmidt, “Nach Liebe suchend” 19).

The massive literature about Bausch's dance theatre, primarily but not exclusively written by dance scholars, views her work as a postmodern document reflecting the postmodern human condition in terms of gender construction, multiculturalism, and transnational culture. The analysis offered here examines her dance theatre as performance art and therefore primarily as a visual text. Its focus is on the theatrical language that she has developed throughout her oeuvre. More specifically, it explores the nexus between the semiotics of the dancing body, the use of space, time, props and costume, music and multimedia, and choreographic patterns in order to elucidate the strategies at work in the text. However, the analysis of her presence in the work of Almodóvar requires an outline of the theoretical premises that inform this study and a contextualization of existing scholarship on Bausch.

While dance as a cultural phenomenon is frequently studied within the field of anthropology and historical dance research focusses on stylistic developments, periods, influential dancers, and choreographers, theoretical research on dance tends to centre on issues of movement and body-analysis. As a result of an emancipation from approaches that are based on aesthetic systems or dominated by literature, movement itself has become

the subject of discourse and is considered a multilayered text that not only is the object of analysis but also writes history itself (Jeschke 2–3). Recent approaches in dance research, led by Anglo-American academic discourse, have identified the body, movement, and dance as significant subjects of interdisciplinary studies (Balme 23). Further important impulses for research on dance theatre originated from the relatively young academic discipline of performance studies, which opened up the concept of performance, including “any event, action, item or behaviour” (Schechner 10), as a possible subject of examination as performance, shifting the focus from meaning to function, from product to process, and interrogating anew the relationship between performance and hermeneutics. What is vitally important for this article’s reading of Bausch and Almodóvar is an understanding of the potential of performance: “Performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories and allow people to play with behaviour that is ‘twice-behaved,’ not-for-the-first time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared” (Schechner 10–11). Performance studies has in fact maintained that, with the development of aesthetic performances (i.e. theatre, music, dance) in directions that blend genres – turning the performance into “performance art,” mixed media, “happenings,” or “intermedia” – the boundaries separating genres blur and that those separating art and life are broken through (Schechner 10–11). In a similar fashion, Erika Fischer-Lichte has expanded the understanding of what deserves our interest in studying performance. She emphasizes the importance of, and the curiosity for, examining the processes occurring during a production, a performance and the reception of a performance, and she argues for a more holistic view of “Produktions- und Rezeptions- bzw. Wirkungsästhetik”:

[Eine] Ästhetik [des Performativen] fragt weniger nach den Bedeutungen, welche Darsteller und Publikum durch oder während einer Aufführung hervorbringen mögen; sie fokussiert vielmehr die performativen Prozesse des Herstellens, Verhandeln und Austauschens, die Darsteller und Zuschauer im Laufe der Aufführung vollziehen. (20)

It is noteworthy that Fischer-Lichte’s conception characterizes performance and the perception of performance as a dynamic, changing, and organic process. Akin to this view, and seeking to validate the specific generic qualities of dance with regard to the act of interpretation, the dance scholar Janet Adshead-Lansdale claims that the genre-specific transience and impermanence of dance needs to be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness. She rejects the idea of a “one-to-one correspondence between movement and meanings” and instead argues for interpretation as an “imaginative and intellectual process that associates movement and other elements of the dance with events and people, both within the movement/dance system and within wider artistic practices and cultural issues” (189). The inclusion of the broader cultural context in the act of interpretation and the role of subjective “reading” by the viewer necessarily lead to the “multiplicity of possible narratives,” i.e. interpretations (189). As a consequence, Adshead-Lansdale characterizes the “reader” (viewer) as the cocreator of a “mobile text” (dance) (203). This approach appears appropriate considering Bausch’s reluctance to be interpreted in any definite way, be it feminist or sociopolitical, and her much quoted statements about her work underscore this reluctance: “I just can’t say: ‘That’s how it goes [...]’. I am watching

