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Tesis [Review of the film Tesis, by Alejandro Amenábar]

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Tesis

Director/writer: Alejandro Amenábar. Producers: José Luis Cuerda, Emiliano Otegui. Cinematographer: Hans Burmann. Art Director: Wolfgang Burmann. Music: Amenábar, Mariano Marín. Las Producciones del Escorpión S.L.

Tesis, written and directed in 1995 by the precocious 23-year-old Alejandro Amenábar, garnered seven out of eight possible Goya awards (the Spanish equivalent of the Oscar), including best new director and best original screenplay. (It is not available on video, but is shown in film festivals with English subtitles.) Its opening scene renders an ordinary urban tableau—passengers seated on a Madrid metro—sinister and unsettling. The train is at a standstill, lights flicker, concerned voices murmur, and then the conductor announces that the metro is stalled due to an accident that has severed a man in half. “Don’t look at the tracks!” he urges the exiting crowds. Nonetheless, Angela (Ana Torrent), the protagonist, quickly detaches herself from the crowd to peer down at the track with a conflicted desire to see, and a horror of seeing, whatever horror lies below.

This prelude presents *Tesis*’s concerns with exploring the intersection of voyeuristic desire, violence, abjection, and spectatorial gender dynamics, as well as its meditation upon the complicity between viewer and footage viewed, between media consumers and images generated and disseminated. At stake in *Tesis* will also be the irreconcilable tension between the visceral desire for and valorization of the “real” that drives the viewer of pornography, and its darker if apocryphal counterpart, snuff, and the ideological opacity of all cinematic images, no matter how illusionistically rendered. We learn that Angela is writing a master’s thesis on media violence, for which she seeks the help first of her advisor Figueroa (Miguel Picazo) in gaining access to the university’s film archives, and then of her classmate, Chema (Fele Martínez). Chema, a misfit splatter-film aficionado, agrees to show Angela his stash of violent tapes, a combination of horror films and footage of real-life disaster that appears to reference the *Faces of Death* video series, even as she protests “It’s for my work” and “I don’t want to see.” These words paradoxically affirm the very fascination with abjection that she would disavow, an unpleasant truth that refracts between the film’s protagonists and us, its spectators.

After their conversation Figueroa unexpectedly disappears, and Angela searches the building, to discover, in the university’s subterranean viewing room, her pro-



fessor dead beneath a screen flickering with audiovisual snow—having suffered a heart attack induced by the unspeakable images of the snuff film he had been watching. She steals the video and plays it in the living room of the bourgeois Madrid apartment that she shares with her family. As with the opening scene of the film, banality and horror collide. Before Angela’s transfixed gaze, a young woman tied to a chair screams “No!” as a man attacks her. Angela blocks her ears, unable to stand what seem to be authentic human screams. She takes the video to Chema and as he watches it, he recounts its contents—while she experiences *Tesis*’ leitmotif conflict: she cannot look but must look. It is a reaction which mirrors our spectatorial response. For when Angela finally does look, the object of her gaze is withheld from our frustrated view, renewing our consciousness of our own complicity in craving a glimpse.

That cinematic images lack transparency, that they are only ever mediated by the dynamic, shifting subjectivities of the viewer and of the filmmaker, who cuts up and reconfigures “reality” to his own taste, is emphasized as Chema and Angela analyze the footage to try to discover who filmed it. Amenábar highlights the tension between the craving for the real that motivates the consumer of snuff (and pornography in general), and the impossibility of any film’s perfect meshing with this fetishized reality. Unlike illusionistic narratives, where the spectator willingly suspends his disbelief to enjoy the tale told, in pornography the paroxysmal moment of extremity caught on film takes on a special urgency.¹ The filmic *mise-en-scène* seems to coincide perfectly with the crime scene in an “ideal” fusion of image with the reality that it purports to render: a garage, a woman tied to a chair, a man assaulting her in incrementally brutal ways. Yet Chema is able to discern that the footage has been cut and spliced so as to eliminate the man’s face, and that the faint horizontal lines that mar the image are specific to the XT-500 video camera.

