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Wardrop, Georgina (2011) *Redefining gender in twenty-first century spanish cinema: the films of Pedro Almodóvar*.  
MPhil(R) thesis.

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# **Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar**

University of Glasgow

Master of Philosophy

**Georgina Wardrop MA (Hons)**

**0404864**

## **Abstract: Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar**

The aim of this research is the evolving cultural conception of gendered identities in prominent and significant films produced in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish cinema of filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. This research project will examine how new images of gender representations appear at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in which the focus is characterised by the tensions between subjective experience and the broader social collectivity. A gender-based theoretical framework will be applied, using psychoanalysis as a tool to deconstruct, analyse and gain in-depth insight into strategies applied by Almodóvar in order to challenge patriarchal and repressive stereotypes and practices throughout his 21st Century filmography. This analysis will create a dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and the film narrative, demonstrating how psychoanalytic notions have been portrayed through the medium of film, defining male and female subjectivity in cinema and in wider society. This thesis examines the creation of what could be considered a “New Spanish Cinema” upon which the representation and perceptions of gendered identities can be regarded as having moved towards a sense of sophistication. Given the increasing importance attached to cultural and gender studies, research into 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish cinema is still a new and largely unexplored area. This thesis provides a distinctive contemporary insight into Spanish Cinema and gender politics. The discourse constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed by Pedro Almodóvar will be analysed in order to represent new conceptions of identity, sexuality and the redefinition of gender in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish Film.

## Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction 1

Chapter I – From Object to Subject in *Hable con Ella* 17

Chapter II – Crossed Identities and Performance in *La Mala Educación* 51

Chapter III – Female Agency in the Midst of the Feminine Sphere in *Volver* 77

Chapter IV – Redefining the Gaze in *Los Abrazos Rotos* 113

Conclusion 141

Bibliography 149

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following people for their help, support and guidance in the completion of my MPhil by Research:

**Dr Brígida Pastor**, my thesis supervisor, for her continuous support, supervision and enthusiasm in the development of my thesis. I would also like to thank Dr Pastor for instilling the passion of Spanish Cinema into my life during my Honours years as an Undergraduate student at the University of Glasgow. Her broad expertise in Spanish Film and Gender Studies has proved invaluable to the development of my research to date.

Staff at the **Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Glasgow** for their guidance and excellent standard of teaching throughout my years as a student within the University department. Special mention must go to; **Dr Karen Peña, Dr John McCulloch, Miss Esther Tallada, Dr Paul Donnelly** and **Professor Mike González** for their lecturing, tutoring and guidance over the years.

On a personal note, my deepest thanks must go to my family and friends who have supported me through my studies and given me the enthusiasm I needed when it seemed like an uphill mountain to climb. I would also like to thank those closest in my life for listening, advising and providing a constant source of understanding.

# Introduction

## **Introduction – Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish**

### **Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar**

The death of General Francisco Franco on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1975 and the abolition of censorship in Spanish Cinema shortly after on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1976<sup>1</sup>, both contributed to the creation of a 'New Spanish Cinema'<sup>2</sup>, enabling Spanish film directors to freely and openly challenge the dominant patriarchal ideals and values that were, and continue to be, present in classic dominant cinema.

These conventions and values in Spain inevitably stemmed from the patriarchal and ideological regime of the right-wing dictatorship that encompassed Spanish society for thirty-six years. It could be essentially argued that classic dominant cinema grew from the influences of North America's Hollywood and the somewhat idealistic machine which other national and regional cinemas followed. The Hollywood institution can be seen as the pioneering pinnacle of cinema as the medium of film which has penetrated the world, reaching cinemas and households in every country

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<sup>1</sup> José Enrique Monterde, *Veinte Años de Cine Español (1973-1992): Un Cine Bajo la Paradoja*, Barcelona: Edición Paidós, 1993, p.207

<sup>2</sup> Marsha Kinder argues that the Salamanca Congress in May 1955 established 'neorealism as the primary aesthetic model for the first phase of the New Spanish Cinema' p.27 – many of the foundations of reaction towards dominant conventions and values of the right wing dictatorship of General Francisco Franco were established during this influential congress; ultimately, the rejection of cinema under the Francoist regime. Kinder further argues; 'neorealism itself could be seen as a vehicle of ideological reinscription, one that was opposed both to fascism and to Hollywood, which were perceived as aligned partly because conventions from popular Hollywood genres had been so effectively absorbed by the commercial films made during the Fascist era both in Italy and Spain.' *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, London: University of California Press, 1993, p.36

thinkable, in every format possible; and in turn reflecting social changes and arguably shaping cultural attitudes.<sup>3</sup> The argument crucial to the backbone of many film theorists' work is that films are in fact bearers of ideology,<sup>4</sup> transporting ideological perspectives to the minds of the spectators in the cinema hall. These ideological perspectives hail from patriarchy, the male dominated discourse that can be seen and reflected in film. E. Ann Kaplan eloquently furthers this idea by arguing that 'Dominant, Hollywood cinema...is constructed according to the unconscious of patriarchy; film narratives are organized by means of a male-based language and discourse which parallels the language of the unconscious'.<sup>5</sup> This 'cultural penetration' of filmic attitudes and discourses related to dominant (Hollywood) cinema, would continue to 'penetrate' and occupy Spanish film not only throughout the period of General Franco's dictatorship, but also after his death, leading Spanish film directors, such as Pedro Almodóvar, amongst others, to both directly and indirectly challenge patriarchal and phallogentric discourse through the discourses of the narratives produced.

Film can be considered as a reflection of social ideals, values and changes – as such the images portrayed in dominant (Hollywood) cinema can be seen as representations of a largely male-dominated, patriarchal society<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, these patriarchal cultural representations in film can reflect the spectator and his or

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<sup>3</sup> Sue Thornham, "Taking Up the Struggle: Introduction" in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.10

<sup>4</sup> Thornham, 1999, p.12

<sup>5</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the gaze male?", *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.30

<sup>6</sup> Steven Marsh & Parvati Nair (eds.), *Gender and Spanish Cinema*, Oxford: Berg, 2004, p.1



her personal ideologies. Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair acknowledge this by stating ‘...in keeping with film’s potential for contesting the status quo, cinema has also provided a key means by which to refigure national identity or, indeed, to challenge its very foundations.’<sup>7</sup> This study will therefore use psychoanalysis and “feminist”<sup>8</sup> film theory as a tool, intertwining filmic discourse and psychoanalytic theory in order to deconstruct and decode phallogentric ideals, values and conventions that are engrained in film narratives and in turn, arguably, engrained in society. The aim is not only to examine these ideals and values, but to highlight Pedro Almodóvar’s attempts at contesting the status quo as Marsh and Nair observe, and in turn challenging these structures that have existed and continue to exist in Post-Francoist cinema.

Pedro Almodóvar Caballero<sup>9</sup> can arguably be considered as the leading contemporary Spanish filmmaker with an international reputation. Mark Allinson argues that Almodóvar symbolises a ‘free and democratic Spain...capturing with his films the excitement of a liberated nation’<sup>10</sup>. His timely entrance into the Spanish cinematic world after General Francisco Franco’s death in 1975 only adds to work of previous Spanish filmmakers (such as Juan Antonio Bardem, Luis Buñuel, Carlos

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<sup>7</sup> Marsh & Nair 2004, p.3

<sup>8</sup> When using the word “feminism”, it is important to consider the variety of meanings it can have in different contexts. Luce Irigaray’s definition is, in my personal opinion, the closest to the “feminism” expressed in this thesis as a whole. She defines it by arguing that “one of the points in feminism is that it attempts to create a space where women can be speakers/agents as *women*”. (See Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991). p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Born in September 1951 in Calzada de Calatrava, Ciudad Real, Spain

<sup>10</sup> Mark Allinson, *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, London: I.B Tauris, 2001, p.3

Saura, amongst many others<sup>11</sup>) and their individual *and* collective attempts to both directly and indirectly challenge the aforementioned patriarchal and phallogentric discourse that has been present and continues to be present through the influences of dominant Hollywood cinema. Almodóvar takes these challenges to a somewhat higher level with the crippling constraints of Francoist right-wing censorship a thing of the past after the abolition of such censorship in 1977.<sup>12</sup> It is not to be considered a black and white binary shift from dictatorship to democracy, but rather a gradual process that required not only political and constitutional reform,<sup>13</sup> but also a cultural revolution in Spanish history, specifically through the medium of film embracing and even surpassing the boundaries of what could be considered 'comfortable' to the eye of the spectator.

Due to his iconic status as the most successful Spanish filmmaker of the present day, many theorists and critics have researched and written on Pedro Almodóvar's work. It would be almost impossible to draw a full critical review on the breadth and depth of research available. However it is my aim to pay particular homage to writers who have undoubtedly influenced and added greater scope to my research on

Almodóvar's 21<sup>st</sup> Century cinema. The crux of my research culminates in the idea

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<sup>11</sup> This study shall focus on Spanish Cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century however, it is noted that Spanish film today would not be where it sits in the cinematic field; were it not for the attempts of filmmakers of the previous centuries (such as that of the 20<sup>th</sup>) attempts to destabilise the patriarchal norm of dominant Hollywood cinema. Notable research that focuses on previous ages of Spanish film and which I have found particularly useful throughout my research are; Peter W. Evans (ed.), *Spanish Cinema: The Auteurist Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, Robert W. Fiddian & Peter W. Evans, *Challenges to Authority: Fiction and Film in Contemporary Spain*, London: Tamesis Books, 1981 and Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, California: University of California Press, 1993

<sup>12</sup> Evans, 1999, p.xix

<sup>13</sup> Allinson, 2001, p.3

that Almodóvar provides new spaces and a platform onto which marginal characters or groups are enabled to have a voice that will in turn penetrate the wider society that has been influenced by engrained beliefs, values and stereotypes that patriarchy has prescribed over centuries. Allinson in his 2001 work titled *A Spanish Labyrinth*<sup>14</sup>, opened my eyes on an introductory level to the historical background of Almodóvar's work and his unique cinematic vision through the use of genre, style and performance. The breaking down of research into context, content and construction has proved to be a valuable tool in understanding such issues and his in-depth analysis of performance and sexuality has proved crucial in the development of Chapter II, focusing on *La Mala Educación (Bad Education)*.

In continuing with the theme of sexuality within the film narrative, it would not be apt to cite research into Almodóvar's work without paying homage to Paul Julian Smith. In *Laws of Desire*,<sup>15</sup> Smith undertakes an incisive analysis of the portrayals of homosexuality in both Spanish writing and film. With a large part of this research dedicated to Almodóvar's work, Smith's contribution is now recognised within the canon of Almodóvar criticism. He argues against the common perception that Almodóvar makes a conscious effort to repress history in his work, putting forward the case that this political and historical emphasis is instead embedded within the filmic narrative, without being openly voiced in the dialogue.<sup>16</sup> It has been my intention throughout this process to embrace Smith's argument and adapt it to

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<sup>14</sup> Allinson, 2001

<sup>15</sup> Paul Julian Smith, *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992

<sup>16</sup> Smith, 1992, p.171

Almodóvar's 21<sup>st</sup> Century work. Just like the political and historical emphasis which is not openly voiced in the dialogue according to Smith, it is my aim to portray the idea that marginality in Almodóvar's work is also not openly voiced, but is instead embedded within the filmic narrative – homosexual characters are never “outed” yet simply exist; strong female characters are never “outed”, yet simply exist in the filmic texture of his complex narratives. These concepts in relation to sexuality that Smith observes will be applied throughout this entire thesis, taking into account the personal view that a challenging of authority in relation to a particular marginalised group can in turn be applied to all marginalised groups collectively. The struggles facing the issue of sexuality, for example, can also arguably be applied to gender. Almodóvar's prominence and spatial creation for female characters can also be said to create a space for further marginal characters such as homosexual males, females, drag queens and vice versa.

A key text that has influenced this research has been *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*<sup>17</sup>. Along with significant contributions from both editors to the volume, this recent work brings together influential articles by Paul Julian Smith, Kathleen Vernon, Isolina Ballesteros, Andy Williams, Linda Williams, Peter William Evans, Mark Allinson, Steven Marsh and Marvin D'Lugo to name but a few. In delving into concepts under sections named: “Form and Figures”, “Melodrama and its Discontents”, “The Limits of Representation” and the “Auteur in Context”, many of

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<sup>17</sup> Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009

the individual articles have undoubtedly added significant insight to the development of this thesis which focuses on the representations and portrayals of gender in Almodóvar's 21<sup>st</sup> Century cinema.

Before embarking on the empirical part of my discussion, it may be helpful if I first address the concept of gender as constructed in Almodóvar's films. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'<sup>18</sup>. This has been a landmark phrase which has been at the centre of the gender/sex debate for many years. This debate comes down to the sociological concepts of nature and nurture<sup>19</sup>. Does our biological sex determine our gender? Or is gender a "psychological type", acquired through life experience and learned through socialisation processes? De Beauvoir's allusion to gender as a "becoming", as a process which is not determined by birth, suggests that gender is a social and cultural construct. Gender is further problematised by concepts such as gender neutrality or transgender which Almodóvar painstakingly integrates into his work and will be examined in Chapters I and II. This is when the concept of gender identity often comes into place as many people undertake the process of coming to terms with their new self identity and also to how others perceive this identity in society. Many refuse to accept that their gender falls into the black and white, binary dichotomy of male and female; a dichotomy arguably created by patriarchy to suit its values and ideals of what a male and female should be. I will argue that Almodóvar

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<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M Parshley, London: Vintage, 1997, p.295 (Original: Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxieme Sexe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, vol.2, p.13)

<sup>19</sup> David C. Rowe, *The Limits of Family Influence: Genes, Experience, and Behaviour*, New York: Guilford Press, 1994, pp.2-3

challenges this binary dichotomy, by introducing through his filmic narratives a grey area which does not correspond to the black and white binary that patriarchy has stereotypically prescribed.

Like Almodóvar, Judith Butler, an US Philosopher and third-wave feminist argues that feminism seems to have made a great error in defining women as one entity, therefore reinforcing this binary, black and white view of gender and gender relations<sup>20</sup>. She eloquently argues that instead, gender should be seen as fluid, something which can change depending on the time and the context. Butler develops her argument as she introduces the idea of gender as “performative”<sup>21</sup>; she puts forward the argument that we all put on a gender performance, regardless of whether this performance fits into the binary view of what is socially and culturally considered “true” gender.

Butler calls for an active approach to changing these views and gender norms by means of what she designates ‘gender trouble’ in order to move feminism from the approach taken by many that women all share common characteristics and interests. It can be argued that Almodóvar has taken this active approach that Butler calls for in order to challenge and change these views and gender norms. By creating gender fluidity, and removing the assumption that gender is “caused” by some sort of factor, Butler, like Almodóvar, believes that this will eventually lead to the change of these

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990, pp.171-190

<sup>21</sup> Butler, 1990, p.173

gender norms and patriarchal society's phallogentric and archaic view of femininity and masculinity.