myself. I am just as lost as all the others,' or: 'You can see it like this or like that. It just depends on the way you watch. But the single stranded thinking that they [the critics] interpret into it simply isn't right. [...] You can always watch the other way" (Hoghe, "The Theatre of Pina Bausch" 72–73). For example, the female dancers in the plays often wear high heels, most of the time complementing a costume that consists of elegant, feminine dresses, made from colourful, flowing, printed fabrics, that allude nostalgically to the style of the fashion in the thirties and forties. The high heels could be interpreted as a symbol of cultural oppression forcing women to walk unnaturally, transforming them into sex objects. By having her dancers wear this footwear, she demonstrates how cultural aesthetic standards are inscribed and internalized, but the shoes – closed-toe shoes – are noticeably very elegant and thus fulfil an ambiguous function of feminization that cannot be narrowed down to sexual objectification. Bausch draws our attention to accepted conventions by decontextualizing them, as, for example, when male dancers appear in cross-dressing costume, with high heels and female ball gowns, or in *Masurca Fogo* on stilts underneath a long dress. This reversal and exaggeration has an alienating and comical effect.

A discussion of performance requires consideration of further central components of the stage apart from the actor/dancer and his/her actions, notably the *mise-en-scène*, the arrangement of stage set and props, and the inclusion of media such as video film. Gabrielle Cody has described the effect of using real natural elements such as soil, water, and grass on stage as "bottled naturalism" (116). Examples of this occur in Bausch's work: there are dead leaves covering the stage surface in *Bluebeard* (1977), a flooded stage in *Arien* (1979), a field of carnations bending in the wind in *Tanzabend Nelken* (1979), a concrete wall that crumbles on stage in *Palermo, Palermo* (1990), and two giant granite cliffs and the projected image of the ocean accompanied by the roaring sound of breaking waves in *Masurca Fogo*. The artificial, nondecorative presence of nature appears surreal, alienating, and, according to Bausch, simply aesthetically pleasing: "Ich finde das schön, so wirkliche Sachen auf der Bühne – Erde, Laub, Wasser" (Hoghe, *Pina Bausch: Tanztheatergeschichten* 34). This presentation of nature, however, clearly contrasts with the culture represented in the actions of the dancers, who, if not dancing solo, play short episodes that illustrate interactions between people. The appearance of animals on stage (portrayed by dancers) – for example a walrus in *Masurca Fogo* – has generally been interpreted as another surprise factor, possibly commenting on the human body's entrapment (Cody 116). While many critics have discussed the aspect of cruelty of love – and, in particular, the violence portrayed against women – the role of humour, in the form of verbal jokes, slapstick, or comical images, as well as the incorporation of children's games in the depicted adult world, has thus far been neglected.

The fact that so many things happen on stage simultaneously causes the spectator to feel overwhelmed at times or unsure about where to focus attention. Elizabeth Wright describes this as a "classic procedure in the postmodern performing arts. The spectator never feels sure that s/he is looking at the 'right' place, since the principal action always seems to go on off-centre. The 'normal' voyeuristic modes of sorting out the world are thus exposed and deconstructed: the onlooker begins to feel the force of his/her own determining fantasies" (25). One factor that further contributes to this sense of multiple

stories is Bausch's technique of montage or collage without clear beginnings and endings – a technique that suggests infinite movement.

One of Bausch's artistic goals is to develop a type of language that achieves a level of communication beyond the common codes of ordinary verbal language. She is quoted as saying, "Mit dem 'Nur Reden' kann man ja nichts anfangen" (Hoghe, "Für Pina Bausch" 13). The idea of dance as a type of language was articulated early on in the theory of modern dance, for example by Mary Wigman: "The dance is a living language which speaks of man – an artistic message soaring above the ground of reality in order to speak, on a higher level, in images and allegories of man's innermost emotions and need for communication" (10). Understanding dance as language and examining choreographies as texts presume acknowledgment of the fact that "interpretation is often difficult in dance, since movements, unlike words, have few combinatory rules that guarantee a clear, unambiguous communication of ideas. Dance is unlike verbal language, for it usually creates meaning only vaguely" (Banes 28).