Angela as investigator (the Spanish *investigar* encompasses both “to conduct research” and “to inves-

tigate”), with Chema as her sidekick, is then situated as a cinematic subject by a point-of-view shot that reveals her to be searching the university cafeteria for the incriminating video camera. She spies the machine in the hands of a classmate, Bosco (Eduardo Noriega), who is playfully filming his girlfriend Yolanda. Yolanda’s smiling image on video wavers as Bosco, visible only from the back, films her, while Angela watches both of them with a mixture of curiosity and dread. Are these amateur images a loving homage to a college girlfriend, or a murderer’s homing in on his next victim? This configuration of male “director,” face hidden from viewer, and vulnerable female subject displayed on screen resonates uncannily with the snuff film set-up, but Angela cannot be sure, so she follows him.

Amenábar wields an aesthetic of rupture and fragmentation to superb effect as Angela’s tracking of Bosco shifts into flight from him after he notices her and starts to pursue her in his turn; the familiar university environs become defamiliarized. As the sinister Bosco now chases after her, Angela stumbles into a labyrinth of empty corridors rendered in choppy, hallucinatory angles. She drops some newspaper clippings about the snuff victim, and when Bosco catches up with her, he manipulates her into pretending that she’s researching the murder for a journalistic report and she ends up having to agree to film him for this project.

Amenábar thus complicates Angela’s position, disrupting the patriarchal dynamics that characterize traditional horror films. While she remains a potential victim until the end, she is also the smart, determined investigator, the detective. In the dance of flight and pursuit that she will perform with Bosco throughout the film, she literally and figuratively maintains her subjectivity against the impulse that would erase it. Carol Clover’s re-reading of horror films is useful in this context. She problematizes an understanding of the horror film genre as reducible to misogynist representations of male depredation and female victimization.² She considers the female survivor, the “Final Girl,” as a resourceful figure who breaks with clichéd, essentialist

representations of femininity, which permits both male and female adolescent viewers to identify with her as she goes on to foil her monstrous foe. Angela, with her lithe body clad in unisex jeans and loose jackets, her short hair, unmade-up face, and serious analytical intent, seems a likely candidate for Final Girl status.

Further, Ana Torrent, the child actress who starred in the work of acclaimed directors Carlos Saura and Víctor Erice, possesses an iconic status within Franco-era and Spanish cinema of the transition to democracy. As Marsha Kinder has discussed, in films such as *Cría cuervos* (*The Secrets of Ana*, 1975) and *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973), the child protagonist Ana repeatedly challenges the perspectives presented as natural by a patriarchal, Francoist social-political order.³ She enacts Oedipal rebellions within rigidly hierarchical family structures and challenges patriarchal preeminence with her own marginalized but fiercely imagined personal vision, which the directors render through POV shots so as to situate the little girl as a subversive subject rather than an oppressed female object. Although explicit referencing of fascist oppression is absent in *Tesis*, Torrent’s resurfacing within the 90s Westernized capital revisits conflictual histories told in transition cinema upon a presumably democratized, postmodern Spanish topography.

This contemporary Madrid, attractively “modernized” with sleek university buildings, cosmopolitan professors, and carefree students, harbors a darkness, vestigial traces of blood rivalries. The allusion to the youthful Ana Torrent and her filmic “Ana’s” both highlights changes in the new Spain and hints at ghosts still gathered in its landscape—fratricidal destructions, murderous impulses that constitute the “dark legend” (*la leyenda negra*) of the obscurantist Spain of the Inquisition and Lorca’s death, a Spain memorialized in the grotesqueries of Goya, Velázquez, Quevedo, Dalí, and Buñuel, among many others.