In order to examine and attempt to transform these existing engrained phallogentric and archaic stereotypes and practices in the film narrative, it is important to consider ways that aid the process of deconstruction and understanding of these engrained conventions and stereotypes. Psychoanalysis can be used as a tool to deconstruct and in turn understand these stereotypes and practices which can be considered to have taken form in society as the absolute truth<sup>22</sup>. It is understandable that after years of patriarchal ideology that was engrained in Spanish society, and due to the binary black and white gender norms that condemned the female to a subordinate role in society<sup>23</sup>, that it was difficult to accept the female as an intelligent and more importantly active agent in film. It is this role as active agent that Almodóvar strives to portray through his female characters in his filmography; his ultimate purpose is to break the stereotypical barriers that marginal characters face as reflected in both film and society. It is furthermore noted that patriarchal structures stereotypically confine characters to particular roles and spaces. Psychoanalysis therefore allows for the unlocking of secrets and reasons as to why both female *and* male characters have been restricted to these confined spaces throughout the course of the film narrative.

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<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.34

<sup>23</sup>, Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

In order to highlight the contestations and challenges of the status quo, I will adhere to the pioneering psychoanalytical theories such as the male gaze<sup>24</sup> by Laura Mulvey who argues that 'Woman...stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.'<sup>25</sup> It is through the male gaze<sup>26</sup> of the male protagonist, male director and male spectator that this 'signifier' and 'silent image' of woman – that Mulvey suggests, and Almodóvar in his work, as specifically studied in Chapter I, portrays – can be analysed and deconstructed through concepts linked to the male gaze, including that of fetishism<sup>27</sup>. E. Ann Kaplan draws on the Freudian theory of castration<sup>28</sup>, eloquently arguing that fragmentation<sup>29</sup> of the female image can be seen as a form of fetishism; it is in the act of what can be considered overt fragmentation of the female body portraying the female as no longer a whole entity and instead compartmentalised<sup>30</sup> that the phallic image is often found; reducing the threat of the female with her lack of the phallus and in turn, making her desirable to aforementioned male gaze. The

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<sup>24</sup> According to Mulvey, there are three gazes: that of the camera, the spectator and the male protagonist in the diegesis. Mulvey argues that in dominant cinema each of these gazes are considered male, fetishising and fragmenting the female form, rendering it devalued. 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>25</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.35

<sup>26</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan argues that 'the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat' She continues her argument by drawing on Mulvey's idea that 'Men, that is, turn the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous', Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31



concepts of fragmentation and fetishism will be studied in depth throughout the body of this research. Furthermore, these concepts have been researched, adapted and further explored by further feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnstone, Mary Ann Doane and Annette Kuhn. I aim to show how Almodóvar's work conforms to such psychoanalytical theories, and I will draw particularly on several theoretical concepts introduced by Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan. Of all the theorists I have considered throughout this research, Mulvey and Kaplan have been especially useful because of their interest in the image of gender as portrayed through film: Mulvey's influential essay titled '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*'<sup>31</sup> encapsulates the main basis of this study. Mulvey's eloquent argument, which mirrors Almodóvar's portrayals of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look'<sup>32</sup>, sets in process the psychoanalytic tool that enables film critics to examine phallogentric discourse and images throughout the filmic text.

This coded discourse is covertly placed by Almodóvar as an attempt to indirectly, or even in some cases, directly, challenge the status quo. Mulvey's Lacanian-thought based consideration of the concept of the active male and passive female<sup>33</sup>, which is considered in Chapter I in relation to the two "passive"<sup>34</sup> females in a comatose state in *Hable con Ella*, can also be stated as present within each of the four Almodovarian

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<sup>31</sup> Mulvey, 2000

<sup>32</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.39

<sup>33</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.39

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter I (pp. 17-50) for in depth analysis on the active male and passive female in relation to *Hable con Ella*

films this thesis will examine. Her theory will prove to be a crucial tool throughout this analysis of Almodóvar's selected films.

E. Ann Kaplan's essay 'Is the gaze male?'<sup>35</sup> draws on Laura Mulvey's aforementioned work on '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*', citing Freudian theory and questioning whether Mulvey's active male and passive female<sup>36</sup> theory can in fact be challenged. Kaplan, like Almodóvar, in Chapter III and IV in *Volver* and *Los Abrazos Rotos*, questions whether women can take the dominant, active position, or whether by attempting to take this position which has not been prescribed to them by patriarchy, they inevitably become 'masculine'<sup>37</sup>. She, like Almodóvar, eloquently tackles the 'pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him',<sup>38</sup> acknowledging the idea that phallogocentric discourse is evidently present in dominant cinema and using psychoanalytic theory as what she calls a 'political weapon'.<sup>39</sup>

My examination of gender in Almodóvar's films, using psychoanalytic theory as a crucial tool to uncover myths and secrets pertaining to patriarchal society and subsequently reflected in film, is certainly not the first to draw on such theories: but through in-depth deconstruction of Almodóvar's filmic work in order to explore the evolving portrayals of gender in his 21<sup>st</sup> Century filmography, I believe my analysis

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<sup>35</sup> Kaplan, 1983

<sup>36</sup> This theoretical aspect will be studied in great detail in Chapter I in relation to Almodóvar's *Hable con Ella* (2002), Mulvey, 2000, p.39

<sup>37</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.29

<sup>38</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.34

<sup>39</sup> 'demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' Kaplan, 1983, p.34

will offer a novel view of Almodóvar as a pioneer of the redefinition of gender.

Moreover, my study can arguably be considered the first which attempts to trace the evolution of Almodóvar's portrayals of femininity, masculinity and alternative sexualities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

This analysis will create a dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and filmic text. I

will show how psychoanalytic notions have been portrayed through the medium of film; in turn defining male and female subjectivity in cinema and in modern society.

The hypothesis formed in the initial selection of films of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Almodovarian filmography was due to the personal observation that Almodóvar's work is constantly forming, reforming and transforming itself; his years of experience since his short films of the 1970s during the "dictablanda" (soft censorship) period and his first feature film post-Franco *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*) in 1980, can be seen to have influenced the transition of Almodóvar's work through dictatorship to democracy. Robert Fiddian and Peter Evans have observed Spain as 'a nation attempting to pick up the pieces of its lost identity, still inevitably anchored in the grim realities of the recent past'.<sup>40</sup> It is this observation that I aim to take forward to a different level; that instead of being anchored in the past, Almodóvar has taken agency in the creation of a new future for Spanish film, surpassing the boundaries and stereotypical confines in relation to gender that patriarchy has prescribed to the Spanish nation over years of a right-wing dictatorship. It is by choosing Almodóvar's most recent films, which focus on

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<sup>40</sup> Fiddian & Evans, 1981, p.7

both the feminine *and* masculine sphere in his characterisation of the film narratives that this creation of what could be considered a 'New Almodovarian Cinema' can be examined. I believe Almodóvar's work certainly does challenge and destabilise earlier representations of invisibility, complexly yet indeed crucially reversing the centuries-old legacies of sexual discrimination in film and in society. It is for this reason that Chapter I will closely analyse the film *Hable Con Ella* (2002), arguing the shift from subject to object, from active to passive in the characterisation of the male and female characters in the narrative. Chapter II will focus on *La Mala Educación*, 2004, analysing crossed identities and performance within the film narrative and discourse. Chapter III will shift focus from the arguably more male-driven narratives previously analysed to a more feminine narrative in *Volver*, 2006, putting forward the argument that Almodóvar's placing of the film discourse in a magnified feminine world results in new spaces and opportunities for women and marginalised groups as a whole. The final chapter will examine Almodóvar's most present film to date, *Los Abrazos Rotos*, 2009, in which Almodóvar presents an overt redefinition of the gaze through a blind male protagonist who would arguably, in classic dominant cinema, usually take form as the vehicle for which Mulvey's male gaze<sup>41</sup> would tend to make itself apparent through the discourse of the narrative.

This study will offer a novel examination of the redefinition of the concept of gender reflected and portrayed through the medium of film. Almodóvar's reconstruction, redefinition and subsequent refiguring of concepts, stereotypes, ideals and values

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<sup>41</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

pertaining to traditional norms will arguably culminate in the creation of a 'New Spanish Cinema'.

# **Chapter I**

## **From Object to Subject in *Hable Con Ella***

## **Chapter I - From Object to Subject in *Hable con Ella***

After over two decades since Pedro Almodóvar's first full-length feature film *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*), 1980, and thirteen subsequent feature films<sup>42</sup>, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has signalled a new phase of filmmaking for Almodóvar, bringing issues of gender to the forefront and tackling engrained cinematic and social inflections of patriarchal society, the dominant society that significantly influences everyday life. While the coming chapters will discuss these issues in greater depth, our present concern is with Almodóvar's 2002 film, *Hable con Ella* (*Talk to Her*), a film which can be seen to break with Almodóvar's past concentration on the predominance of female characters in his narratives<sup>43</sup>. Here, he uses the female as the means to foreground the male story, thus supporting the argument within this thesis as a whole that Pedro Almodóvar is in fact an advocate for the marginal strands of society, especially in relation to gender, identity and sexuality.

*Hable con Ella* (*Talk to Her*) 2002, tells the story of Benigno Martín and Marco

Zuluaga, two men who once cross paths at a ballet performance to be united later

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<sup>42</sup> For a comprehensive filmography and plot summary of Pedro Almodóvar's work up until 1999, see Mark Allinson, *A Spanish Labyrinth: The films of Pedro Almodóvar*, London: I.B Tauris, 2001, pp 230-244

<sup>43</sup> Allinson, 2001, p.72

within the confines of a hospital ward where Benigno works as a nurse caring full-time for Alicia, a ballet student who lies unconscious in a coma after an accident. At the clinic, Benigno is re-united with Marco who he noticed crying at the ballet performance; however, this time they are re-acquainted as Marco's lover Lydia González, a famous Spanish female bullfighter, also lies in a coma after being gored by a bull in the ring. As the narrative unfolds and the men watch over their comatose love objects, their relationships with both Alicia and Lydia *and* somewhat suggestively their relationship with *each other* are told through a narration of flashbacks darting backwards and forwards in time. Events take a turn for the worse as Benigno is imprisoned after raping Alicia while in a coma, as he believes both of them to be deeply in love and declares his wish to marry her. In a desperate bid to re-unite himself with Alicia, not bearing to be apart from her, he takes, as he thinks, enough pills to send him into a coma, but instead overdoses and subsequently dies. In a somewhat ironic twist to the tale, Alicia wakes up from her coma during childbirth, giving birth to a stillborn baby, but Marco unfortunately does not reach Benigno in time to tell him the news. Throughout this tale of love, loss, emotions, and friendship, the story of both male characters is pushed to the forefront of the agenda as Almodóvar emphasises the role of gender as a vehicle for subverting existing norms and stereotypes that have held sway for centuries.

From the outset of the film narrative, Almodóvar instantly provides the audience with the first instance of the conflict of binary gender identities and performance of



gender<sup>44</sup>. The opening titles of the film are projected upon a 'stage curtain' which gradually pulls up in theatrical fashion to reveal the first ballet scene, *Café Müller*, by Pina Bausch. The ballet consists of two women in white nightdresses, carelessly stumbling around the stage where numerous obstacles (tables and chairs) are placed into which the women collide. A male figure is seen in the darkness moving the obstacles out of the way as the performance ends with the dancers falling to the ground, almost as if ill and abandoning themselves to their fate. Mark Allinson, argues that 'the opening ballet, *Café Müller* by Pina Bausch, presents a dystopian world of illness and obstacles...the sequence is replete with metaphorical allusions to the film's principal story and characters'.<sup>45</sup> These 'metaphorical allusions', as Allinson suggests, can be equated to the plot of the story to come as the two female dancers perform, portraying a characterisation of insanity, with no control, their eyes closed, in silence. Allinson continues this idea by arguing that 'the two dancers, who stumble blindly and in isolation through a forest of tables and chairs across a bare stage, are metaphorical representations of the two comatose women in the main plot of the film'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Butler argues that feminism in its definition of gender as two black and white dichotomised entities has made a great error: gender is fluid and not fixed, and each individual almost "acts" out what can be considered a gender performance. This performance is performed regardless of whether it fits into the binaries of what is culturally considered to be "true" gender. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: London, 1990, pp.171-90. This theory will be further developed in Chapter Two.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Allinson, "Mimesis and Diegesis: Almodóvar and the Limits of Melodrama", Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.152

<sup>46</sup> Allinson, 2009, pp.152-153

It could be further suggested that ballet can be considered as an art form that requires no speech: both females who take lead role in the performance of *Café Müller* could possibly be representing the female gender as a whole, whose role in dominant patriarchal society arguably takes form in the silent, absent and marginal<sup>47</sup> position as noted by Mulvey. It can be noted that patriarchal structures engrained in society attempt to confine individuals to particular roles and spaces. The role of the female in society has often been equated to silence; some might argue that she is even imprisoned in this role as mother, house maker and wife, all of which can be considered enclosed within the boundaries of a home under the watchful eye of the patriarch, the male of the house. Allinson notes this point of imprisonment by suggesting:

Despite their protector, the dancers collide with the walls of the stage, a relatively open space that nonetheless is made to feel like a prison. Prisons – both literal and metaphorical – are another feature of *Talk to Her*. And as the dancers fall to the ground, their limbs become stiff, a further link to the immobility of the bedridden Alicia and Lydia.<sup>48</sup>

Not only in the first scene does Almodóvar present the spectator with an overt criticism of the dichotomy of binary identities and the compartmentalisation of roles; he also metaphorically links the physical characteristics of the ballet dancers to the roles of the characters in *Hable con Ella*; immobile, uncontrolled, silenced female figures versus the active male moving objects out of the way to control the direction

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<sup>47</sup> E. Ann Kaplan puts forward the idea that 'patriarchal myths function to position women as silent, absent, and marginal'. "Is the gaze male?", *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.30

<sup>48</sup> Allinson, 2009, p.153

of the performance. This immobility as Allinson describes it, could also be arguably linked to the idea of the active male and passive female<sup>49</sup> in film theory and subsequently in the ruling ideology of dominant society. Laura Mulvey eloquently puts forward the argument that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.'<sup>50</sup> She further suggests:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film.<sup>51</sup>

It could be suggested that this active male and passive female dichotomy that Mulvey argues can be applied to the structure of representation in dominant society, can in addition, be applied to the entire narrative of *Hable con Ella* as a whole; the two female characters Alicia and Lydia are both in a coma for the best part of the film narrative. They do not form part of the diegesis yet they, in their comatose state, are the vehicles for the development of the stories of both males, Benigno and Marco. From their hospital bedside, both Benigno and Marco are active agents of the narrative and diegesis, with the use of flashbacks and storytelling the vehicle to the understanding of all four characters' lives, as Mulvey further notes 'the male

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<sup>49</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>50</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>51</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.46

protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action.<sup>52</sup> This dichotomy will be further explored in the scenic analysis throughout this chapter.

Almodóvar eloquently sets the scene of the film as he introduces the spectator to Benigno and his role as a nurse in the private clinic in which he works. The active male and passive female binary is explored as Benigno tends to Alicia. He is the active male in his tending to Alicia, caring for her as she lies comatose – she is mute due to her present condition, has no voice and no agency whatsoever. Laura Mulvey suggests that ‘the sexualisation and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses.’<sup>53</sup> This castration threat,<sup>54</sup> as initially developed by Freud, has been adopted by psychoanalysis and feminist film theory to account for images which can be arguably said to be placed intentionally within the filmic narrative in order to subvert existing traditions and values – one of which being the silenced, inferior and passive female with the threatening genital organ (lack of phallus), to that of the contrasting active omnipotent agent of the male (with phallus). This is eloquently portrayed by Almodóvar as Benigno and his colleague Rosa wash Alicia’s limp body.

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<sup>52</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.41

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

The camera focuses on a close shot of Alicia's breasts as she is being washed. This fragmented<sup>55</sup> image fills the entire frame, cutting off the rest of her body.

