

The New Fin-de-Siècle: Journeys of Nationhood through Almodóvar's and Kieślowski's Cinema

Daniel Tan
University of Western Australia
20963662@student.uwa.edu.au

Literally, the French phrase *fin de siècle* translates as “end of the century”. The term gained prominence during the end of the 19th century, and originated from artists whose works reflected the perceived decline of social orders towards a sense of renewal.¹ Although *fin de siècle* is associated with this particular period in history, the phrase can be transposed to the end of the 20th century, when social and political upheavals were also occurring across Europe. In addition, the use of cinema by contemporary artists to reflect these developments draws artistic parallels to the original *fin de siècle*. This essay will explore how journeys of nationhood and social renewal at the end of the 20th century were interpreted by filmmakers, using Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue*² and Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother*³ as representations of Europe's transition from a continent characterised by division and isolation, towards a unified entity with shared values of collectivism and democracy.

The journeys of *Three Colours: Blue* and *All About My Mother* are both triggered by a common tragedy, that of an automobile accident. The protagonist in *Three Colours: Blue*, Julie, is travelling with her husband, Patrice, and their daughter when their car crashes, leaving her as the sole survivor. In *All About My Mother*, Esteban is hit by an oncoming car while his mother, Manuela, looks on. These tragic incidents become emotional catalysts for Julie and Manuela to embark on personal journeys that uncover a nexus between the trauma of the past and the collective opportunities of the future. Their arcs mirror socio-political developments in their native countries, France and Spain, and symbolise Europe at large in a similar state of flux.

The backdrop of *Three Colours: Blue* is of Europe's reunification at the end of the Cold War, having been produced after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution

¹ Ruth Livesey, “Fin de Siècle,” Oxford Bibliographies, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199799558/obo-9780199799558-0030.xml> (accessed May 20, 2014).

² *Trois couleurs: Bleu* [Three Colours: Blue], DVD, directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski (1993; Chippendale: Hopscotch Entertainment, 2003).

³ *Todo sobre mi madre* [All About My Mother], VHS, directed by Pedro Almodóvar (1999; London: Pathé, 2000).

of the Soviet Union.⁴ Indeed, Patrice, a renowned composer, had been commissioned to write a concert to commemorate the historic milestone at the time of his death. Following the accident, however, ownership of the unfinished composition falls to Julie, who promptly disavows it and attempts to destroy all copies of it. In this regard, Julie directly denies Europe's reunification within the film's narrative, while signifying a social regression and withdrawal supposedly acting "in the service of emotional recovery".⁵ Indeed, following an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Julie watches a television broadcast of Patrice's and her daughter's funeral, rather than attending in person. In addition, she cuts all connections to her past life by disposing of her family home, readopting her maiden name and taking up residence elsewhere. Subsequently, the film focuses on Julie's "interior" state,⁶ and of her "ego as a protective shield" against the trauma of the past.⁷ Julie, as such, becomes an embodiment of the notion of liberty, which Kieślowski appropriates from the French Revolution as one of its historical ideals.⁸

However, the theme is explored in an emotional, rather than socio-political sense. Julie's self-imposed freedom from the past pushes her into a "void",⁹ as her denial with "living in the present absence of the past"¹⁰ leads to a sense of emptiness, as represented in her initial, passionless lovemaking with Olivier, a former assistant of Patrice's who continues composing the concert in his stead. Another motif for Julie's social isolation is a local swimming pool, which serves as a refuge where she literally cleanses her past, and which represents her newfound mobility.¹¹ Additionally, instances where Julie visits her elderly mother watching television contain on-screen depictions of freedom of movement, such as skydiving. That Julie's mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease emphasises a further detachment from the past, and a subsequent loss of identity and personal connection. These motifs become metaphors for Europe as a whole, whose division by the Iron Curtain similarly prevented the nurturing of shared bonds for half a century during the Cold War.

The remembrance of the past (and lack thereof) is a theme that also plays a role in *All About My Mother*. Despite Esteban's pleas to know "all about his father", Manuela refuses to disclose his identity, whom she left following Esteban's conception. In her attempts to erase this chapter in her personal history, Manuela's photos are all deliberately torn and missing their "other half", leaving Esteban with no memories to draw upon of his father.¹² Similarly, it is suggested that Esteban's

⁴ Office of the Historian, "Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, 1989," U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/fall-of-communism> (accessed May 23, 2014).

⁵ Helen Taylor Robinson, "The Ego, the Eye and the Camera Lens—A Psychoanalytic Reading of Traumatic Loss and Mourning in Krzysztof Kieslowki's *Three Colours Blue* (1993)," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2007): 512, doi:10.1080/07351690701484683 (accessed May 17, 2014).

⁶ ⁶ Robinson, "The Ego, the Eye and the Camera Lens," 510.

⁷ *ibid.*, 512.

⁸ *ibid.*, 511.

⁹ Dave Kehr, "To Save the World: Kieślowski's Three Colors Trilogy," *Film Comment* 30, no. 6 (1994): 15, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/docview/210250070/fulltextPDF?accountid=14681> (accessed May 17, 2014).