With the appearance of Bosco as the possible snuff “director,” Amenábar problematizes the dialectic of spectatorial distance vs. complicity that he has



The investigator:
Angela (Ana Torrent)

articulated through the varying responses of Angela, Chema, Figueroa, and the metro passengers to spectacles of carnage. For Bosco, with his dark, burning eyes, chiseled features, sensuous mouth, and black, curling hair, exemplifies the romantic movie hero, Spanish-style, a masculine ideal for heterosexual female or gay male viewers. His gaze, often filtered through the video camera that he trains on his girlfriend and then on Angela in the “interview,” is both repellent and irresistible. Angela is riven by contradictory impulses in which menace becomes indistinguishable from seduction, fear from desire, and ecstasy from abjection.

Angela’s extreme psychosexual conflict is put into play in a dream, a nightmarish fantasy sequence framed within meta-cinematic allusions to horror film convention. In the dead of night, a dark figure enters her apartment. A POV from the intruder’s perspective (nodding to the use of the predator’s perspective as, for instance, in *Friday the Thirteenth*, to enhance the claustrophobic sensation of the hunted victim) shows the terrified Angela watching the bedroom doorknob slowly turn, and the camera cuts to her POV as Bosco appears silhouetted in the doorway. Setting the video camera at eye level, he approaches her bed, whispering with an improbable seductiveness, “I’m going to kill you.” The clash between Angela’s erotic longing and her fear imbues the scene with an unbearable charge. He pricks her just beneath the jaw with his knife, they kiss passionately, he covers her body with kisses, and then instead of penetrating her phallically, he stabs her. The weapon is blatantly figured as a descendent of a lineage of fetishistic phallus substitutes that figure in horror narratives, from the sharpened wooden stake that impales the vampiric Lucy Westenra, to the knives of Norman Bates, Freddy Krueger, and Jason Voorhees, to the chainsaw of Leatherface and Chop Top. Angela’s dying gaze takes in the video camera filming the scene, its red light winking like an evil eye. The *mise-en-abîme* complexity of this death scene, in which the victim becomes the spectator of the most terrible spectacle of

all, recalls *Peeping Tom* (1960), whose protagonist literally kills women with the cinematic apparatus by attaching a knife to it and filming them as they watch themselves die.

Georges Bataille’s formulation of the nexus between eroticism and extreme experience is illuminating in this context. For Bataille, eroticism is a libidinal force awakened by any radical experience (ritual sacrifice, blood spectacle) that menaces the contours of the integral, cohering self with a dissolution, a shattering of boundaries between self, other, and universe. The brush with limitlessness that opens toward death both evokes and stands in for the disintegration of self proper to erotic epiphany, tellingly known as “the little death” (*la petite mort*).⁴

However, Amenábar engages with the intersection of violence and eros while also avoiding the misogyny that, *Final Girl* notwithstanding, marks many horror films, as well as Bataille’s theories and the recent Hollywood-produced, exploitative, meditation manqué about snuff in *8MM* (Joel Shumacher, 1999). Amenábar’s probing of the dark recesses of human appetite also involves a complex and ethical exploration of the psychosexual female self in thrall to a love object. That the latter is also a predatory self whose subjugation of its others effects a terrible metamorphosis from living, animate being to inert object, filmic memory of light and shadow, raises disturbing but vital questions about the relation between desire and self-annihilation.

As Angela renews her investigative odyssey with Chema, the web of conspiracy widens. Jorge Castro (Xavier Elorriaga), the professor who takes over the deceased Figueroa’s film class, tells the students that Spanish cinema must aspire to Hollywood success by “giving audiences what they want.” When Angela, Castro’s new advisee, questions ubiquitous media violence and its numbing effect on viewers, Castro insists upon the imperative of a soulless, aesthetically bankrupt industry: audience cravings must drive the market. The force behind a consumerist, sensation-starved, nar-

Caught by the killer
(Eduardo Noriega)



cissistic society is bloodlust; where art, ethics, and even morality are sacrificed to cash flow, blood sport will thrive.