With the camera's ability to crop and frame certain parts of the body into the shot, the spectator's gaze is directed towards this fragmented image of Alicia's breasts; she is no longer whole in the eyes of the camera and arguably this could be said to represent the eyes of the ruling ideology with its patriarchal core values. Is the female seen in the eyes of patriarchy as a whole image, an active agent? Feminist film analysis in conjunction with psychoanalysis would tend to sway towards the opposite end of the spectrum – that in fact, the fragmented shot of Alicia's bosom represents the fragments that the patriarchal eye concentrates on, rendering the female form devalued and no longer a whole entire agent.

Almodóvar continues this theme by instantly cutting to another fragmented shot – this time of Alicia's legs. The difference between the former and the latter being the legs as a possible representation of a phallic image – the 'castrated' male upon the discovery of the lack of the phallus in the female renders the female form 'phallus-like'<sup>56</sup> as Kaplan notes. Juliet Mitchell, in line with Kaplan and Mulvey, suggests:

Instead of acknowledging this evidence of castration they set up a fetish which substitutes for the missing phallus of the woman, but in doing this fetishists have their cake and eat it: they both recognise that women are castrated and deny it, so

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<sup>55</sup> Kaplan notes that fragmentation can be seen as a form of fetishism, arguing that 'the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat' drawing on Mulvey's argument that 'men, that is, turn 'the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'...' 1983, p.31

<sup>56</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

the fetish is treated with affection and hostility, it represents the *absence* of the phallus and in itself, by its very existence, asserts the presence of it.<sup>57</sup>

This scene could be taken as a prime example of this theory, with the male gaze<sup>58</sup> of the camera looking to project its castration trauma and find the phallic member in other areas of the female body. By doing so, the reassurance that everything now conforms to phallogentric values brings peace to the camera, the male protagonist and the audience as the phallic projection has been found and the castration threat subsequently diminished.

As the spectator is introduced to Marco's story, Almodóvar continues his considerable criticism of dominant cinematic film techniques such as fragmentation by juxtaposing these images with the rather masculine Spanish pastime of bullfighting. After Lydia González comments on her profession by proclaiming 'hay demasiado machismo en el mundo del toro' (there is too much chauvinism in the bullfighting world), Almodóvar instantly juxtaposes this chauvinistic male world with a female bullfighter, considerably at odds with the 'stereotypical' macho role of the male fighter against the male bull.

Almodóvar shoots interestingly; fragmenting Lydia's image as only her waist from behind is seen through the camera's lens. Could this again represent classic dominant cinema's tendencies to shoot the female form in this way, fragmenting the

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<sup>57</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.85

<sup>58</sup> According to Mulvey there are three 'gazes' in film, all of which are male, functioning exclusively in line with male desire. These three male gazes are the camera, the audience and the male protagonist. 2000, pp.39-40

image, rendering the female considerably devalued and no longer as a complete entity from the perspective of the male gaze? Almodóvar plays with these gender stereotypes as Lydia's appearance could be arguably considered as 'masculine'; her hair scraped back tight, with her torero suit complete with a tie. This masculine image of Lydia is in juxtaposition with the following scene as Lydia appears with full 'feminine' features; long hair, makeup, earrings. Claire Johnston proposes that 'the fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism: woman represents not herself, but by a process of displacement, the male phallus...'.<sup>59</sup> The fragmented shot of Lydia's waist from behind could therefore be implied to connote this male narcissism as Almodóvar reveals to the spectator through suture (shot/reverse shot) Marco watching Lydia bullfighting from the stands. It could subsequently be noted that the fragmented shot the camera sees and therefore the fragmented shot the spectator sees was in fact filmed from the prospective of Marco's male gaze, fetishising Lydia's body and representing, as Johnston suggests by process of displacement, the phallic member of the male human being.

The dichotomised binary of activity and passivity, subject and object, is probed further and in some sense overtly challenged as the audience is presented with a further flashback of the lives of Marco and Lydia. As Marco drives Lydia back to her chalet, Lydia encounters a snake in the kitchen. She runs out of the house hysterically screaming, assuming the female role of passivity in stark contrast to her

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<sup>59</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-cinema", Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, EUP: Edinburgh, 1999, p.33

previous strong-willed active role through the characterisation by Almodóvar. Marco rushes to Lydia's aid, assuming the active male role as he kills the snake and deals with the situation. Linda Williams proposes the idea that:

The point is certainly not to admire the "sexual freedom" of this new fluidity and oscillation – the new femininity of men who hug and the new masculinity of women who leer – as if it represented any ultimate defeat of phallic power. Rather, the more useful lesson might be to see what this new fluidity and oscillation permits...<sup>60</sup>

This new fluidity and oscillation as William submits is portrayed perfectly during this scene as seconds after Marco kills the snake in his active role as powerful male agent, he breaks down and sensitively sheds a tear. This active role is therefore blurred; he becomes the agent of a new sense of masculinity whereby it is acceptable for a man to cry and show his usually somewhat hidden sensitive side. It could be argued that Almodóvar in this scene overtly challenges the stereotypical active/passive dichotomy, suggesting instead that females can be active agents (Lydia in the bullfighting ring) and men can be passive 'subjects' (Marco sensitively crying over the snake).

These stereotypical dichotomies and existing traditions, some might argue, stem from the hierarchical layers that naturally occur within society as a whole. In patriarchal society the state and the Church (specifically the Catholic Church) can be deemed to form these upper layers of the hierarchy; their decisions, traditions and values forming engrained structures that have trickled through society for centuries.

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<sup>60</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", Robert Stam and Toby Miller(eds.) *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, p.215



Almodóvar, as further developed throughout this volume, often overtly criticises the dominant patriarchal ideals and values that have influenced and continue to influence not only Spanish Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also the deeper roots of Spanish society in general.

Within the narrative of *Hable con Ella*, there are what arguably seem to be overt attacks on religion and its 'moral' teachings; before and after Lydia González's bullfight scene where she is horrifically gored by a bull and left in a coma, there are two scenes that could be portrayed to contain overt attacks on the religious teachings of Catholic Spanish society. In the first of these two scenes the camera cuts to a medium shot of a shrine to Jesus Christ as Lydia's family and Marco wait before the bullfight. A diegetic conversation is pursued as a story is told of nuns who were raped by missionaries in Africa. This moral dilemma in itself of missionaries of God's word committing such a horrific crime is further attacked as a character exclaims 'No todos van a ser violadores...' (They're not all rapists) to which a damning overt criticism follows: 'No...también los hay pedófilos.' (No, some of them are pedophiles).<sup>61</sup> The image therefore portrayed through this scene can be analysed as an extremely negative image of religion, its morals and values and its teachings through missionaries, who are as Almodóvar suggests, are not as pure as their moral values make them out to be.

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter Two regarding *La Mala Educación* (2004) for further development of this topic.

This idea is further strengthened after Lydia is gored by the bull and lying in her hospital bed in a coma. Marco proclaims 'Me cuesta mucho trabajo tener fe' (It's really hard work for me to have faith) as he watches his partner lying, unrecognisable to him – and he is unable to talk to her. The shrine from the previous scene has been re-created in Lydia's hospital room (it is not suggested who placed it there but it does not seem to be to Marco's taste as he does not sit by it praying to the heavens). The camera focuses on Marco's desolate expression as Lydia lays motionless, her bed visible through a mirror located to the left hand side of the shot. The camera then shifts its focus to the mirror, and the religious shrine beside her bed is visible. Arguably this could be seen as a reminder of the fact that during bad or testing times many people turn to the Church and its religious teachings for comfort and solace; however the previous damning attack is a reminder of the immoral stance so well documented in modern day society about the Church and the inbuilt hypocrisy within its own structures. Almodóvar brings this to the forefront of the agenda as he tackles the reason for which these engrained values and ideals exist in society in the first instance.

The active male versus passive female stereotype is further investigated during Caetano Veloso's performance of *Cucurrucucu Paloma*. The lyrics of the diegetic song tell the tale of a lost love, linking a metaphor of a dove<sup>62</sup> to that of a man who is mourning a love that is no longer. Arguably the metaphor of a bird could be

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<sup>62</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot notes; 'The Slavs believe that, at death, the soul turns into a dove. This bird partakes of the general symbolism of all winged animals, that is, of spirituality and the power of sublimation.' *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1971), Jack Sage (trans.), New York: Dover Publications, 2002, p.85

considered as a form of challenging the entrapment faced by women within patriarchal society. Birds, including doves in particular, are generally caged birds, locked within the boundaries of a metal cage. As Juan Eduardo Cirlot suggests, birds represent the power of sublimation; the power of phase transition<sup>63</sup> which could be argued as the transition from trapped and caged to freedom. Possibly far-fetched yet sustainable all the same, the idea of a dove in a bird cage could be considered the phallogentric world, almost like a jail in which women, psychoanalytically speaking, are entrapped, oppressed and silenced. This metaphor is instantly linked to Marco, however, as Almodóvar pans the camera to a medium shot of his face as he is evidently emotionally moved by the lyrics of the song. According to Laura Mulvey in her influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', woman is image and man can be seen as 'bearer of the look'.<sup>64</sup> This again subscribes itself to the active male and passive female dichotomy as woman in her passive state functions in line with male desire, with man as bearer of the look projecting his active male gaze onto her image and turning it into a spectacle for the male camera, protagonist and audience<sup>65</sup>, as mentioned previously. However, Almodóvar challenges this idea, giving Lydia agency as the camera cuts in suture from Lydia's gaze to the object of her gaze, Marco, as he sheds a tear. The roles are reversed here as Lydia's gaze is fixated on Marco, her active stance contradicting stereotypes with Marco's passive

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<sup>63</sup> Cirlot, 2002, p.85

<sup>64</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.39

<sup>65</sup> Refer to Footnote 17, Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

and somewhat sensitive link to the metaphor of the bird, equating him with the entrapment and passivity once deemed to be faced by women alone.

As Marco walks away Lydia follows him, almost assuming a 'masculine' position as she embraces him from behind and asks him why he cried after killing the snake. In dominant cinema it could be suggested that there is an expectation for the male to be the active subject in the embrace, however, Almodóvar eloquently reverses these roles. The camera cuts to a flashback of Marco's past as an image of a fully naked woman is seen from a distance as she runs from a snake – the whole image of the female figure in full view of the long shot yet filmed from such a distance that she looks small, almost arguably insignificant in the eyes of the camera and therefore of patriarchal society? Whilst providing the spectator with an overt challenging of these stereotypes and roles, Almodóvar also uncovers and outs the fact that they do still exist within many forms of dominant cinema, including Spanish Cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Another feature somewhat inherent of dominant Hollywood cinema that reinforces the active male/passive female binary is voyeurism. Kaplan sets out this theoretical argument by putting forward the idea that 'voyeurism and fetishism are mechanisms the dominant cinema uses to construct the male spectator in accordance with the needs of his unconscious'.<sup>66</sup> This 'scopophilic instinct'<sup>67</sup> as Kaplan argues is evident as Marco walks through the corridor of the hospital. As he passes Alicia's room, the

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<sup>66</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.30

<sup>67</sup> 'the male pleasure in his own sexual organ transferred to pleasure in watching other people having sex' Kaplan, 1983, p.30

door is slightly ajar and he stops as he catches a glimpse of Alicia lying motionless in her bed. Mulvey further develops this argument by stating:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen...The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle.<sup>68</sup>

As Marco stops as he walks past Alicia's room, the camera cuts to a reverse shot from inside the bedroom – this reverse shot seems to create the image of a gap at the door as it isn't fully closed. The suture shot continues as a further reverse shot is portrayed through the eyes of the camera, this time revealing Marco's gaze at a naked Alicia lying still in a coma. As Mulvey notes in the above citation, Alicia can be seen here as the erotic object not only for Marco within the story, but also for the spectator within the auditorium. Her breasts are in full view of the camera's focus, and it is almost as if the spectator's gaze is drawn to her naked body. It is important to add, as Mulvey also notes, that it is the male who carries this vision and transports the spectator's gaze towards the naked Alicia's breasts. Kaja Silverman supports this statement by suggesting that suture functions in this particular way placing 'the male subject on the side of vision, and the female subject on the side of spectacle.'<sup>69</sup> Alicia here is being looked at; she is the object of spectacle as Marco's vision carries the

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<sup>68</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.40

<sup>69</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects", Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, EUP: Edinburgh, 1999, p.101

spectator into a sense of voyeurism as his gaze is the gaze the spectator now 'owns'.

Despina Kakoudaki in her analysis of *Hable con Ella* submits:

Alicia appears nude from the very beginning of the film, with a close-up of her breasts among the first images we see of her body...Here it seems that Almodóvar courts a reading of objectification, and even thematizes this interpretation by presenting a woman who is unaware of being looked at; her lack of awareness renders both camera and viewers inevitably voyeuristic, perhaps even unapologetically so.<sup>70</sup>

As Kakoudaki notes, both the camera and viewer are rendered voyeuristic through Marco's personal voyeurism and again further in the narrative as Benigno is alone with Alicia massaging her thighs. The camera's focus is instantly drawn to this showing of bare flesh again as Alicia's body is fragmented and fetishised. Christian Metz in his article titled '*The Imaginary Signifier*' draws on the idea of fetishism:

Fetishism is generally regarded as the 'perversion' par excellence, for it intervenes itself in the 'tabulation' of the others, and above all because they, like it (and this is what makes it their model), are based on the avoidance of castration...Thanks to the fetish, which covers the wound and itself becomes erotogenic, the object as a whole can become desirable again without excess fear.<sup>71</sup>

The substitute of the fetish in order to calm the threat of castration as mentioned previously is of relevance in this scene as Benigno massages Alicia's thighs. As Alicia's body is fetishised through the voyeuristic male gaze of the camera with her thighs being shot in fragmented fashion; the focus of the camera's lens and therefore the

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<sup>70</sup> Despina Kakoudaki, "Intimate Strangers: Melodrama and Coincidence in *Talk to Her*", Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp.229-230

<sup>71</sup> Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier", Robert Stam and Toby Miller(eds.) *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, pp.428-431

spectator's eye is also drawn to that of a lava lamp on Alicia's bedside table. It could be argued that the lava lamp (one placed on each side of the bed) is extremely phallic in shape – its position as fetish and therefore 'covering the wound'<sup>72</sup> as Metz argues renders the naked body of Alicia desirable again: the lack of the phallus and subsequent castration threat that Alicia as female poses, leads the camera through the function of the male gaze<sup>73</sup> to look for this phallic reassurance in surrounding objects. The wound is therefore covered as Metz suggests, and the fear that Alicia as a female poses is therefore diminished and she can be seen as an object of desire again. This is analysed and considered as a possible way out from the threat of castration that the extreme close ups of her naked thigh and lack of phallic member pose to Benigno, the camera and the viewer.