David Price has convincingly argued that Bausch criticizes Western logocentrism in her theatre by using Artaud's techniques, such as the subordination of speech and text, the importance of *mise-en-scène*, and the dreamlike quality of the stage (326–28). In the same vein, pointing to the theatricality of nonrepresentational, nonnarrative performance, bereft of unity and entered action, Wright seems to suggest that Bausch portrays the world as an absurd and dark place that leaves the individual unprotected:

Clearly Bausch's aim is not that of transmitting knowledge rationally. Her effects contain no guide to interpretation via any programmatic texts, nor do her actors comport themselves with a conscious understanding of their role *vis-a-vis* one another. Stable selves disappear; intelligible contexts metamorphose unaccountably, foregrounding the vulnerability of the subject and its feeble defences. (25)

Based on their indeterminacy and impermanence, it would appear as though images in dance scenarios are processed differently from language, appealing to different levels of perception that operate in a more intuitive, unconscious mode. The point of recognition (with the object, the gesture, the situation) is the crucial and definitive factor in appropriating the observed, and it is based on experience, familiarity, and knowledge – in this respect not unlike the vocabulary of language. In this way it becomes possible for the viewer to relate to what is performed. Ursula Fritsch describes this process of understanding as resonance and emotional appropriation based on our physical memory. She refers to Bausch's critical portrayal of culturally prescribed norms and rigid systems and conventions of control and limitation that express themselves physically:

Mit ihren Fragen spürt Pina Bausch die leiblich wirksamen gesellschaftlichen Zurichtungen und Eingrenzungen, die verinnerlichte "Selbstzwangsapparatur" (Elias) auf, sowie die darunter oder darüber liegenden Hoffungen und Sehnsüchte. [...] [S]oziale Modellierungen sind nicht mehr nur unbewusst im Tanz abgebildet [...] sondern werden selbst zur Erfahrung ausgestellt. Zuschauer können, soweit sie das Tanzgeschehen auf der Bühne an sich heranlassen, innerlich "mitschwingen," empfinden und von daher begreifen, was in ihnen, in uns allen leiblich eingraviert ist. (271)

If experience and familiarity are the foundation for understanding dance, the question arises as to how Bausch develops her choreography. Her method appears plausible: she taps into the dancers' pool of memory by asking them to recall certain experiences and emotions or to imagine situations and to translate them into a gesture, movement, or short scene. Her point of departure is to work with the dancer as a whole person, drawing upon his or her imagination and creativity in the collective effort of approaching dance. The task or question challenges the dancer to use his or her body in a reflective and decontextualized, perhaps also playful manner beyond mere physical mastery of movement. Associations of this sort as well as movements and gestures of every day life produce material for the choreography that also may be inspired by places and cities (Fernandes 25–34; Hoffmann 12; Mulrooney 149–97; Schlicher 113–20, 139–45; Servos 234–37; and Wildenhahn). This material is subsequently treated through the various factors of dance compositions such as energy, form, space, and rhythm (Schlicher 145).



*Café Müller*

Through her method, Bausch has developed techniques and preferences that result in a unique vocabulary. Her techniques illustrate the blending of art forms as well as the crucial role of “looking” and observing in her approach. One example of her choreographic strategies (see Fritsch 270–71), is her technique of condensing a story to a single word, image, or gesture. The effect could be either theatrical or, depending on the context, also poetic. An example from *Café Müller* would be the gesture of the sleepwalking women with extended arms reaching out into the space (see also Hoghe, *Pina Bausch – Tanztheatergeschichten*).

Bausch also employs the cinematic techniques of slow motion and repetition in order to achieve emphasis or alienation. An example for the use of repetition can be taken from an eminent scene in *Café Müller*: the male dancer lifts a woman but fails to hold her on his arms just as she fails to cling onto him, thus slipping to the ground. This sequence is repeated excessively, thus suggesting despair and mutual torture. Another frequent technique is duplication, applied to a movement, either in the sense that everybody on stage carries out the same movement simultaneously, which clearly focusses the viewer's attention on one centre of action, or in the sense that every dancer does his or her own typical movement at the same time, thus diverting the viewer's attention to multiple centres of action. Bausch also engages in language games, deconstructing language by drawing on idiomatic sayings that use the body in a metaphoric sense and has the dancers carry the saying out in a literal way – for example, “to pull someone's leg,” is expressed in German by saying “to take somebody on your arm,” and this, then, is what the dancer would do. Contrast and transgression constitute still another ploy, above all

as a prominent element in Bausch's depiction of gender relationships: the proximity of tenderness and aggression, for example, is demonstrated with smiling couples whose loving touches upon each other's hair turns into hair pulling, or whose kisses turn into aggressive bites. Finally, there is Bausch's ironic play with gravity: movement often is not directed upwards but rather downwards, for example when dancers after a lift let themselves fall towards the ground. Likewise, the vertical plane is complemented by the horizontal plane – an earmark of modern dance. However, Bausch's dancers are not only lying or sitting on the ground. Enabled through props such as water and rubber mats, they are sliding on the floor, thereby breaking the limitations of dance with what appears to be children's games or circus acts.