Meanwhile, Chema has discovered that Castro himself is implicated in the snuff conspiracy, and frantically calls Angela in the professor's office to warn her. Alas, the professor has already pulled out a video that he'd recorded of Angela discovering Figueroa's body and stealing the tape. Angela manages to flee Castro's office. Back at Chema's apartment, however, she discovers in his closet the same incriminating XT-500 model, and even worse, footage of herself in intimate moments—sleeping and kissing the enlarged, evilly handsome image of Bosco on her home video screen. Hidden lenses are thus ubiquitous: security cameras, video recorders, electronic eyes, instruments that invade private, personal space with a voyeuristic impetus that ultimately kills. Francoist surveillance may be a thing of the past, but an inquisitorial, fratricidal fervor is still fed by this network of spying mechanisms embedded within the very architecture of the new, technologically savvy, consumerist Spain.

The Final Girl is thus finally on her own, caught in the classic horror dilemma in which all signposts are shrouded in ambiguity. Whom to trust? Will desire lead to death? Her mounting anxiety culminates in the film's climactic scene, in which she attempts to finally penetrate the mystery by visiting Bosco at his chalet just outside Madrid. Once again, this signifier for the affluent *madrileño* family is defamiliarized into a frightening funhouse by a thunderstorm. As the elements assault the landscape, Bosco forces Angela to admit, "Me gustas," or, "You please me, you appeal to me." Splatter film convention has the camera crosscut between a lightning-illuminated image of Chema, whom the camera renders monstrous as a looming, amorphous intruder, breaking into the house and Bosco tenderly lifting Angela's face to his own.

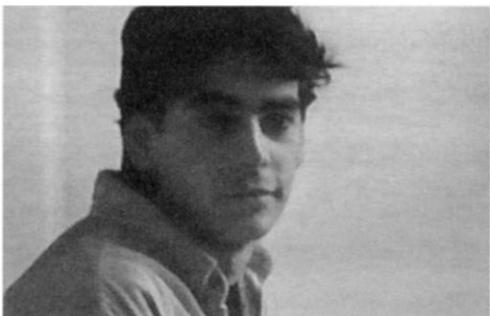
During a subsequent fight in which Bosco brutally beats Chema unconscious, Angela realizes too late that her friend has come to save her. She backs away from

the living room into another space that she then understands, also too late and with a nightmarish *déjà-vu* flash, to be the garage, the primal scene, both banal and terrible, of the snuff film.

Bosco then looms in the doorway. The camera cuts to Angela, tied to a chair, listening in horror to the deadpan confessional in which he informs her of her imminent fate while setting up his video equipment. He will dismember, then re-assemble her with infernal artistry into a new hybrid form.

Bosco is the Spanish for Hieronymus Bosch, the Flemish master of the hellish carnivalesque that disfigures human bodies into unholy travesties of their original shape in the triptych "The Garden of Earthly Delights." This triptych hung in Philip II's castle El Escorial, inspired numerous Spanish artists and monarchs, and remains in the Prado Museum in Madrid today. Bosch's disturbing, surreal representations of human disarticulation, ear drums pierced by giant musical instruments, passion punished by severing and castration, is akin to Bosco's "work." Both evoke a chaotic, obscene, and regressive dissolution of boundaries that, for the psychoanalyst and semiotician Julia Kristeva, characterizes abjection, which "disturbs identity, system, order . . . does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. . . . Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady, a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles . . . a friend who stabs you."⁵

If, according to psychoanalytic narratives of socialization, language signifies the civilized subject's ability to defer the satisfaction of his desire, to sublimate that desire into symbolic words, art, or artifacts that always stand in for the thing to which they allude, Bosco remains in the pre-socialized sphere of abjection where all impulses are instantaneously fed. His matter-of-fact recitation of the horrors that he will inflict upon Angela will be conflated with their realization in an unholy coupling of word and thing. Bosch's tormented minions are creations, however macabre, that respect the gap between art and life. This contemporary Bosch