In relation to the lava lamps at the side of Alicia's bed, it can be suggested that Almodóvar has a tendency to use objects as descriptive to the characters within the filmic narrative<sup>74</sup>. Arguably, this use of objects as narrative almost runs parallel to the narrative in itself; the objects that are placed around or nearby the characters in the film often tell a great deal about the characters themselves or the plot that is likely to follow. As the camera pans across Alicia's bedside table, a photo of Alicia ballet dancing is noticeable through the camera's lens. Not only does this convey to the spectator Alicia's love for the art of ballet, but it could be argued that this photo

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<sup>72</sup> Metz, 2000, p.431

<sup>73</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>74</sup> Allinson notes that 'Objects tell us about characters, what they cherish, hate or fear. They can communicate information in simple denotative terms or, through connotation, convey even complex psychological aspects of the characters.' 2001, p.171

of Alicia represents her current situation: the boundaries of the frame entrap Alicia's image within a confined space, she is unable to transcend this space as the boundaries keep her tied within. Alicia in her current situation is also trapped within the silence of a coma; she is not able to act or react, she has no means of caring for or doing anything for herself, rendering her silenced and invisible. This could also be analysed one step further and represent the situation of women in patriarchal society, trapped within the boundaries of that society that restricts them to certain roles, as wife, mother, and housewife and as bearer of future generations. This idea is suggestively probed further as Marco talks to the Doctor regarding Lydia's coma and states 'Puede abrir los ojos pero como un acto mecánico. Su cerebro está parado, no concibe ideas ni sentimientos.' (She can open her eyes but as a mechanical action. Her brain is dead, she has no ideas or feelings.) Again, this could be deemed as possibly far-fetched; however it is viable and indeed arguable that this statement represents the idea of women under patriarchy: that they are silenced by society and conceive no ideas or feelings of their own.

As the camera pans past the framed photograph, its gradual movement hesitates for a second and focuses on the cover of a book. It is almost as if the camera significantly and purposely sets its focus, and therefore the focus of the spectator's eye on the title of the book with the rest of the cover blurred and completely out of focus altogether. '*La noche del cazador*' (*The night of the hunter*) being the title of the book – it could be argued that this is a possible premonition to Benigno's future act as he 'rapes' Alicia and impregnates her while she is in a coma.



Almodóvar, along with his eloquent and intricate investigation of the active and passive roles assigned to the male and female genders, also takes this investigation of marginality further as he challenges the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality throughout the narrative. In the scene psychoanalytically analysed above as Benigno massages Alicia's thigh, he is interrupted by Señor Roncero (Mr. Roncero) who is Alicia's father and also a psychiatrist. The camera cuts from the image of the thigh to Señor Roncero's gaze, with a reverse shot back to that of the thigh as it is clear he possibly notices something out of the ordinary. He proceeds to ask Benigno about his sexuality to which he replies that he's orientated more towards men, but he doesn't have that problem now as he is no longer alone. The connotations of him no longer being alone relating to him 'being' with Alicia become even further implanted into the mind of the spectator, with Almodóvar's use of suture critical to the delivery of this idea and sentiment. In the following scene Benigno and his colleague Rosa discuss the conversation with Señor Roncero as Benigno proclaims:

Pero bueno cómo se atreve a preguntarme si me gustan los hombres o las mujeres...¿a quién le importa? A ver si preguntó a la enfermera jefe si es bollo...o a ti, te preguntó si te gusta el bestialismo o la coprofagia. (How dare he ask me if I like men or women? Who cares? Did he ask the head nurse if she's a dyke...Did he ask you if you like bestiality or coprophagy?)

Benigno's outrage at Señor Roncero's comments are reinforced by Rosa as she says 'llevas razón, esas cosas no se preguntan' (You're right. You don't ask things like

that). This brings to the forefront of the agenda the idea that homosexuality exists in the world of Almodóvar just like heterosexuality does itself.

Paul Julian Smith notes that 'homosexuality is not repressed but is rather called into being by these social structures which cause it to be ever on the margins of visibility: neither completely hidden (and therefore impossible to control) nor wholly apparent (and thus socially sanctioned).'<sup>75</sup> There is no over-compensation for marginality within his film discourses and narratives; characters do not come out of the closet, neither do they need to overtly state their inner desires, wants or feelings. Benigno to the spectator's initial eye may come across stereotypically homosexually 'camp', thus suggesting his statement to Señor Roncero regarding orienting more towards men would come as no surprise. However, when this statement turns out to actually be 'untrue' – the ambiguity over his sexuality returns. Rosa's exclamation that 'you don't ask things like that' reinforce the fact that Almodóvar does not openly introduce characters as gay, straight, bisexual or transgender – they exist as human beings within a society of hierarchical labels that inflect marginality.

The foregrounding of dichotomies by Almodóvar continues throughout the narrative linking the fluidity of performance<sup>76</sup> to the fluidity of gender. Mark Allinson proposes:

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Julian Smith et al, *¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p.9

<sup>76</sup> As referenced in Footnote 3, Judith Butler argues that feminism in its definition of gender as two black and white dichotomised entities has made a great error, arguing instead that gender is fluid and not fixed, and that each individual in themselves almost "acts" out what can be considered a gender performance. This performance is performed regardless of whether it fits into the binaries of what is

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

In Almodóvar, the self-conscious foregrounding of gender and other signs of identity forms part of a more generally self-conscious mode of representation that lays bare the constructed or performative nature of art and all identity.<sup>77</sup>

This 'performative nature' of art links to the earlier discussed notion of gender as performativity.<sup>78</sup> Katerina, Alicia's ballet tutor is the vehicle for which this idea of gender, art and performativity all link together to form a fluid notion that breaks with the rigid boundaries of gender as a dichotomy. Katerina describes a ballet set in World War I:

Es el ballet, cuando se muere un soldado, emerge de su cuerpo su alma, su fantasma y eso es, una bailarina...Bonito porque, de la muerte emerge la vida. De lo masculino emerge lo femenino. (It's the ballet in which when a soldier dies, from his body emerges his soul, his ghost, and that's a ballerina...Lovely, because from death emerges life. From the male emerges the female.)

The suggestion of a ballerina emerging from a soldier's body, from the masculine emerging the feminine denotes this fluidity of gender and the idea that these gender boundaries should in fact be non-existent; that one gender can emerge from the other and vice versa. Gender could be arguably noted as fluid and not fixed – this concept of gender identity as an attempt by Almodóvar of reconfiguring identity as a whole, banishing to the history books the suggestion of gender as binary, black and white and rigid within the laws of the dominant hierarchy.

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culturally considered to be "true" gender, 1990, pp.171-90. Developed further in *La Mala Educación* (2004) Chapter II.

<sup>77</sup> Allinson, 2009, p.151

<sup>78</sup> Butler, 1990, pp.171-90

These binary stereotypes are challenged further through the character of Benigno and what could be arguably described as his 'effeminacies'. Through the medium of flashback the obsessive love that Benigno feels for Alicia is portrayed and developed. It is arguably clear that Benigno's care for Alicia is slightly more disturbing than once thought; as she drops her purse in the street he appears within minutes to return it to her personally and asks to accompany her home, running across busy traffic and risking his own safety to find out her address. It is at this precise moment in the narrative that the spectator realises that Señor Roncero is actually a psychiatrist, and Alicia's father. It becomes evident that the only reason Benigno made an initial appointment with Alicia's father was to get closer to Alicia (worried that she hadn't turned up to ballet class as he was voyeuristically gazing from his window). During this psychiatric appointment the boundaries of gender identity are further challenged. Juliet Mitchell notes, 'Gone is the logical thesis that it is with the reproductive powers of puberty that the male and female take on the attributes of masculine and feminine'.<sup>79</sup> This is evident within the discourse of *Hable con Ella* as Benigno explains to Señor Roncero that he studied to be a nurse while also studying beauty therapy, a make-up course and hairdressing. Each of these studies and occupations could all be said to be traditionally what are considered 'feminine' – it is not entirely expected that a male will take upon these roles in patriarchal society. However the mere fact Almodóvar places Benigno within these pre-set 'boundaries', and instead challenges them and overtly outs them as untrue gives rise to the

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<sup>79</sup> Mitchell, 1974, p.74

development of a new mode of representation to fit modern society out with existing engrained patriarchal values and ideas.

The previous flashback turns out to be Benigno's story as he relays it to Marco – both men share their feelings as Marco reveals he is physically incapable of touching Lydia, that he doesn't recognise her anymore and that she isn't the same person she once was. This sharing of emotions, sentiments and feelings is often, within film and society as a whole, relegated towards being a 'woman's issue' – often through the medium of film portrayed through the genres of melodrama and the soap opera, the 'woman's film'.<sup>80</sup> It is therefore a rarity for typical 'macho' Spanish men to show their emotions within the filmic narrative. Paul Julian Smith has argued in relation to Spanish writing and film that woman often serves 'in traditional style as a vehicle through which two men explore the relationship between each other'<sup>81</sup> In *Hable con Ella*, both Benigno and Marco bond over Alicia and Lydia's situation, consolidating Smith's argument – even in their passive muted state they are still having a profound effect on both men. Benigno announces the title of the film by instructing Marco to 'hable con ella' (talk to her), stating 'el cerebro de una mujer es un misterio, y en este estado más' (a woman's brain is a mystery, and in this state even more so). Again, using the active male/passive female binary, it could be argued that this is a reflection over the work and world of Almodóvar as a whole. His work has and continues to delve into the minds of female characters and marginal characters alike;

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<sup>80</sup> For more information see Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.437-449

<sup>81</sup> Paul Julian Smith, *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p.140

minds which have been mysterious for years due to being passive, absent, marginalised, silenced and put on the extreme boundaries of society for centuries by the hierarchy of patriarchy. Benigno in the film discourse diegetically states:

A las mujeres hay que tenerlas en cuenta, hablar con ellas, tener un detalle de vez en cuando...recordar que existen, que están vivas y que nos importan. (You have to pay attention to women, talk to them, be thoughtful occasionally...remember they exist, they're alive and they matter to us.)

Although it is clear that Benigno in this case is talking about both Alicia and Lydia in their comatose states; could it in fact be argued that he is instead metaphorically arguing the case of the female in general? Almodóvar's work has strived to create a space for the feminine in film, his films talk to women, about women, are thoughtful about their wishes, emotions and desires, remind us that women exist, that they are alive and most importantly that they matter in the world of film. Laura Mulvey suggests that 'woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of women still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.'<sup>82</sup>

However, the argument here in the case of Almodóvar, is that he attempts to reverse this existing 'norm' that Mulvey suggests has existed in patriarchal culture. Instead of conforming to the norms and regulations tying the female to her place as bearer of meaning and as a silenced image; Almodóvar strives in his work to subvert

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<sup>82</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.35

these ideas, making women (and marginal groups as a whole) maker of meaning, advocates of their desires and as writers of their own fate.

Arguably one of the most important scenes in the narrative of *Hable con Ella*, and the scene that inevitably writes Benigno's own fate is the silent film showing of *Amante Menguante (Shrinking Lover)* – a black and white film that tells the tale of a male lover, Alfredo, who due to a mishap with a chemistry experiment ends up shrinking until he becomes miniature. He ends up entering his lover Amparo's vagina as she peacefully sleeps and stays there, re-acquainting himself with the womb, metaphorically from which he first arrived. This scene is introduced eloquently by Almodóvar as the camera superimposes the image of the hospital where the protagonists are based onto the film poster of *Amante Menguante*. This sets the scene, initiating and suggesting a link between events in the hospital and events in the silent film's narrative. This image of the hospital is superimposed onto the poster as the diegesis returns to Alicia's hospital ward and Benigno massages her naked body. Similar to previous fragmentation<sup>83</sup> scenes as analysed above, the camera instantly cuts to a close shot of Alicia's shoulders as Benigno removes her nightdress – the camera focuses intensely on detail as he unties the bows and pulls the dress down to reveal her bare naked breasts in full view of the camera's lens. It is at this precise moment in the narrative that the camera cuts back to the film theatre and *Amante Menguante* is shown. Christian Metz notes:

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<sup>83</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

Cinema practice is only possible through the perceptual passions: the desire to see (=scopic drive, scopophilia, voyeurism), acting alone in the art of the silent film, the desire to hear which has been added to it in the sound cinema (this is the '*pulsion invocante*', the invoking drive, one of the four main sexual drives for Lacan...) <sup>84</sup>

These perceptual passions as Metz notes are reinforced through Almodóvar's use of the silent film. The narrative of this film within a film inadvertently and arguably links directly to the camera cuts to the hospital bedroom as Benigno massages Alicia. The introduction to the film with Benigno diegetically whispering to himself 'no, no me pasa nada' (no, I'm okay) gives rise to the idea that something is in fact not okay – the doubtful gaze in Benigno's eyes suggesting in addition that something untoward is possibly within moments of commencing. Mark Allinson notes that the black and white silent movie is 'crucially, the moment when Benigno fatally confuses fiction within reality, his recounting of an extended, literalized metaphor (reentering the womb) leads to rape.'<sup>85</sup>

As *Amante Menguante* is playing and Benigno's voiceover tells the story of the film script, the camera cuts again to Alicia's hospital room, shooting directly from above in a low crane shot as Benigno massages her naked body. The diegesis flows back and forward from silent film to hospital ward as the shrinking Alfredo pulls back the bed sheets to reveal an extreme close shot of Amparo's naked breast. The camera's lens then focuses on her leg and subsequently back to her breasts as Alfredo climbs onto her body. The sheer size of Alfredo as a miniature lover causes the fragmented

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<sup>84</sup> Metz, 2000, p.420

<sup>85</sup> Allinson, 2009, p.152



shots of Amparo's image to be more powerful; the fragments are made to look enlarged in contrast to the miniature size of Alfredo, her breasts towering over Alfredo as if they were mountains. These continuous shots of fragmentation of the female image culminate in an extreme close shot of Amparo's vagina as Alfredo climbs inside.

Mulvey argues the case of fragmentation further, noting:

The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look.<sup>86</sup>

This extreme close shot of Amparo's vagina eloquently compliment Laura Mulvey's argument as the lack of phallus as indicated causing a threat of castration to the male gaze<sup>87</sup> of the camera, male protagonist and spectator are subverted by the technique of fragmentation; rendering the female as stylized towards male desire, looking for a fetish in form of a fragmented close shot and devaluing the female image of her full, 'guilty' self for the lack of possession of the phallic male member. She is now, as Mulvey suggests, stylized and fragmented by close shots that Almodóvar provides the spectator with; in turn becoming beautiful and no longer castrating due to her lack of the phallus. It could be argued that the phallus is found not only through fragmented close-ups; but also in the image of the miniature

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<sup>86</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.43

<sup>87</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

Alfredo himself, almost arguably phallic in shape with his imminent entrance into Amparo's vagina being metaphorical of the sexual act.

As Alfredo removes his clothing<sup>88</sup> and fully enters the vagina, the diegetic musical soundtrack forms a crescendo in line with Amparo's pleasure; ending in climax. The camera's gaze cuts directly back to Benigno massaging Alicia's thighs as he tells the story that Amparo stays inside his lover forever; as he is retelling the tale an extremely worried look on his face is evident to the spectator, almost arguably a sense of guilt. The camera jump cuts to an extreme close shot of the red<sup>89</sup> lava fluid from the lava lamp moving gradually within the head of the yellow fluid. Despina Kakoudaki notes that 'the close-up of the lava lamp on Alicia's bedside table...further discloses the sexual nature of their relationship',<sup>90</sup> noting the transition of their relationship from innocently professional to something suggestively deeper, and it is almost whispered through the use of objects and gazes that in fact, the deed has been done and Alicia has been raped.