¹⁰ Emma Wilson, "Three Colours: Blue: Kieślowski, colour and the postmodern subject," *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998): 352, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=46046034-6a98-4f83-8ddb-e5d51f58b232%40sessionmgr110&vid=13&hid=112> (accessed May 17, 2014).

¹¹ Wilson, "Kieślowski, colour and the postmodern," 354.

¹² Viki Zavala Eggert, "Authentic Monsters and Artificial Mothers: Maternal Frustration in Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2014): 387, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=46046034-6a98-4f83-8ddb-e5d51f58b232%40sessionmgr110&vid=18&hid=112> (accessed May 18, 2014).

father has no knowledge of his son. Although Manuela eventually agrees to reveal her past on Esteban's seventeenth birthday, he is killed during that same night before she has a chance to do so.

While Manuela herself is physically unharmed, her ensuing emotional trauma is not unlike Julie's in *Three Colours: Blue*. Manuela engages in her own destructive behaviour by breaching the ethics of her profession, that of organ transplants – ascertaining the destination of her own son's organs and surreptitiously visiting the recipients. Upon being reproached by a co-worker following an admission of her actions, Manuela suggests leaving both her job and Madrid on the spot.¹³ Moreover, Manuela exhibits signs of social withdrawal, in her initial, solitary mourning for Esteban behind the closed doors of her apartment.¹⁴ At this point, Manuela's behaviour becomes a metaphor for Spain, having historically been “inward-looking” and “centralised” in its socio-political orientations.¹⁵ Similar to Julie's mother in Kieślowski's film, the father of Rosa, a nun, also suffers from Alzheimer's disease. In the film's Spanish context, these characterisations – including Manuela's denial of a paternal figure for Esteban – recall the country's 1977 Amnesty Law, in which a “pact of forgetting” overlooked atrocities committed under Francisco Franco's authoritarian rule for the sake of national healing.¹⁶

However, Almodóvar places equal focus on Spanish society in the present day, one which has experienced greater social and political freedom since the 1980s¹⁷ while still coming to terms with its past under “the spectre of Francoism”.¹⁸ To this end, one establishing shot of Madrid features the Sagrada Família, a basilica whose period of construction spans from the era of the Kingdom of Spain to the present day, symbolising a national identity under construction.¹⁹ The National Transplant Organisation (ONT), where Manuela works, was established more recently in 1989, and in the film represents a nationwide body that resembles a microcosm of modern Spanish society, one characterised by the diffusion of power and well-being²⁰: “... the film reinforces the idea that the slickness of this operation depends on a whole (Spain, the body) whose parts (the regions, the organs) are well connected and functioning happily alongside each other”.²¹ With the ONT itself formed following a popular public campaign,²² Manuela's decision to donate Esteban's organs to a hitherto-anonymous recipient illustrates a rejuvenated sense of regional solidarity in a post-Franco Spain.²³

The emergence of solidarity also plays a pivotal role in Julie's journey in *Three Colours: Blue*. Through the sole memento of her past in the form of a blue glass

¹³ Ryan Prout, “All about Spain: transplant and identity in *La flor de mi secreto* and *Todo sobre mi madre*,” *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2007): 56, doi:10.1386/shci.1.1.43/0 (accessed May 18, 2014).

¹⁴ Prout, “All about Spain,” 48.

¹⁵ Linda Craig, “From national to transnational in Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother*,” *Transnational Cinemas* 1, no. 2 (2010): 162, doi:10.1386/trac.1.2.161_1 (accessed May 18, 2014).

¹⁶ Emma Pinedo, Tracy Rucinski and Ralph Boulton, “U.N. tells Spain to revoke Franco-era amnesty law,” Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/30/us-spain-franco-idUSBRE98ToYJ20130930> (accessed May 23, 2014).

¹⁷ Craig, “From national to transnational,” 162.

¹⁸ Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 395.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 389.

²⁰ Prout, “All about Spain,” 45.

²¹ *ibid.*, 57.

²² *ibid.*, 45.

²³ *ibid.*, 48.

mobile,²⁴ along with reprisals of Patrice’s concert resurging upon mentions of her past, society’s collective consciousness “overwhelms the psyche” in a “push-pull” psychological struggle; this is evinced in the film’s fades to black and Julie’s “flights” from reality during these interludes.²⁵ Julie’s rehabilitation is further aided through a kinship with a neighbouring tenant, Lucille. While embodying sexual freedom through her jobs as a striptease artist (which Julie refrains from denouncing due to her introverted outlook), Lucille suggests to Julie that there are other, greater tragedies in the world than hers.²⁶ This sense of mutual understanding causes Julie to undergo a process of reconstruction away from her “mindless” solitude,²⁷ and precipitates her return to society. At this point, the activities shown on the television watched by Julie’s mother feature an increasing degree of control – and hence, interdependence – in the form of safety harnesses, as they progress from scenes of skydiving to bungee jumping.