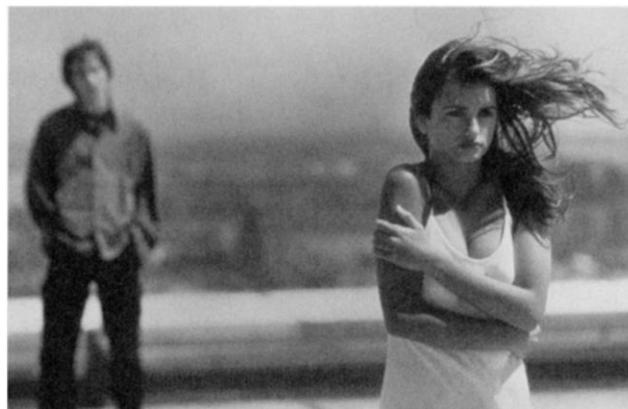
Hunter and hunted . . .
and vice versa

actualizes such visions on the living bodies of women through an abjection that subsumes all divisions between the real and the not-real, language and nonsense, inside and outside, the cohering body and its spliced and diced parts and products.

But in Amenábar's redemptive vision, Angela has kept the knife that she carries for protection, thus metaphorically wresting the weapon of patriarchal depredation from its traditional (within horror and noir conventions) phallic keepers. As Bosco prepares to film her, she slices through her bonds, breaks free, attacks him, struggles with him, grabs his gun, and, resisting the (incredibly) still seductive black-leather-clad hand that reaches toward her, shoots him. Reversing her predicament through composure, wits, and tenacity, she has won the battle against Bosco and against herself. The snuff perpetrators (including Castro) are dispatched, transmuted into legitimate (news) footage. Chema recovers to possibly begin a romance with Angela.

Nonetheless, *Tesis* concludes by panning the eager visages of the patients in the hospital where Chema is recuperating. The TV anchor warns that the following images "might be offensive to viewers" (*pueden herir [wound] las sensibilidades del espectador*). Voyeuristic frenzy remains within as well as without, and the insatiable desire for media bytes of gore is as lethal to the viewers as to the victims displayed on screen. The obscurantist, fascist Spain excoriated by Buñuel and Saura might be buried under a glittering post-Franco society, but consumerist technologies and economies have awakened new decadent desires as well as summoned back evil energies from the past like so many returns of the repressed.

In his next film, *Abre los ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*, 1997), subtitled and recently released on video through Summit Entertainment, Amenábar continued to develop his darkly oneiric aesthetic toward an exploration of onto-epistemological questions about identity, knowledge, and the significance of the media image within a fin-de-millennium context. Amenábar's success has catapulted him into the Spanish film scene, along with other young directors such as Alex de la Iglesia, Juanma Bajo Ulloa, Agustín Villaronga, and Imanol Uribe, and he seems poised for international recognition. (There is even word that his next film—*Los otros*, a gothic thriller—will star Nicole Kidman.) The 90s cinema created by these directors is bereft of the political consciousness that characterizes transition cinema, permeated instead with an iconoclastic violence that tackles, for instance, millennial Madrid madness (Iglesia's *Day of the Beast*, 1995), sinister pseudo-science cultists (Villaronga's *The Moon Child*, 1989), and shady



Abre los ojos

urban characters living on the edge (Uribe's *Días contados*, 1995). Nonetheless, the uncompromising, razor-edged aesthetic that marks the work of Amenábar and his peers suggests that a dark reservoir of unprocessed recent history remains just beneath the surface of a Westernized, technocratic social-cultural veneer.

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Notes

1. For this idea, see Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 185–228.
2. Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Fantasy and the Cinema*, ed. Donald Hall (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 91–133.
3. Marsha Kinder, "The Children of Franco in the New Spanish Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 2 (1983): 57–76. Indispensable as well are her essay "The Spanish Oedipal Narrative from Raza to Bilbao," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13, no. 4 (1991): 67–94, and her book *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993). See as well the illuminating discussion of these issues in Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
4. Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Minuit, 1957), pp. 17–32.
5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 1–31. For Kristeva, the abject signifies a regressive, borderline state prior to language, the civilizing force created by lack and signifying the primordial lost object, the mother's body, and all subsequent absent, desired objects, "the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10).