Bausch's code of movement reflects a larger question of sociopolitical conditioning of norms and ideals of movements and behaviour over the course of the history of civilization. Academic classical dance technique emerged during the time of French absolutism, and, with its artificiality, codified stylization, and regimentation, it symbolizes the restraint and control of human affects and passions. By contrast, early twentieth-century modern dance liberated the language of the body and its movements by seeking emotional expressiveness. Based on the different purpose and aesthetics of dance, the function of the body changed, for no longer was it the ideal of dance to defy gravity and no longer was the ultimate goal the physical encapsulation of controlled emotions. *Ausdruckstanz* was the dance of expression epitomized by the works of expressionist choreographers such as Rudolf Laban, Oskar Schlemmer, Mary Wigman, and Kurt Jooss during the 1920s (cf. Manning and Benson 30–35). Jooss latter was a mentor of Bausch at the Folkwang school in Essen, and it is safe to say that she reexplored this tradition of *Ausdruckstanz* in the late sixties and the seventies (Cody 117).

Critics have commented on Bausch's use of the body's discursive potential and suggested that her concept is rooted in social practice, viewing the body as representation of gender, race, and class (Birringer 86). Raimund Hoghe compares the body in her theatre to a landscape – vulnerable, open, marked by experience – that narrates stories without words, that speaks from individual and common histories (“Für Pina Bausch” 12). Fernandes underscores that the interdependence of the body and society must be recognized: “the personal body is a social body – a social construction at psychological and physical levels, constantly permeated and controlled by repetitive discipline within social power relationships” (9). Anne Fleig has coined the apt term “Körper-Inszenierungen” to illustrate the function of the body as central medium to convey critical meaning: “Körper-Inszenierungen veranschaulichen, modifizieren oder hinterfragen zentrale gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmungs- und Deutungsmuster wie Natur/Kultur, Männlichkeit/Weiblichkeit oder Realität/Fiktion” (13). In other words, rather than celebrating a cult of physical artistry and mastery as in formalist detachment, Bausch seems primarily interested in “talking” about and questioning culturally conditioned constructions of established dichotomies, such as nature-civilization, masculinity-femininity, reality-fiction, childhood-age. In addition to this, by exploring and subverting the expectations and rules of dance, she ironically and playfully comments on the medium of dance itself.

Bausch's work is said to have influenced the aesthetics of both European and American choreographers and theatre directors, for example Robert Wilson, Anne

Teresa De Keersmaeker, Bill T. Jones, and Peter Stein (Ross). Almodóvar expressed his admiration for the German choreographer in his first major breakthrough film *Todo sobre mi madre* ('All About my Mother'), winner of the 1999 Oscar in the category of best foreign language film. In this film he paid homage to Bausch by including a poster of her in *Café Müller* in Cecilia Roth's son's room. In *Hable con ella* (2002) he included the aforementioned two excerpts from her dance pieces. In addition, the central female character is a young ballet student who has decorated her room with pictures of her idol, Pina Bausch.

Almodóvar is known for his treatment of controversial subjects such as homosexuality, transsexuality, sadomasochism, drugs, rape, and incest, particularly in his early, mostly black-and-white films. Critics have also commented on his preference for melodrama, which, as he explains, allows him to "talk naturally about strong sentiments without a sense of the ridiculous" (Willoquet-Maricondi viii). Apart from these subversive themes and his critical insights into the social construction of norms around gender and sexuality, his penchant for women and their stories is also of interest in this context:

When it comes time to write and direct, women attract me much more. I've always liked feminine sensitivity and when I create a character it's much easier for me to do a feminine one, and I manage to shape it in a more solid and interesting way. On the other hand, women have more facets, they seem more like protagonist types. [...] We, men, are cut from the same cloth, while women hold a greater mystery inside, they have more nuances and a sensitivity that is more authentic. (Willoquet-Maricondi x)