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<sup>88</sup> Despina Kakoudaki notes: 'Benigno is careful to cover his tracks to less guarded sexual behaviour (the lover's removal of his clothes standing for perhaps removing a condom, his decision to remain inside the body of his beloved standing for a decision not to withdraw before ejaculation).' This, arguably, is an extremely valid point to make, however it would be the intention of the author to acknowledge this argument, and further suggest that in addition to this interpretation, Alfredo is removing his clothes and metaphorically entering the womb (See Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74), going back to the pre-oedipal phase in the waters of the female body – with his clothes removed a further link to the state of a foetus before it is born to the world by its mother, 2009, p.213

<sup>89</sup> A possible interpretation of the red fluid of the lava lamp would be to suggest that red represents menstrual blood; and by this the camera cutting to this extreme close shot of red lava fluid could represent a sign of the stopping of menstruation now Benigno has entered and impregnated Alicia.

<sup>90</sup> Kakoudaki, 2009, p.212

As Alicia's pregnancy is uncovered and it is revealed that falsification of medical notes has been happening under the care of Benigno; Almodóvar continues to challenge and subvert existing norms and traditions. Robin W. Fiddian and Peter W. Evans, in relation to contemporary Spanish film and fiction, argue the case that 'a film is the product of historical circumstance and...the child of ideology; sometimes it may consciously or unconsciously challenge established structures of values...at others it acquiesces in them.'<sup>91</sup>

Almodóvar arguably consciously challenges these engrained structures as the revelation of the rape is discussed during a meeting of the doctors and nurses on Benigno's ward. The occupation of doctor could be said to be traditionally a male job while the occupation of nurse could be considered more likely to be taken up by females. However, Almodóvar uses this opportunity to blast these stereotypes by mixing and alternating both females and males in both occupations around the table. However, he also reminded us through his use of characterisation that this process must be seen as ongoing and there is still a lot to be done and a long way to go before these stereotypes can be once and for all dispelled from modern society; both senior roles of head of ward and head of hospital are male. The placing of females is evident, yet recognisably not in senior managerial roles within the hospital environment. This is an overt reminder that female progression is indeed a matter of time and that through the means of cinema, this progression can be portrayed to

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<sup>91</sup> Robin W. Fiddian & Peter W. Evans, *Challenges to Authority: Fiction and Film in Contemporary Spain*, London: Tamesis, 1981, p.7

society as a whole. Almodóvar continues to challenge this in the coming scenes as Marco learns of Lydia's death and calls Benigno at the hospital, to be answered by a female receptionist; yet in the following scene he arrives at a prison in Segovia looking for Benigno, and this time he is greeted by a male receptionist. This can be deemed as considerably unusual within the stereotypes of society yet this is Almodóvar's reminder of the progression he desires to be made in film – giving both females *and* males an opportunity to break through these stereotypes and re-write them accordingly to suit each individual's needs, and not the needs of the patriarchal ideology.

Almodóvar's use of protagonism for marginalised groups is again emphasised in a scene between Marco and Benigno in Segovia prison. This scene is eloquently shot as both men are separated by a glass barrier. Fiddian and Evans argue that glass can be viewed as 'traditionally a symbol of two-dimensionality, fragility and transparency';<sup>92</sup> this argument of fragility is directly reflected in the narrative as Benigno's despair over being apart from Alicia is evident; his world has arguably revolved around Alicia for such a long time that the mere fact he has been torn from her presence causes a fragile state of mind that ultimately ends in his attempt to put himself in a coma to be with her that ultimately leads to his death. This fragility Benigno feels without Alicia evokes a sense of empathy between both male protagonists and the spectator. Almodóvar shoots part of this shot from an angle upon which Marco's reflection is projected on Benigno's face and vice versa, something Mark Allinson describes as

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<sup>92</sup> Fiddian & Evans, 1981, p.85

‘highlighting their mutual empathy’.<sup>93</sup> Yet it could be argued that not only is this empathy between the two, but even possibly a hint of something further than an empathetic friendship? Isolina Ballesteros recognises this argument, stating that their relationship ‘comes to be intensely homosocial, if not homosexual’,<sup>94</sup> an argument strengthened by Benigno’s claim he has been thinking a lot about Marco, especially at night and that he wishes he could hug him. His desire to hug Marco denotes the friendship between the two while also having suggestive connotations of a homosexual nature as Benigno exclaims he was not sure if Marco would have minded being called his boyfriend in order to secure a face to face visit. Marco confirms that he wouldn’t have minded in the slightest, holding his hand to the glass, upon which Benigno kisses his hand and puts it directly on top of Marco’s. As both men hold out their hands and ‘touch’ each other via the glass screen which acts as a separator between the two, the suggestion of their relationship signifying more than friendship is instilled into the spectator’s mind. This ambiguity over sexuality as referenced previously<sup>95</sup> reinforces the fact there is no need in the world of Almodóvar to affirm or negate sexuality – that characters exist in their own right and that to conform to a label that society prescribes should no longer be applicable in the medium of film.

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<sup>93</sup> Allinson, 2009, p.156

<sup>94</sup> Isolina Ballesteros, “Performing Identities in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar”, Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.81

<sup>95</sup> Smith, 1995, p.9

The subsequent death of Benigno by accidental overdose, and the tragedy of Marco not arriving to the prison in time to tell him that, in fact, Alicia's pregnancy led to her awakening from the coma gives the narrative an almost negative tone even though it is now known that Alicia is awake and well. The film narrative is, however, given a more positive ending as Alicia and Marco are re-acquainted in the theatre; the camera films Marco as he again sheds a tear, this time evidently over the death of his close friend Benigno. The camera cuts to Alicia who is sitting further behind Marco as she notices his tears and her gaze is fixated on him. The diegetic lyrics of the song *Intimate Strangers*, are reminiscent of the story of the narrative; a narrative of intimate strangers breaking the boundaries of stereotypes while reminding the spectator and society as a whole of the practices and conventions that have silenced and marginalised woman from progression in society, just like Alicia and Lydia have been silenced for the duration of the narrative in a coma. The connotations of intimate strangers being Alicia and Marco as they 'meet' for the first time, intimate as they already know each other well, strangers as they do not know each other at all.

Isolina Ballesteros notes, 'Alicia, the once passive and motionless object of the gaze during her coma, has regained consciousness and recuperated her role as spectator'.<sup>96</sup> Arguably, Almodóvar in his characterisation not only of both female protagonists being silenced in a comatose state, but also in the majority of characters prominent throughout the narrative seems to come close to Laura

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<sup>96</sup> Ballesteros, 2009, p.82

Mulvey's analysis of the active male passive female dichotomy<sup>97</sup> and scene by scene eloquently breaks it down, subverting the existing norms and re-appropriating them for modern day society. As Alicia wakes from her coma and regains her active gaze, the suggestion that Ballesteros' argument of Alicia recuperating her role as active agent can be applied to females within patriarchal society as a whole. Through the medium of film, Almodóvar strives to reinforce the idea that challenging the authoritarian patriarchal values that are firmly engrained in the roots of society can in fact be re-appropriated, re-formed and re-figured; creating a new way of thinking the sexual, banishing the black and white dichotomies that hold back the natural fluidity of gender in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish film.

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<sup>97</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

## **Chapter II**

# **Crossed Identities and Performance in *La Mala Educación***



### **Crossed Identities and Performance in *La Mala Educación***

Pedro Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación* (Bad Education), 2004, is what can only be described as a gripping and intense mystery which tells the story of two childhood lovers, Ignacio Rodríguez and Enrique Serrano, separated since their unforgettable and life-changing schooldays at a Catholic school in 1960's Spain. The film narrative, described by Kathleen M. Vernon as filled with "complex chronologies, crossed identities, and story within a story structure"<sup>98</sup> jumps back and forth to the 1980s with Ignacio and Enrique now both young adults reunited at last when Ignacio, now a young budding actor, turns up at Enrique's office looking for work at his successful film directing company. The story is eloquently conveyed by Almodóvar through a series of flashbacks based on one of Ignacio's stories by the name of "La Visita" (The Visit), spanning the school life of the two young boys and exposing the deep and dark secrets of sexual abuse experienced at the hands of school principal Padre Manolo (Father Manolo) and the devastating effects that this abuse consequently has on Ignacio's life. Enrique, amidst a crisis of inspiration for his next film, agrees to adapt Ignacio's story into a film script and plans on casting Ignacio as Enrique

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<sup>98</sup> Kathleen M Vernon, "Queer Sound: Musical Otherness in Three Films by Pedro Almodóvar" in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.60

himself; however, Ignacio desires to play the part of Zahara, the transsexual lead act, his persistence leading Enrique to become suspicious, deeming Ignacio as having changed since their childhood. In his visit to Ortigueira, Galicia, in the search of Ignacio's mother, he becomes aware that the real Ignacio, his first love, in fact died four years previously, his suspicions subsequently proven correct, and that the young man he has been in contact with was actually Ignacio's younger brother, Juan. This impressive twist in the narrative is crucial to *La Mala Educación* as it presents the spectator with a plenitude of crises of identities and lies, eloquently portrayed by Pedro Almodóvar through his clever use of flashbacks, brought to the spectator's eye through the script of "La Visita" which penetrates the narrative at frequent intervals; and the lack of rigid structure which allows for his vivid imagination and creativity to be examined throughout.

It can be argued, and rarely contested, that Pedro Almodóvar has strived to create a space for female agency in Spanish film<sup>99</sup>, with the belief that gender can be used as a vehicle for challenging and attempting to change ideas and values engrained in patriarchal Spanish society and thus the values and ideas portrayed through dominant cinematic practice. Not only does he foreground female roles in his films, which will be discussed further throughout this thesis, but he has also created a space for and been a great advocate of the protagonism of homosexuality in contemporary Spanish cinema. As Paul Julian Smith notes, 'For the Francoist

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<sup>99</sup> For further information and in-depth analysis of Almodóvar's work, consult: Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009

censor...the very topic of homosexuality was taboo, and would inevitably contaminate every inch of the film'<sup>100</sup>. A topic, considered as taboo for the censor of the Francoist period and Spanish patriarchal society as a whole, would not stop Almodóvar from incorporating it in his films and arguably pushing it to the forefront of the narrative. However, Almodóvar did not (when directing *La Ley del Deseo* (Law of Desire) in 1987) and does not in his current scripts make a conscious effort of highlighting this 'contamination'<sup>101</sup> of society by homosexuality throughout the narrative. Instead, he portrays society as he believes it should exist; without patriarchal, archaic values that were arguably engrained in the beliefs of its institutions such as the Catholic Church. Smith adds:

It is perhaps significant that novelists such as Tusquets and Goytisolo, film-makers such as Almodóvar, rarely address the relation between gay and straight society, the problematic of the closet and of coming out that are so much discussed in English-speaking countries.<sup>102</sup>

Almodóvar's technique in not overtly highlighting sexuality and transvestism in his films is evident in *La Mala Educación*, with the majority of the male characters engaged in either homosexuality, homoeroticism or transvestism. This could be considered as Almodóvar's way of challenging the engrained ideas existing in patriarchy that deem homosexuality as marginal, as unnatural. Smith, in his research on the subject of homosexuality in both Spanish writing and film further develops

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<sup>100</sup> Paul Julian Smith, *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p.143

<sup>101</sup> Smith, 1992, p 143

<sup>102</sup> Smith, 1992, p.5

this argument by stating that 'Indeed the very choice of a homosexual hero in these films must pose a challenge to those codes of representation and structures of identification inherent in dominant cinema practice.'<sup>103</sup>

Many of Almodóvar's films, such as the aforementioned *La Ley del Deseo* and *La Mala Educación*, among others, can arguably be analysed hand in hand with Queer Theory which emerged in the 1990s, heavily influenced by the work of Michael Foucault. Queer theorists argue that identities (which include both gender identities and sexual identities) are fluid and not fixed, and to categorise one by a pre-determined, idealised identity or gender norm is no longer acceptable in a new democratic society with liberal choice. Many queer theorists, such as Teresa de Lauretis, acknowledge Queer as 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual'<sup>104</sup>. It can be arguably considered, then, that Almodóvar clearly provides the spectator with this new way of thinking the sexual through his overtly sexually driven narratives and his insistence for the foregrounding protagonism of women, homosexuals and transvestites, all of whom can be pertained to a "marginalised" role in patriarchal society. In *La Mala Educación*, Almodóvar eloquently portrays the confusion of identity within each and every character (an idea that shall be discussed and developed further throughout this chapter) making clear his choice not to portray happy, loving and stable relationships between the characters within the filmic narrative, but instead portraying the harsh reality of life and deeming himself

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<sup>103</sup> Smith, 1992, p.134

<sup>104</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3, 2, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp.iii - xiii

under absolutely no 'duty to compensate for decades of repression and invisibility by substituting politically correct 'positive images' of gays and lesbians'<sup>105</sup>.

From the outset of *La Mala Educación*, Pedro Almodóvar continues previous Spanish directors' work in the challenging of patriarchal conventions and ideals existing in society<sup>106</sup>, concentrating on an overt criticism of religion and the Catholic Church.

Almost immediately, in the opening title credits of the film, images of naked women and transvestites are contrasted with images of religious symbols. This ironic juxtaposition can be considered a criticism of the Church as an institution that has provided years of suppression through its oppressive role in Spanish society. A collage of still photographs forming a religious cross is visible on the screen with LA MALA EDUCACIÓN (Bad Education) imprinted directly over the cross. The title in itself could arguably be noted as another coded attack on religion, its teachings and its values. Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki draw to light the fact that Bad Education not only connotes the literal bad education depicted in the narrative but also has connotations in its Spanish translation of "bad behaviour" and "bad conduct"<sup>107</sup>. Could each concept of bad education, bad behaviour and bad conduct, superimposed on the image of a cross, all link together to relate to Catholicism and

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Allinson, *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, London: I.B Tauris, 2001, p.101

<sup>106</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, this study shall focus on Spanish Cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, however it is noted that Spanish film today would not be where it sits in the cinematic field were it not for filmmakers of previous centuries' attempts to destabilise the patriarchal norm of dominant Hollywood cinema. Notable research that focuses on previous ages of Spanish film and which I have found particularly useful throughout my research are; Peter W. Evans (ed.), *Spanish Cinema: The Auteurist Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, Robert W. Fiddian & Peter W. Evans, *Challenges to Authority: Fiction and Film in Contemporary Spain*, London: Tamesis Books, 1981 and Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, California: University of California Press, 1993

<sup>107</sup> Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.26

its apparently “moral” values? The suggestion of immorality in relation to Catholicism and its teachings is further examined throughout the film narrative as flashbacks of “La Visita” enable both the extra-diegetic audience and crucially the diegetic protagonists themselves, in particular the character of Enrique, to delve into the past lives of the young boys, and to understand further the root of their confusion of identity.