With the help of others, Julie ultimately comes to accept her past. Julie confronts and forgives Patrice’s pregnant mistress, despite only learning of their affair after his death; Julie goes as far as offering her former family home to raise their unborn child in.²⁸ Furthermore, she resumes work on Patrice’s concert with the help of Olivier, reviving the film’s underlying narrative of European reunification. In this regard, Julie’s reunion with her past mirrors the isolated divisions during the Cold War being replaced by the united institution of the European Union, whose core values include solidarity and democracy. This notion is further advanced in the film’s closing sequence, in which a collective montage of the film’s characters suggests not a “restaging” of the past, but a reconciliation with it, which in turn allows a sense of renewal.²⁹ Much of this subtext derives from Kiesowski’s own Central European heritage, in which his native Poland had been the “traditional battleground between East and West, belonging fully to neither tradition, neither culture”.³⁰ Thus, Julie’s path from solitude to solidarity, and the emergence of a common identity, works as a metaphor for Central Europe in the post-Cold War era.³¹

Collectivism also remains relevant in *All About My Mother*, forcing Manuela to acknowledge her past and embrace the future. Prior to Esteban’s death, Manuela had alluded to her theatrical past, having played a role in a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This revelation occurs during a screening of the film *All About Eve*, which in itself revolves around “generosity and the transfer of vitality from one character to another”, similar to *All About My Mother*’s backdrop of organ donation.³² The presence of these two texts within both the narrative and the film illustrates the dissemination of Western culture,³³ which broadly indicates the challenging of traditional social norms in post-Franco Spain.³⁴ In particular, the film’s subversion of gender identities, as embodied in Lola, Esteban’s father, and Manuela’s old friend Agrado – both being transgender – prompts Agrado to publicly

²⁴ Robinson, “The Ego, the Eye and the Camera Lens,” 510.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 512.

²⁶ Kehr, “To Save the World,” 15.

²⁷ Wilson, “Kiesowski, colour and the postmodern” 350.

²⁸ Kehr, “To Save the World,” 15.

²⁹ Wilson, “Kiesowski, colour and the postmodern,” 361.

³⁰ Kehr, “To Save the World,” 10.

³¹ *ibid.*, 16.

³² Prout, “All about Spain,” 53.

³³ Craig, “From national to transnational,” 163.

³⁴ Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 386.

declare that “she’s no monster”.³⁵ However, Agrado’s acceptance by her stage audience while she flaunts her physical features, with only few expressions of disapproval arising, suggests a more tolerant, heterogeneous Spain. This is illustrated in Rosa’s Argentinian descent,³⁶ Lola’s El Salvadorian roots³⁷ and the presence of African children in the nunnery.³⁸ Conversely, the predominant Latin American lineage among the primary characters suggests a cultural affinity not so much with Europe at large but a “Spaniard” heritage.³⁹ Nonetheless, Spain’s democratisation works as a prelude to the European Union and its core values.

Related to the subverted gender expectations in *All About My Mother* is the changing nature of motherhood.⁴⁰ Agrado’s performance also suggests a more liberal society in which roles are continually being “reconfigured”.⁴¹ Indeed, Manuela’s role as a motherly figure evolves from caring for her son, to briefly settling with Lola, who is HIV-positive, to taking custody of Rosa’s baby (following her death in childbirth), whom she names Esteban in memory of Manuela’s son and for its masculine connotations.⁴² However, Almodóvar otherwise advances a new, inclusive concept of the family unit, one comprising of an eclectic, interdependent sisterhood⁴³ that, following Lola’s departure, effectively erases the role of a father.⁴⁴ Hence, like Julie in *Three Colours: Blue*, Manuela accepts her past – an allusion to Franco-era Spain – before embracing a new, liberalised station in life. Hence, *All About My Mother* reflects an “idiosyncratically inflected national history – that of a once giddy post-Francoist and now firmly consolidated democratic Spain”.⁴⁵

Three Colours: Blue and *All About My Mother* present two instances of contemporary artists using the medium of cinema to conceptualise changes in the world around them. With regards to Pedro Almodóvar, his chronicle of a mother reconciling with her past and experiencing rebirth works as a metaphor for Spanish society in the post-Franco era, reflecting both its modernisation and the acceptance of its traumatic history. Similarly, in the case of Krzysztof Kiesowski, his portrait of a widow emerging from the wreckage of her past trauma and returning to society serves as a tract for solidarity overcoming division. Both narratives unfold amidst the formation of the European Union, and lead to its shared values of collectivism and democracy. As such, the use of cinema to reflect these socio-political developments is characterised not so much by the world-weariness of the *fin de siècle* at the turn of the century, or even the propaganda of authoritarian paradigms of the Cold War. Rather, Kiesowski and Almodóvar utilise cinema to provide affirmations of their countries’ transitions in the post-Cold War era, and of their shared journeys from isolation towards a collective European identity at the turn of the millennium.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 391.

³⁶ Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 387.

³⁷ Craig, “From national to transnational,” 167.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 169.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁰ Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 386.

⁴¹ Elaine Canning, “Destiny, theatricality and identity in contemporary European cinema,” *New Cinemas: Journey of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 3 (2006): 164, doi:10.1386/ncin.4.3.159_1 (accessed May 18, 2014).

⁴² Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 388.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 395.

⁴⁵ Epps and Kakoudaki, cited in Eggert, “Authentic Monsters,” 368.