The film begins where *Todo sobre mi madre* ended: the same theatre curtain of salmon-coloured roses and heavy gold fringing that had revealed a darkened stage in the earlier film now opens to reveal the Bausch spectacle *Café Müller*. In fact, Almodóvar credits Bausch, who appears in the *Café Müller* excerpt, together with Malou Airaud, an original dancer from the Tanztheater Wuppertal, as providing both a starting point and a conclusion to *Hable con ella* through her works *Café Müller* and *Masurca Fogo*:

When I finished writing "Talk to Her" and looked at Pina's face again, with her eyes closed, and at how she was dressed in a flimsy slip, her arms and hands outstretched, surrounded by obstacles (wooden tables and chairs), I had no doubt that it was the image which best represented the limbo in which my story's protagonists lived. Two women in a coma who, despite their apparent passivity, provoke the same solace, the same tension, passion, jealousy, desire and disillusion in men as if they were upright, eyes wide open and talking a mile a minute. (*Talk to Her. Press Book* 13)

The performances of these two pieces are an integral part of the plot development, as they enable the encounter of the protagonists. Moreover, the dance segments frame the film and thus function as a poetic symbol for the themes of love, loss, communication, and friendship. Finally, they represent performativity and the act of watching, and both are clearly an important part of life and become prominent themes in their own right.

The two main male characters of the film, Benigno and Marco, sit next to each other in the auditorium during a performance of *Café Müller* – the first chance encounter that leads to an unusual friendship between the two men. Two sleep-walking women wander



around in a reeling motion running into chairs and tables and against walls, while a man attempts to clear the way for them by pushing away the chairs and table. The atmosphere is one of chaotic loss. In the play there is no explanation for the state in which the women appear on stage – it is described only through portrayal. The accompanying music of this sequence underlines the sense of disorientation and sadness. It is the elegiac “O Let Me Weep, For Ever Weep” from Henry Purcell’s *Fairy Queen* (1698 and 1702), its words lamenting lost love. During the dance sequence, the camera cuts twice very briefly to the auditorium of the theatre and shows two male spectators in medium close-up. The second time, we realize that one of them (Marco) is weeping, moved to tears by emotion. After this dance sequence lasting about three minutes, the camera cuts to a shot in a hospital room, as is soon apparent from the blue nurse uniform the younger man of the two (Benigno) is wearing. He tells Alicia, a patient not visible in the frame, that the performance he witnessed was so beautiful that this man cried. In the opening scene in the hospital that introduces Benigno’s relationship to Alicia, he presents to her an autographed photo by Bausch that the latter has signed with the words “I hope you overcome all your obstacles and start dancing!” This scene containing this foreboding message can be considered part of the prologue of the dance sequence.

In contrast to *Café Müller*, the later works appear less subjective and emphasize instead a global outlook and universality with a new thematic orientation towards cities and travelling, as is also evident in the selection of music (cf. Mulrooney). *Masurca Fogo*, the second piece incorporated into this film, was created for the Expo 98 in Lisbon and uses Portuguese fado, tango, samba, jazz, and pop songs. Apart from the appealing music, the inclusion of dialogues, film projections, outlandish costumes, and other visual effects and gags make for a stunning production, which enjoyed rave reviews in a recent tour in North America (Citron).

The excerpt from *Masurca Fogo* that we see near the end of *Hable con ella* opens with a midrange shot of the stage: we see a woman in a long flower dress, lying and being passed on the supporting hands of men who lie next to each other shoulder to shoulder with outstretched arms functioning like a human conveyer belt or, as the dance mistress excitingly explains to Alicia during the intermission, “like a wave” carrying the female dancer. All the while the woman breathes into a seventies style microphone, and her amplified sighs are a strange, disparate sound accompanied by k. d. lang’s song “Hain’t that funny,” which, with its line “It slowly



*Masurca Fogo*

dawned on me that my baby is gone / My baby’s gone,” echoes the bereaved, lost-love mood of the Purcell passage. After being lifted to an extreme elevated and open position with arms stretched out to the side, she lets herself fall down in the waiting net of arms of the male dancers. The particular moment of the free falling forward of the woman’s body is breathtakingly

beautiful, for it displays complete openness and trust and the moment of catching the body represents a moment of perfect interplay between the woman and the men. The camera zooms in on the female dancer, tracking her movement and revealing her safe landing only at that very moment. Again, the theme of the song is that of loss, of alienation and sudden disillusionment, and the song enhances the emotion of mourning.