The issue of identity is crucial throughout the film discourse as it is arguably clear that through the character of Juan, the spectator is introduced to a character that has no sense of identity at all. Marsha Kinder furthers this argument, relating these crises of identity to characters and their “avatars” as she explains that:

Almodóvar’s splitting of characters in *Bad Education* is more extreme than in any of his previous films. One actor (Gael García Bernal) has four avatars: Juan, Ángel, Zahara, and Ignacio. Another character, Enrique is split into three avatars: the child, the filmmaker, and the biker, each played by a different actor, all using the same name. A third character is split into two avatars, Father Manolo and Mr. Berenguer, who are renamed and recast so as to bear little similarity to each other, except for their desire for boys and young men. These variations become a dizzying database of doubling worthy of Buñuel.<sup>108</sup>

As Kinder notes, it is evident through Juan, posing as Ignacio in his visit to Enrique’s office in Madrid, that the spectator becomes aware of this “dizzying database” of identities that are reflected throughout the film discourse. Even after portraying the roles of his brother Ignacio, and the transvestite Zahara, he is still out of touch with his own personal identity, and asks Enrique to call him “Ángel”. By taking on a

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<sup>108</sup> Marsha Kinder, “All about the Brothers: Retroseriality in Almodóvar’s Cinema” in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.289

completely separate role to that of his brother or even that of himself, he arguably finds it easier to perform on almost a clean slate, a blank canvas onto which he can paint and create the character Ángel Andrade's role. This links with Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity'<sup>109</sup>. Butler's concept, developed in her extensive research of performance theory, eloquently argues that "feminism" seems to have made a great error in defining genders as two separate entities, therefore reinforcing this binary, black and white view of gender and subsequently of gender relations.<sup>110</sup> She puts forward the argument that each individual in society puts on a gender performance, regardless of whether this performance fits into the binary view of what is socially, culturally and widely considered "true" gender. These performances, according to Butler, are 'performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means'<sup>111</sup> and can be articulately witnessed through the film discourse of *La Mala Educación* and the characters and numerous avatars to which it presents.

In continuing with the theme of performativity Isolina Ballesteros' argument that 'Almodóvar's exposition of the performative nature of culture, particularly as it bears on gender and sexuality, seems to support John Mckenzie's claim that ours is an "age

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<sup>109</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990, pp.171-190

<sup>110</sup> Butler, 1990, p.173

<sup>111</sup> Butler, 1990, p.173

of performance”<sup>112</sup>, and is backed up even further with Juan’s dizzying performing roles as Juan, Ignacio, Zahara and Ángel in which it can be argued that Almodóvar presents the spectator with drag as a performance in itself. Moya Lloyd eloquently notes that ‘As a practice, drag suggests that constituted subjects can ‘act out’ fictional gender roles’<sup>113</sup>. This “acting out” as Lloyd notes, can be arguably considered as performance in itself. The spectator is invited, through the fictional roles in the script of “*La Visita*” of Paquito and Zahara, to witness a drag performance of both characters at “*La Bomba*”.

Through the character of Paquito, a comical element is introduced by Almodóvar, with Paquito portraying and performing the epitome of a stereotypical, effeminate drag queen. Andy Medhurst, in his study of farce in Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema, states that ‘it is notable that the cross-dressing figure of Paquita (Javier Cámara)... provides an injection of both humor and femininity’<sup>114</sup>. This light-heartedness of Paquito’s act delivers a sense of comedy in a considerably dark narrative, which Mark Allinson notes as ‘part of the ‘game’ of playing the woman...humour is often a protective mechanism against potentially hostile reactions’<sup>115</sup>. This game-playing as Allison has noted, can be considered to add to the sense of Butler’s theory of

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<sup>112</sup> Isolina Ballesteros, “Performing Identities in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar”, in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.71

<sup>113</sup> Moya Lloyd, “Performativity, Parody, Politics”, in Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol.16, 1999, p.201

<sup>114</sup> Andy Medhurst, “Heart of Farce: Almodóvar’s Comic Complexities”, in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.122

<sup>115</sup> Allinson, 2001, p.91



“performativity” throughout the film narrative. Both Zahara and Paquito are performing, blurring the dichotomy of gender identity once they put “female” clothes and makeup onto a “male” body.

However, in addition to the comic element the performance of Paquito delivers to the spectator, he is also characterized by Almodóvar as a vehicle for the exploration of the oppressive, controlling role of the Catholic Church. Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair suggest that ‘the symbolism and rituals of the Catholic Church have provided rich pickings for ironic inversion’<sup>116</sup> which can be directly witnessed through Paquito’s comic statement that both himself and Ignacio will be beaten with a whip and sent out if they enter the church. This echoes Paul Julian Smith’s research on queer readings in Hispanic texts when he states that ‘under the Franco regime legal repression became progressively harsher. Revisions to the notorious Ley de Vagos (Law of Idlers) of 1953 rendered known gay men and lesbians subject to “security measures.”’<sup>117</sup> As Padre Manolo in his prayers at Mass states ‘podéis ir en paz’ (You may now leave in peace), Paquito immediately responds with ‘¡Ojalá!’ (If only!) Although this statement seems comical in itself through Paquito’s portrayal of the phrase in his effeminate ‘sissy’<sup>118</sup> voice; it could be suggested as, in fact, possibly concealing a hidden meaning – they will never be able to be at peace living in a

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<sup>116</sup> Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair (eds.), *Gender and Spanish Cinema*, Berg: Oxford, 2004, p.4

<sup>117</sup> Paul Julian Smith et al, *¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p.10

<sup>118</sup> For an in depth analysis of “Sissy Behaviour”, see José Piedra, “Nationalizing Sissies” in Paul Julian Smith et al, *¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p.372

society which oppresses and subordinates them to a marginal status in the eyes of patriarchy.

Through the performance by Zahara at “La Bomba”, Almodóvar presents the spectator with what can arguably be seen as an inadvertent challenge of the dominant practices of Hollywood cinema. Almodóvar’s lack of hesitance to include intensely sexual scenes within the narrative can be witnessed through the first oral sex scene between Zahara and Enrique. Almodóvar plays with the classical dominant film tradition of fragmentation<sup>119</sup>, with the camera focusing on close up shots of fragments of the naked body that the extra-diegetic audience would almost naturally assume to be female. It could be argued that Almodóvar, in his portrayal of fragmentation of the male body, is subverting existing traditions usually pertaining to the female image in order to destabilise them and in turn, redefine them. Steve Neale eloquently argues that the male ‘body is feminized...an indication of the strength of those conventions which dictate that only women can function as objects of an explicitly erotic gaze’<sup>120</sup>. The psychoanalytical concept of fragmentation of the female body which shall also be referred to as a form of fetishism is eloquently challenged here by Almodóvar. Kaplan argues that ‘the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman’s

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<sup>119</sup> Ann Kaplan argues that ‘the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman’s threat.’ This could be seen as a challenging of the phallogentric convention in the eyes of psychoanalysis with Zahara as a “feminine” image on top of Enrique . E. Ann Kaplan, “Is the gaze male?”, *Women and film: Both Sides of the Camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.31

<sup>120</sup> Steave Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle”, in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1992, p.18

threat'<sup>121</sup> She continues her argument by drawing on Mulvey's idea that 'Men, that is, turn "the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'<sup>122</sup> By sexualising the female body, the male gaze<sup>123</sup> focuses on these fragmented female images, rendering the female devalued as she is no longer whole in the eyes of the camera, male protagonist *and* spectator. Pedro Almodóvar plays with this concept of the male gaze and fragmentation of the female image, not only in the previous oral sex scene but also as Zahara is performing. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Zahara's bottom, filling the screen. This fragmented image is captured by the camera, rendering Zahara's body as a fragment and, in turn, devoid of its whole entity. Arguably, Almodóvar presents the extra-diegetic audience with this image in order to challenge dominant Hollywood cinematic practices that often present fragmented images of the female body in order to portray the message that they are not valued as a whole in patriarchal, phallogentric society.

The irony in the fact that Zahara is actually a drag queen, performed by a man with a phallus present underneath the dress, can further add to Almodóvar's challenge of dominant cinematic practice, furthering his intent of giving protagonism to marginalised groups. Arguably farfetched, this challenge is continued even further, as Zahara is miming to the diegetic music in the narrative. Could it be that

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<sup>121</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>122</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>123</sup> According to Laura Mulvey, there are three gazes: that of the camera, the spectator and the male protagonist in the diegesis. Mulvey argues that in dominant cinema each of these gazes are considered male, fetishising and fragmenting the female form, rendering it devalued. Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

Almodóvar is suggesting that females, men in drag, transgender people, transvestites, homosexuals, and any other marginalised group do not actually have a voice of their own in a phallogentric society? The act of miming suggests the opening of the mouth in which no sound comes out; the mime act is therefore mute and silenced; attributes often connected to the role of the female in film and subsequently in society<sup>124</sup>.

As Zahara and Paquito through the script of *“La Visita”* visit the Catholic boys’ school where Ignacio and Enrique were educated, Almodóvar presents the spectator with a further juxtaposition; this time one which consists of the visit to the church and the taking of drugs. As Zahara and Paquito sniff “speed” before their visit to blackmail Padre Manolo, the idea of morality, of right and wrong are evoked in the mind of the extra-diegetic audience. Clearly, in the eyes of the Church, a patriarchal institution known for its teachings of morality, both characters (as homosexuals, dressed in drag, taking prohibited substances) would not be accepted by the Church and would be seen to be committing a sin. However, it can be argued that Almodóvar purposely places these characters in this particular situation in order to place another coded attack on the Catholic religion and its teachings through the film narrative. Marsha Kinder conveys this point linking drugs to marginality by noting that ‘Almodóvar succeeded in establishing this eroticized marginality as a new stereotype for post-Franco Spain, particularly for foreign audiences. It is a marginality associated with

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<sup>124</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.30

drugs, transsexuality, homoeroticism, and terrorism.<sup>125</sup> Almodóvar's coded attack on the Church could also be subsequently suggested as a coded attack on Spain under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, and his oppressive regime's links to the Catholic Church. Arguably, this can be explored even further through the narrative, as Zahara is blackmailing Padre Manolo inside the confines of the school, the camera cuts to a close-up of a photographic still of the schoolboy Ignacio that Padre Manolo keeps in his drawer. This close up allows the spectator to see the still, with its thick white border marked around the photograph, almost suggesting that Ignacio is trapped within the confines and boundaries of the Church, Catholicism and patriarchy as a whole. It almost suggests that there is no way out after the abuse the young boy has faced.

The abuse by the Catholic priests on Ignacio and his peers is tackled further by Almodóvar in what can be arguably considered the most memorable and even somewhat haunting scene of the film. As the narrative flashes back to the 1960s, the diegetic singing of *Moon River*<sup>126</sup> is heard. Almodóvar, in his altered version, uses the lyrics as another vehicle to criticise Catholicism and the pillar that it arguably represents in patriarchy. Kathleen Vernon suggests that 'the recurring use of such striking vocal types testifies to Almodóvar's fascination with androgynous and uncanny voices, with "feminine" sounds that issue from male bodies (or the reverse)

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<sup>125</sup> Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1993, p.432

<sup>126</sup> Original Lyrics: Johnny Mercer and Henry Mancini (1961), originally sung by Audrey Hepburn in Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961

and with the disturbing power over listeners that ensues.<sup>127</sup> This “feminine” sound from young Ignacio’s voice arguably portrays a sense of innocence in the young boy, an innocence that is soon to be taken away. Ignacio sings ‘Yo quiero saber que se esconde en la oscuridad y tú lo encontrarás...’ (I’m longing to know what is hidden in the dark, and you’ll find it...), and just as this diegetic lyric is heard, the guitar that Padre Manolo is playing stops abruptly as it is clear to the spectator that although not able to see through the bushes, that this abrupt ceasing of the diegetic sound is the consequent suggestion of Padre Manolo’s sexual advances towards Ignacio.

Vernon continues:

‘The Spanish lyrics, adapted by Almodóvar, are strikingly different from the English original. They transform the wistful and wishful ode, replete with nature imagery...into a much darker consideration of nature as the source of troubling secrets, “murky waters” (agua turbia), and a quasi-biblical knowledge of good and evil.’<sup>128</sup>

This portrayal of evil is hinted throughout the narrative. What is hiding in the darkness as suggested by the lyrics that young Ignacio is singing could be the suggested implication of the abuse that young boys (and girls) have faced at the hands of their Catholic figures of authority. Marsha Kinder notes this by arguing that ‘In *Bad Education*, the worst seems to be a priest molesting a child, the notorious patriarchal crime, which, despite its recent prominence in the press, still remains largely hidden in the bushes.’<sup>129</sup> To draw on this idea further, as the camera pans

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<sup>127</sup> Vernon, 2009, p.59

<sup>128</sup> Vernon, 2009, p.61

<sup>129</sup> Kinder, 2009, p.273

away from Ignacio singing, a medium shot of the surrounding bushes is visible. Almodóvar literally presents the spectator with this notorious crime happening, as the audience are kept out as the act is committed – precisely hidden behind the bushes as Kinder suggests. The camera cuts to an extreme close up of Ignacio's face filling the entire shot as a drop of blood runs down his forehead, splitting his face in two; a technique used by Almodóvar in order to possibly represent the confusion of identity that Ignacio will face from this moment on in his life. The film discourse enhances this idea further as Ignacio's voice taking the role of voice-over states that 'un hilo de sangre dividía mi frente en dos. Y tuve el presentimiento que con mi vida ocurriría lo mismo. Siempre estaría dividida y no podría hacer nada para evitarlo.' (A trickle of blood divided my forehead in two. I had a feeling the same thing would happen with my life. It would always be divided and I couldn't help it.) This division of identity would prove crucial in Ignacio's life eventually leading to his devastation, drug addiction and ultimately, his death.

The theme of abuse is continued in a scene resembling that of *Moon River* reappearing later in the narrative; as Ignacio is summoned by Padre José to sing a re-worked version (apparently altered by Padre Manolo himself) of *Torna a Surriento*<sup>130</sup>, now re-named *Jardinero*. Vernon continues her examination of queer sound in film, again drawing on this scene, by suggesting 'the gardener is said to nurture the flowers, bringing them to blossom with flaming hues.'<sup>131</sup>. Could this gardener

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<sup>130</sup> Composed in 1902: Ernesto de la Curtis. Lyrics: Giambattista de Curtis

<sup>131</sup> Vernon, 2009, p.63

cultivating his flowers be a direct association with and reference to Padre Manolo and his priests abusing the young schoolboys and subjecting them to troubling experiences that will consequently affect the rest of their lives? Vernon seems to subscribe to this idea, noting 'Although the on-screen audience of priests seem to miss the song's double entendres, with flowers and blossoming functioning as a reference to sexual experience and sexual maturation, they are not likely to be lost on the offscreen public.'<sup>132</sup> Almodóvar's use of repetition of such a similar disconcerting scene heightens the sense that the spectator is privy to and now unavoidably subscribed to the disturbing knowledge of these troubling secrets; if the *Moon River* scene wasn't memorable enough; Almodóvar graces the audience with a return to darkness, to the lies and secrets that will ultimately cause utter devastation in the lives of his characters.