The very last dance sequence shows an organized and oddly stylized pair dance, in which only a small sway of the hip and the lush stage setting of a bucolic idyll hints at its erotic nature. Yet it is unmistakably a sexually charged atmosphere. The couples dance in a very orderly manner in harmony to the sounds of an instrumentally upbeat Cabo Verde Mazurka (“Raquel,” by Bau) – until finally one couple breaks away from the formation. Choosing this idyllic scene for the end of the film corresponds with the miraculous recovery of Alicia, the young dancer, and the allusion to the blossoming romance between her and Marco. Almodóvar elaborates in an interview the chosen scene from *Masurca Fogo*: “[It] begins with the sadness of the absent Benigno (the sighs) and unites the surviving couple (Marco and Alicia) through a shared bucolic emotion: [...] If I had asked for it specifically I couldn’t have got anything better. Pina Bausch had unknowingly created the best doors through which to enter and leave *Talk to Her*” (*Talk to Her. Press Book* 13).

It is significant that both female protagonists in Almodóvar’s film are devoted to professions – dance and bullfight – that allow them physical challenge and artistic and emotional expression. Thus their physicality and bodies are placed in the foreground and remain so later, as they both become immobilized in comas. It is paradoxical that the two women in Almodóvar’s film are extremely vulnerable and dependent on assistance and yet, at the same time, seem to exert power and control over the male (Yung). By comparison, in Bausch’s dance theatre, women are carried, twisted, and lifted, their bodies becoming objects of (playful) manipulation. Yet they seem to seek out that game, perpetuating it to the point of exhaustion. Her representation of gender relations has been commented on by numerous critics as depiction of the sadomasochistic terms of heterosexual power relations (Cody 120). It follows that the emotional range from joyfulness to obsession, from exuberance and pleasure to pain, desperation, and frustration is portrayed by both women and men in her dance theatre.

A recurring phrase in the film occurs when the mistress of the dance (Geraldine Chaplin) comments to Marco after he reassures her of his harmless intentions towards Alicia: “I am a mistress of ballet – nothing is simple.” Because the complex nature of human relationships is the subject of dance and probably also because of her experience, she knows better than Marco and seems to disbelieve his naïveté. It is paradoxical that, during their ride to the bullfight in Madrid, Marco swears his love to Lydia and talks about how he has put his relationship with his separated wife behind him. By doing so, he distracts Lydia from telling him the truth about her return to her previous lover. Their relationship is marked by a lack of communication and, although he later tends to the comatose Lydia after she had been gored by the bull, he does not think of talking to her. In contrast to Marco, Benigno continuously talks to Alicia in order to cheer her up, telling her stories about his activities in her place such as going to the silent movies or to dance

performances. Benigno advises Marco to talk to Lydia as well, hence the title of the film. Originally, Almodóvar wanted to call his film "The Man Who Cried," but Sally Potter had already taken this very title for her 2000 film starring John Turturro and Christina Ricci (Scott 163).

Almodóvar points out that film is about "the joy of narration" and about "narrators" – "men who talk to whoever can hear them and above all to those who can't" (*Talk to Her. Press Book* 7). Of no lesser importance in light of the metanarrative plane of the play is the thematization of the process of the conscious looking at, or more precisely, of the conscious viewing, of "performance." Observing and watching occurs at different levels – one, at the level of narrative in the film and, two, at the level of its reception. In the narrative, it is routinely through a scenario of watching that the protagonists are brought together. As discussed above, the film starts out with the performance clip of *Café Müller* (with the first encounter between Benigno and Marco) and ends with the performance of *Masurca Fogo* in the same theatre (with the first encounter between Marco, Alicia, and her dance teacher). There are many more scenarios that underscore the importance of the act of watching: Marco sees Lydia the first time in a television talk-show, Benigno observes Alicia during her dance lessons from his apartment. At a garden party, Marco and Lydia watch the performance of a romantic song ("Cucurrucucú Paloma," in a rendition by the Brazilian vocalist Caetano Veloso), and on the crucial day of Lydia's final bullfight they watch a wedding ceremony together. Later Marco watches Lydia in the bullfight. In the hospital, he reencounters Benigno, watching him perform his body-hygienic routine on Alicia, and it is the sight of Alicia's naked breast that arouses his curiosity. After Benigno's death he moves into his apartment and discovers the view into the dance studio, thus repeating Benigno's voyeuristic observing as he recognizes Alicia exercising.