The narrative is brought back to 1977 and the script of "La Visita", as Zahara, posing as Ignacio's fictional sister, blackmails Padre Manolo and Padre José. Almodóvar devotes himself to tackling the theme of abuse further, which Víctor Fuentes suggests as being 'Almodóvar's interest, if not "obsession", in the scenario'. He continues, 'In several interviews, some from many years ago, he alludes to this traumatic scenario of desire, abuse, and revenge that finally comes to the foreground in 2004.'<sup>133</sup> As Almodóvar himself has noted, and Fuentes suggests, these

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<sup>132</sup> Vernon, 2009, p.63

<sup>133</sup> Víctor Fuentes, "Bad Education: Fictional Autobiography and Meta-Film Noir" in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.432



issues although marked by personal experience do 'not directly derive from it'.<sup>134</sup> It is arguably due to this personal experience that Almodóvar spent years working on *La Mala Educación*, perfecting it to leave the spectator with the haunting, disturbing effects of the abuse at the hands of an institution that is supposed to be one of the moral pillars of Spanish society. The hypocrisy of Catholicism is continually challenged, as Zahara asks of Padre José: '¿Sigue pegando a los alumnos?' (Does he still hit the pupils?). This intense accusation is revoked by Padre Manolo as he emphatically states 'No estás en posición de amenazar a nadie. Digas lo que digas, la gente me creerá a mí y no a ti.' (You're in no position to threaten anyone. Whatever you say, people will believe me, not you.) This can be considered a clear attack on the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and its teachings, as Padre Manolo dotes on the fact that the "believed" morality of religion and the work of God that he and the other priests devote themselves to will be enough for anyone to believe them and not the transvestite Zahara sitting directly in front of him, who according to Padre Manolo is in no position to make threatening remarks. Almodóvar, in providing a sense of hope to the audience and evoking a sense of cinematic identification within the spectators, gives a reminder of the death of General Francisco Franco and his right-wing regime as Zahara continues 'no, la gente ha cambiado. Estamos en el '77. Esta sociedad valora más mi libertad que su hipocresía.' (No, people have changed. This is 1977. This society puts my freedom above your hypocrisy.) This overt challenge can only be considered a clear statement against the hypocritical values

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<sup>134</sup> Fuentes, 2009, p.432

that Almodóvar believes are present within religion, values that Almodóvar believes have and should continue to change after the death of Franco in 1975. The date being crucial in the narrative – a statement that would not have been allowed to prevail in censored Spanish cinema under Franco.

This criticism of the Church as a pillar of society and its “moral” teachings is examined further throughout the narrative as a flashback takes the spectator back to Ignacio and Enrique’s childhood as they visit the Cine Olympo (Olympo Cinema) to see a film based on religion titled ‘*Esa mujer*’ (That woman). Marvin D’Lugo notes that ‘The staging of this scene – technically, a film-within-a-film-within-a-film – reaffirms the notion of the theatrical as constituting a privileged space of sexual freedom and artistic creativity.’<sup>135</sup>. This eloquent argument developed by D’Lugo can be examined further by linking it to the act taking place in the diegesis. The camera presents this scene in juxtaposition with a medium shot from behind Enrique and Ignacio as they are masturbating each other. The juxtaposition of the Catholic narrative with the homosexuality of the two young boys can be considered a powerful attack on the hypocrisy of the Church and its values and teachings. The scene of *Esa mujer* is present in this shot as Enrique and Ignacio are almost silhouetted in front of the cinema screen. As D’Lugo notes, this space of sexual freedom for Ignacio and Enrique to act on their desires for one another is juxtaposed by the “presence” of the Church, upon which their image is silhouetted, that would

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<sup>135</sup> Marvin D’Lugo, “Postnostalgia in *Bad Education*: Written on the Body of Sara Montiel” in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.375

reject and despise both Enrique and Ignacio if found to be performing sexual acts on each other. This is enhanced by the diegetic voice of Sara Montiel acting as the nun who has returned to the convent to be rejected by her Mother Superior. This rejection echoes in the minds of the two young boys as they realise what they are doing is “wrong” in the eyes of the Church. Almodóvar provides the spectator with this realisation of wrong and the idea of sinning as Ignacio states ‘lo que hicimos en el cine no estuvo bien...creo que fue un pecado, y que Dios nos va a castigar.’ (What we did in the cinema wasn’t right...I think it was a sin, and God’s going to punish us.) However, Almodóvar also offers the spectator a further attack and a complete dismissal of religion as a whole and God’s existence as Enrique replies with ‘¿Dios? Yo no creo en Dios.’ (God? I don’t believe in God).

Just as the spectator is offered a dismissal of religion and its teachings, the audience is again transported back to the ideas evoked in the *Moon River* scene as Ignacio is removing Padre Manolo’s robes in the sacristy after being caught hiding with Enrique in the dark enclosed space of a toilet cubicle (again arguably reinforcing the oppressive boundaries and confines of patriarchy as the boys are trapped in a small space hiding from the authoritarian figure of Padre Manolo). Padre Manolo’s desiring gaze for Ignacio is considerably disturbing, regarding which Víctor Fuentes notes ‘the camera at times adopts the point of view of the paedophile priest, focusing on his strong libidinal desire toward the child.’<sup>136</sup> The gradual darkening of the image is portrayed through a fade-to-black as the camera zooms in on Padre

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<sup>136</sup> Fuentes, 2009, p.435

Manolo's robes – again suggesting, just like the pan away from the Moon River scene, that something sinister is about to happen. The voice-over of Ignacio returns, 'Me vendí por primera vez en aquella sacristía' (I sold myself for the first time in that sacristy) in exchange for Padre Manolo's promise that they would not expel Enrique from the school. However, this turns out to be a lie, and the moment in which Ignacio loses his faith.

As the narrative returns to Madrid 1980, the arguably coded attacks on Catholicism and its values as a pillar of patriarchal society are left behind and subsequently make way for the return of the theme of gender as performance. Ángel/Ignacio/Juan's insistence on playing Zahara in Enrique's film repeats the sense of the blurring of what can be considered a gender dichotomy, and gender as performance. Insisting on being called Ángel, he begs Enrique for the role of the transvestite cross-dresser, stating that he can lose weight and do anything for the part. This causes Enrique to doubt Ignacio, yet the spectator is presented with another scene containing fragmented<sup>137</sup>, fetishistic close up shots of "Ignacio's" crotch as he swims in Enrique's pool. The shot/reverse shot technique implemented by Almodóvar grants the spectator with Enrique's fetishistically eroticising gaze as the camera cuts back and forth from close-ups of fragmented parts of "Ignacio's" body to medium shots of Enrique, gazing from the pool. Although considerably far-fetched, and further developing the earlier comments on fragmentation, it could be suggested that this

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<sup>137</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

fragmentation through the eyes of Enrique, the male gaze, is not only a way of seeing women in patriarchal society, but also any marginalised group, including homosexuals and transvestites in this particular film discourse.

It can further be argued that Almodóvar, in continuing with his technique of not overtly stating the character's sexualities, subscribes to Paul Julian Smith's idea of 'the conflict between private, homosexual life and the public, heterosexual sphere'<sup>138</sup>. Apart from the sexual acts that are witnessed inside Enrique's home and those inside the Catholic school it is not overtly obvious that he is homosexual. However, the spectator later sees, in the private sphere of his home, Enrique penetrating "Ignacio" from behind, which can arguably be considered as an extremely graphic hyperbolic display of sex. Judith Butler argues that theatre and cinema use hyperbolic displays of sex in order 'to shatter the epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality'<sup>139</sup> and as the fragmentation scene from earlier and the present one being analysed show, both lead to full penetrative sex scenes between two men. Almodóvar does not shy away from portraying these 'hyperbolic displays', the mere reality of the lives of his characters in the film narrative.

It can be noted that there are only a handful of female actresses in the script of *La Mala Educación*; one of these is encountered as Enrique travels to Ortigueira, Galicia in search of Ignacio's family. Through Ignacio's mother, the spectator is finally made

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<sup>138</sup> Smith, 1992, p.194

<sup>139</sup> Judith Butler, *Critically Queer, Bodies that Matter (On the discursive limits of "sex")*, New York; London: Routledge, 1993, p.233

aware of the revelations of Ignacio's death four years previous, of Juan's true identity and of the revelation of Señor Berenguer's (Mr. Berenguer, formerly Padre Manolo) visit to Galicia looking for Ignacio's stories. It is revealed that Señor Berenguer now works for a publishing company in Valencia, in charge of publishing young authors' stories, which Fuentes argues is 'a subtle way of indicating that his interests have not entirely changed'<sup>140</sup> and which Marsha Kinder also recognises as Berenguer performing 'a more secular version of the same censorship and exploitation that he exercised as principal of Ignacio's religious school: for, the tyrannical publisher quite literally fucks the author, whose story undergoes a chain of appropriations and accommodations.'<sup>141</sup> Señor Berenguer's performance is evident through his extensive roles as a priest, religious worshipper, literature teacher, school principal and publisher of young authors' work. Yet it can be argued that hypocrisy emerges in the fact that he suggestively abuses each and every one of these positions once he succumbs and acts upon his feelings for the young schoolboy Ignacio.

As it comes to light through Señor Berenguer that he and Juan plot to kill Ignacio with Juan buying the lethal drugs and Berenguer giving them to Ignacio in what he tragically deems to be his 'last fix', Juan states that 'no soy un monstruo' (I'm not a monster); however this statement could easily be rejected in light of the lengths to which Juan would go to succeed as an actor. It becomes clear throughout the

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<sup>140</sup> Fuentes, 2009, p.440

<sup>141</sup> Kinder, 2009, p.282

narrative that he will literally do anything, including selling himself by sleeping with both Enrique and Señor Berenguer, for the part in “*La Visita*” and for materialistic gifts, even though he is apparently heterosexual (as the closing credits subsequently inform the spectator that he marries Mónica, the wardrobe girl). Unlike Juan, Señor Berenguer arguably admits his hypocrisy, as after killing Ignacio, and leaving the cinema that has been showing a Film Noir week Berenguer suggests that ‘es como si todas las películas hablaran de nosotros’ (it’s as if all the films were talking about us). As Isolina Ballesteros notes, ‘by linking Ignacio’s sex change to drug addiction and death, Almodóvar appears to punish Ignacio for his/her transgression even as he denounces the repressive climate in which s/he had to live.’<sup>142</sup> Perhaps this should be considered a hint from Almodóvar that although modern-day society is growing to be more tolerant towards homosexuality and transvestism, there is still a long way to go to tackle the engrained values, conventions and ideals engrained within phallocentrism, within a patriarchal society that has spent decades attempting to shape the values of its citizens.

Almodóvar ends this gripping story with a textual frame of the future of each character’s life. Ángel Andrade is destined to a life working solely on television series which as Paul Julian Smith suggests equates to condemning ‘its antihero, ambitious for a film career, to a postcinematic “living death” in television’<sup>143</sup> while Señor

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<sup>142</sup> Ballesteros, 2009, p.94

<sup>143</sup> Smith, Paul Julian, “Almodóvar on Television, Industry and Thematics”, in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.44

Berenguer is killed by Ángel as he runs him over while driving a car, arguably evoking a sense of sadness in the spectator, as Marvin D'Lugo notes:

Like Benigno, the rapist in *Talk to Her* (2002), Berenguer is, from a moral position, a despicable character. Yet....he evokes a certain pathos by virtue of being doomed by his own uncontrollable desires....Precisely through Berenguer's reappearance, the old Manichean structure of good and evil that seemed to rule Francoist morality has been replaced by a more compassionate understanding of what Almodóvar has famously called "the law of desire."<sup>144</sup>

This desire is further suggested as the spectator finds out that 'Enrique Goded continúa haciendo cine con la misma pasión.' (Enrique Goded is still making films with the same passion) onto which the camera zooms in on an extreme close up of the word "*pasión*", echoing D'Lugo's comment that the only law Almodóvar believes apt for his films and for society as a whole is the "law of desire". Each scene in the film can be considered driven *for* and *by* passion and desire; the two young ex lovers' passion for each other, Padre Manolo's desire for Ignacio, Señor Berenguer's desire and passion for Juan, Ignacio's passion to change his sex. Although not all reciprocated, these desires and passions cross the boundaries of what can be considered morally correct according to the values, ideals and teachings of the Catholic Church and patriarchy as a whole. Yet through the examination of identity, performance and coded discourse which can arguably be noted as an attack on religion, phallocentrism and its values and conventions, Pedro Almodóvar takes Spanish film to another level; moving from the subjugation of the feminine so ever present in dominant Hollywood cinema, into giving females and other marginalised

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<sup>144</sup> D'Lugo, 2009, p.381



groups full agency and a space for their own discourse in what has been a considerably male-dominated environment. His films pose a challenge to the earlier view held by many that cinema was a primary source of the voyeuristic gaze<sup>145</sup> exercised through patriarchal values and conventions. It seems that Almodóvar's limits are endless, choosing to epitomise the new, postmodern<sup>146</sup> Spain and stretching the boundaries of Spanish film in contemporary Spanish society.

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<sup>145</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>146</sup> Allinson, 2001, p.209

## **Chapter III**

# **Female Agency in the Midst of the Feminine Sphere in *Volver***

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In 2006, after four years of deeper and darker narratives such as *Hable Con Ella*, 2002, and *La Mala Educación*, 2004, Pedro Almodóvar returns to what can be considered a more light-hearted comedy which immerses itself in a feminine sphere spanning the lives of three generations of women and their female neighbours from rural Castilla La Mancha, Spain. Almodóvar's *Volver* (*To Return/Coming Back*), 2006, tells the story of Raimunda, her sister Soledad (Sole) and Raimunda's daughter Paula, who have all left their roots in La Mancha to live in Madrid. Three years previous to the film's beginning, it is believed that Raimunda and Soledad's parents were killed in a tragic fire, with the narrative marking the spectral return of their mother, Irene, as her ghost appears at various points throughout the film.

In the rural streets of Alcanfor de las Infantas, Castilla La Mancha, rumours have been rife amongst the villagers that Irene's ghost has been appearing, looking after her sister La Tia Paula (Aunt Paula). After La Tia Paula's death, Irene decides to appear to her daughter Soledad, who, still believing she is a ghost, allows her to stay in her flat in Madrid. As the plot advances, the audience become privy to dark events and secrets such as the intended rape of young Paula by her "father" Paco, the subsequent murder of Paco by Paula and the disposing of his body by Raimunda. It is

later found out that Irene is not in fact a ghost, and that the woman found dead with her husband was actually their neighbour Augustina's mother with whom he had been having an affair. The complex twists and turns in the narrative by Almodóvar gradually provide the spectator with more information as the plot thickens. This gradual release of information, mixed delightfully with the comic and the serious (which will be explored in further detail throughout this analysis) gives rise to one of Almodóvar's most critically acclaimed works, winning awards at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival for Best Actress (shared by the female protagonists) and Best Screenplay for Pedro Almodóvar.<sup>147</sup>

From the outset of the film narrative, Almodóvar transports the spectator directly into the "mundo femenino" (feminine world) as the camera presents an establishing shot in the local graveyard as the female villagers are cleaning, polishing and tending to the graves. Each and every character in the *mise-en-scène* is female and it is clear from this opening shot that Almodóvar has returned in some sense to an in-depth portrayal of the feminine sphere, a stark contrast from that of *La Mala Educación* (*Bad Education*), which centres on the male world in the patriarchal confines of the Catholic Church as discussed in Chapter II. The domestic act in itself of cleaning the gravestones could be analysed as a coded attack on the norms, conventions and values of patriarchal society which assume a woman's place to be in the home: the sphere of domesticity which subjects a woman to the roles of wife, mother and

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<sup>147</sup> <http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/ficheFilm/id/4332959/year/2006.html> (Accessed 20.05.2010)

housewife.<sup>148</sup> Molly Haskell argues that ‘the persistent irony is that she is dependent for her well-being and ‘fulfilment’ on institutions – marriage, motherhood – that by translating the word ‘woman’ into ‘wife’ and ‘mother’, end her independent identity.’<sup>149</sup> This ending of the female’s independent identity, as Haskell argues, is eloquently portrayed through Almodóvar’s establishing shot as the sphere of domesticity is evident through the camera’s lens. Through the medium of the domestic sphere, the female role in patriarchal society is not only suggested but subsequently challenged through the portrayal of the villagers as they are cleaning the graves. Not only does Almodóvar initially establish these roles prescribed to the female in society; in addition, he uses this portrayal as a powerful tool in order to destabilise and subvert the archaic traditions born from society that have haunted the female role in film; and instead portraying the possibilities of a “New Spanish Cinema” in which the female world can be presented accordingly.