As spectators of the film, we are of course watching throughout, but we are particularly drawn into the picture during point-of-view shots, when the camera perspective is identical with the perspective of the subject, and during close ups and camera angles that make us feel as if we were present at the same location. This is the case in the first hospital scene, where Benigno and another nurse wash and groom Alicia. Her body appears as if on display for the camera (Jones 15). Cinematographic care is taken in the shooting of the dressing scene of Lydia prior to the bullfight, with close-ups and tracking shots that follow every move of Lydia as she puts on and buttons up the brocade bolero-jacket and adjusts the fit of her tights of the bullfighting costume. The resulting effect of the camera work, in combination with warm glowing colours, is a very sensual one, as if the camera were caressing the body.

Julian Smith has pointed out the sexual ambiguity of the character Lydia, played by the singer Rosario Flores, as a female bullfighter, which seems to resonate with the frequent cross-dressings in Bausch's theatre (25). Most important as a show-piece of performance within the film, however, is the subsequent bullfight scene, which employs cinematographic techniques that Bausch has adopted from cinema – repetition and slow motion, the focus on one particular gesture of the torero (the turn as the bull passes, with erect posture, upper body extended back, and rotated,

not unlike a dance posture). To highlight this scene, Almodóvar muffles the diegetic sound and overlays it with the nondiegetic music by Alberto Iglesias.

If one wishes to read the film as reverence to women, their beauty, vulnerability, yet resilience and power, no other artist would have a perspective more akin to Almodóvar's than does Bausch. Her *Masurca Fogo* introduces a strong image of life-affirmation in the final scene: a film of blossoming flowers is depicted in time-lapse, while couples, intimate and motionless, rest on the ground in formations that resemble fetal positions or in the shape of yin and yang. While this scene could simply be read as an image of a sexual unity that is the basis for new life, an alternative reading would be to view it as the transformation of the two sexes into the original oneness. The idea of oneness or perfect communication is further substantiated by a film sequence that is screened in *Masurca Fogo* after the intermission and before the stage performance resumes. It is a documentary of a 1986 Cape Verde dance contest, and it depicts couples moving as dancing pairs in simple steps, but with great harmony. Close-ups of the feet and lower legs convey the sense of perfect communication between the couples: the two dancers appear as a four-legged unity, the documentary thus a running commentary on what is depicted in the final image on stage and reinforcing the communication of a utopian ideal of human relationships. Even though her later pieces seem lighter in mood, more colourful, exotic, luxurious, and global, there is an underlying ephemeral quality to the happiness. The themes of noncommunication, of manipulation between men and women, the motif of desire and rejection, and the portrayal of absurdity and nonsense are embedded in an exuberant, sensual, and voluptuous texture of episodic pieces and images that range from "the concrete to the ephemeral, from the humorous to the horrid, from the satiric to the poignant" (Citron).

Bausch weaves a multilayered text appealing to different channels of perception. The viewer is invited either to make intellectual connections or to read the text intuitively or just to be entertained or amused. In many respects, the result is a mirror of the culture we live in. What we are shown is sometimes funny and sometimes bizarre. By turning to images of ethnic dance and nature in the form of landscapes, ocean scenery, and blooming flowers, she projects visions that seem to contrast critically with the reality of Western culture and society. The route she takes is inquisitive, and the techniques of alienation and subversion trigger puzzling and unsettling effects. Ultimately, her strategies aim at heightening awareness of how things are and perhaps also at promoting a more accepting and forgiving notion of human nature. By using a multitude of languages, her visual and kinetic performance art presents a superbly creative and powerful way of fully engaging both the intellect and the senses.

What enabled the organic melting of Bausch's dance theatre into Almodóvar's film may be precisely the fact that both artists embrace the image, the visual and sensual, in ways that speak to faculties beyond the intellect, yet are supported by strategies that enhance critical awareness. These strategies strive to show and transgress limitations, norms, and convention and, in consequence, also venture into the surreal, the absurd, the childlike, or the power of nature. What is demonstrated, finally, is an understanding of performance and of witnessing performance that appears as a natural response to, or refuge from, reality – and is therefore an integral part of life itself.

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