This idea is furthered by the narrative as Paula comments ‘Que de viudas hay en este pueblo’ (There are so many widows in this town)<sup>150</sup> to which Soledad replies ‘Las mujeres de aquí viven más que los hombres’ (The women here live longer than men). It is not to directly say that Almodóvar is here diminishing the value that men have on society; yet it could be suggested by this conversation that he is, in fact, eloquently setting up this “mundo femenino” upon which the rest of the narrative

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<sup>148</sup> Molly Haskell, “The Woman’s Film”, in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.22

<sup>149</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.24

<sup>150</sup> Film narrative translations are taken directly from subtitles from *Volver*, An Almodóvar Film, Two-Disc Edition, Madrid: El Deseo, 2006

will be based. However, just as the domestic portrayal of cleaning arguably provides a reminder of the normative patriarchal values engrained in Spanish society; Almodóvar presents in the following shot an even further haunting reminder. As Raimunda, Soledad and Paula are tending to the grave of their deceased family the audience is introduced to Augustina, a terminally ill neighbour from the village who has come to the graveyard to tend to her own grave, which according to Raimunda is a custom very much upheld to in the villages of Castilla La Mancha, buying a plot and looking after it all their lives, as if it were a second home. As the four women are conversing together, with the villagers tending to their graves in the background of the same shot, the female world is in full view of the camera's lens. However, in the middle of the medium shot filmed from a straight on camera angle, a tree splits the image exactly in the centre of the shot. According to E. Ann Kaplan, who draws on the Freudian theory of castration<sup>151</sup>, the lack of the phallic member in the female form leads the male gaze<sup>152</sup> (the male protagonist, the camera or the spectator, or possibly even a combination of all three which will be explored in more detail in the following scene), to unconsciously look for the phallus in other objects. This in turn, diminishes the threat and terror of castration that Freud argues is present when man encounters woman. Kaplan observes that 'it is designed to annihilate the threat that women (as castrated and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses.'<sup>153</sup> It could be

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<sup>151</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

<sup>152</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>153</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the gaze male?", *Women and film: both sides of the camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.31

noted that Almodóvar strategically places the tree in the centre of the medium shot, phallic in shape, almost as a significant reminder that the presence of patriarchy still exists; even in his attempts to portray the feminine sphere does the looming phallic tree split the women apart.

However, it could also be argued that the phallic tree is not only placed in the shot as a reminder of the presence of patriarchy but also to diminish the threat that the almost all-female cast pose to the male gaze. According to Laura Mulvey, there are three gazes in film which all inevitably lead to the male gaze. These three gazes are the camera, the male character in the film and the spectator (who does not necessarily need to be male but who has patriarchal, “male”-based, phallogentric values).<sup>154</sup> She argues that ‘the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’’.<sup>155</sup>

In the case of *Volver* however, especially in the scene being analysed, there is no male character present. Regardless of this, the director behind the camera is male and many of the spectators will either be male or have been brought up in a largely patriarchal society with the engrained values and conventions that Pedro Almodóvar is attempting to challenge with his work. This male gaze is examined further as

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<sup>154</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>155</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

Raimunda and Soledad are loading the boot of the car with all the cleaning equipment necessary for the gravestones, the camera zooms to a medium shot of Soledad's waist from behind, fragmenting the image as it closes in on her bottom. Almodóvar here introduces a further psychoanalytical concept into the narrative body of his work. Fragmentation, which will also be referred to as a form of fetishism could be considered as a further way of diminishing the threat of castration as argued by Freud<sup>156</sup>. Kaplan eloquently puts forward the case that 'the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat'<sup>157</sup> She continues her argument by drawing on Mulvey's idea that 'men, that is, turn "the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" ...'<sup>158</sup> By sexualising the female body, the male gaze<sup>159</sup> focuses on these fragmented female images, rendering the female devalued and void as she is no longer whole in the eyes of the camera, male protagonist *and* spectator. As the camera focuses on Soledad's fragmented waist, Almodóvar can be said to be providing the spectator with a direct portrayal of the fossilised view to which dominant cinema has filmed female characters for decades. With the camera zoomed to only show part of her body, she is therefore no longer whole in the eyes of the camera and the spectator, in turn the audience's eyes being drawn to the

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<sup>156</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

<sup>157</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>158</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>159</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40



focal point of her bottom, almost fetishistically and erotically inviting the spectator to have a lingering look.

As Almodóvar establishes the narrative through the opening scenes, the critique of the structure of patriarchal thought and the subsequent restructuring of that thought is continued. Raimunda, Soledad and Paula drive to Tia Paula's house in Alcanfor de las Infantas, and the mise-en-scène becomes even more important in analytical terms as concrete pillars are visible in the background of the scenes shot in the patio. This is further echoed in the following scene at Augustina's house across the street, arguably built at the same time in the same style. Again, like the tree splitting the shot in the graveyard, the pillars are phallic in shape, possibly suggesting the notion of rigid, normative patriarchal structures that loom over society, oppressing and entrapping the female within the boundaries of archaic conventions. Robin W. Fiddian and Peter W. Evans put forward the argument that pillars can be interpreted as 'unconscious erections of repressed sexual desire...powerless to resist total annihilation by the sexual, controlling, reductive gaze of the patriarch.'<sup>160</sup> Could it in fact be that the pillars themselves represent the controlling, reductive gaze of the patriarch? In terms of Spanish society, as discussed in relation to *La Mala Educación* (Bad Education) the Church and the State seem to be the main channels of this phallogentric, archaic thought. Fiddian and Evans agree with this argument as they suggest that the image of Spain can be seen as 'toiling under the supervision of

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<sup>160</sup> Robin W. Fiddian & Peter W. Evans, "Viridiana and the Death Instinct" in *Challenges to Authority: Fiction and Film in Contemporary Spain*, London: Tamesis, 1981, p.69

reactionaries of Church and State.<sup>161</sup> The pillars therefore could be noted as the representatives of these cultural traditions from which dominant cinema has evolved over time.

The idea of the oppression and entrapment of women and marginalised groups as a whole can be examined further in *La Tia Paula*'s house: the camera pans through the patio and, in turn, into her house, as various photos of women can be seen in the background of the subsequent shots. The camera cuts to a close up shot of a photograph of Raimunda and Soledad's mother, Irene, as she lies asleep in a deckchair under the sun of Castilla La Mancha. The image of Irene is surrounded with a frame, which could almost suggest and represent women's entrapment again under the looming supervision of dominant society. Being enclosed within the borders and boundaries of the frame allows, psychoanalytically speaking, for no way out. The entrapment can be seen as four walls bounding Irene in a confined space from which there is no escape. Although at this point in the film it is not yet known, by the end it is clear to see that she was living a married life in which she was trapped fulfilling the institution of marriage, with a husband who was having an affair with Augustina's mother. The subsequent death of her husband and her "return" seem to be representative of Almodóvar's positive and optimistic viewpoint of the future. Arguably, it could be further suggested that the return of Irene commands an idea that even after entrapment and oppression due to ideas and values engrained in society, there is a way out. Just like there is a way out for Spanish

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<sup>161</sup> Fiddian & Evans, 1981, p.62

Cinema as an institution, a way out that Pedro Almodóvar and other directors, male and female alike strive for, a way out from the norms and conventions that have embedded themselves in dominant cinema for decades.

The narrative transports the spectator from La Mancha to Madrid, the city Almodóvar uses as the scene for the murder of Raimunda's husband, Paco. As one of the few male characters in the film, Almodóvar presents Paco as what can only be described a rather stereotypical "macho" Spanish man. Gender roles are clearly examined in this scene as Raimunda arrives home and immediately starts preparing dinner; before she has time to even unpack her things she is within the boundaries of the kitchen (a female environment, according to phallogentric discourse) as Paco is lounging on the couch, drinking beer and watching football. As Paula sits down on the adjacent sofa, Almodóvar provides the audience with a reverse shot as the camera takes Paco's fetishistic and objectifying male gaze<sup>162</sup> and the camera cuts to a close up of Paula's crotch area. Kaplan argues that the female is 'assigned the place of object (since she lacks the phallus, the symbol of the signifier), she is the recipient of male desire, the passive recipient of his gaze.'<sup>163</sup> Paula is clearly subject to Paco's gaze and desire as the reverse shot puts the spectator in a rather unnerving position as the audience believe Paco to be Paula's father, although this later turns out not to be the case.

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<sup>162</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>163</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.125-126

The incestuous tones however, hide beneath the fragmentation of Paula's body, which is made even more revealing as she has her legs wide open, almost as if Paco is seeing them as open to penetration by him. Pilar Aguilar eloquently argues that 'No interesa la persona en su concepto global – que, por supuesto, incluye también su cuerpo-; interesa un cuerpo, o ciertas partes de un cuerpo considerados como trozos de carne apetitosas, sin la entidad globalizadora.'<sup>164</sup> (The global concept of the person doesn't matter – which, of course, also includes her body-: what matters is a body, or certain parts of a body, considered appetising pieces of meat without a globalizing entity.) The idea of these fragments being appetising pieces of meat evoke a clear sense of the active male/passive female<sup>165</sup> dichotomy which as Mulvey suggests, exists in dominant cinema. Paula, in her passive state as female, seems to have no power over Paco's fetishising gaze, this close up of Paula's crotch suggesting his thoughts are driven by his active male desire to have Paula, to penetrate her and render her conquered.

Linda Williams eloquently expands on these concepts further, arguing that:

The categories of fetishism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism...are by definition perversions...usually defined as sexual excesses...yet the perverse pleasures of film viewing are hardly gratuitous. They have been considered so basic that they have often been presented as norms. What is a film, after all, without voyeurism?<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Pilar Aguilar, *Mujer, Amor y Sexo en el Cine Español de los '90*, Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, 1998, p.116

<sup>165</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.39

<sup>166</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess", in Stam, R & Miller, T (eds), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, p.212

Almodóvar challenges this convention of dominant cinema by exploring voyeurism not only in its pure state, but with a sense of fetishistic incest which arguably takes the scopophilic instinct<sup>167</sup> to another level. Kaplan further sets out this theoretical argument by putting forward the idea that 'voyeurism and fetishism are mechanisms the dominant cinema uses to construct the male spectator in accordance with the needs of his unconscious'<sup>168</sup>. As Paula is getting ready for bed, there is a slight slit as her door is slightly ajar, into which a silhouetted Paco voyeuristically peers. Not only does this scene conform to Mulvey's theory of scopophilia being pleasure in looking<sup>169</sup>, it takes an even stronger form as in this particular case, Paula does not know she is being looked at, giving Paco as the active male an even greater sense of power onto which he can project his fantasies<sup>170</sup>. Mary Ann Doane further evokes the sense of prohibition as she notes 'spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression.'<sup>171</sup> The audience is privy to Paco's gaze at Paula's prohibited body as her long hair and naked body are

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<sup>167</sup> Mulvey suggests 'The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure at being looked at', 2000, p.37

<sup>168</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.30

<sup>169</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.37

<sup>170</sup> Mulvey as previously cited: 'The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly', pp.39-40

<sup>171</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator", in Stam, R & Miller, T (eds), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, p.497

seen directly in front of Paco's silhouette. As Paco is the subject of the look, Paula becomes 'la imagen, el objeto mirado'<sup>172</sup> (The image, the object that is looked at.)

*Volver* further posits a sense of restructuring of engrained patriarchal thought as fragmentation is again repeated, in this case of Raimunda's body as she is washing dishes in the kitchen. Not only again does Almodóvar present the spectator with the female character ironically in a categorised female place in the home according to phallogentric thought, he also includes in the original script that 'Dentro hay tazas y vasos, usados anteriormente por el padre'<sup>173</sup> (Inside there are cups and glasses, previously used by the father). The insistence by Almodóvar that it is Paco who has used the dishes further challenges the idea of gender segregation within the domestic sphere. According to Paco, and to men of his kind, it can only be considered the woman's job to wash the dishes, another domestic task such as the graveyard cleaning seen previously at the start of this chapter.

The camera's gaze is shot from above; a crane shot that provides an overhead view of the scene, focusing perfectly on Raimunda's breasts. Not only are Raimunda's breasts in full focus of the camera's lens, it can be considered that these breasts can, in fact, be seen as a symbol of motherhood. Pilar Aguilar draws on this argument by noting '...un plano de detalle de un busto espectacular sólo significa una de estas dos cosas: "es una tía buena" o "es una excelente productora de leche materna."' <sup>174</sup> (A

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<sup>172</sup> Aguilar, 1998, p.113

<sup>173</sup> Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver: Guión Cinematográfico de Pedro Almodóvar*, Ocho y Medio: Madrid, 2006, p.52

<sup>174</sup> Aguilar, 1998, p.128

detailed shot of a spectacular bust can only mean one of two things: “she’s a hot woman” or “she’s an excellent producer of maternal milk.”) Women, psychoanalytically speaking, ideally materialise the lack of the phallus by giving birth to a male child with phallus, raising them into the symbolic<sup>175</sup> and therefore gaining validity in patriarchal society. This complex issue of motherhood, clearly portrayed here through the image of breasts as the producers of maternal milk, can arguably be seen as a legacy passed down from traditional patriarchal culture. Women are validated by giving birth, as the bearers of new life.

As Raimunda washes the dishes, the camera focuses on a large knife as she picks it up to wash it. This again could be considered a powerful phallic symbol in juxtaposition with the show of her breasts. According to Mulvey this juxtaposition comes about as a result of the male castration anxiety:

Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma...or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object.<sup>176</sup>

Almodóvar here eloquently presents the second avenue of escape in accordance with Mulvey’s theory. The anxiety evoked by the crane shot of Raimunda leads the camera, and male spectator to substitute the anxiety with the phallic knife, finding the object that is lacking in the female figure in a fetish itself. However, not only can

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<sup>175</sup> Lacan, Jacques, *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1*, John Forrester (trans.), Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), New York: Norton, 1991

<sup>176</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.42

the knife be interpreted as phallic; it can also be considered a premonition that this knife is going to be seen and used again.

In the final scene in which Paco appears, after his incestuous voyeurism directed at Paula, Almodóvar films a scene of Raimunda and Paco in bed together. Surprisingly, as some may consider (with the exception of the scene currently under analysis) there are no further scenes containing sexual acts, no hyperbolic displays of sex as discussed previously in relation to *La Mala Educación*. As Raimunda is opening up to Paco about her worries relating to the health of La Tía Paula, Paco tries to have sex with her while it is obvious to the audience that he is not paying any attention to her at all. He arguably sees her as an object with which he would like to have his way. However, in the one scene that a sexual act is displayed, Almodóvar powerfully includes Raimunda's sexual rejection of Paco. In the only scene where Paco as the active male intends to use his given active role and have his way with Raimunda, she assumes agency and rejects him. This could be suggested as the ultimate rejection for a man, which leads him to turn to pleasuring himself, the diegetic noises slightly disturbing to the ear as Raimunda sheds a tear. However, not only are the noises disturbing for the spectator, there is also arguably the eerie sense that due to the close proximity of this particular scene to his voyeuristic and fetishistic gazes at Paula through her bedroom door, he is in fact, masturbating over her.

The voyeurism and fetishism directed at Paula by her supposed father Paco directly leads to his murder as it becomes clear his active male gaze has been transformed, in



Raimunda's absence, into action itself as he attempts to have sexual intercourse with her. As this is unfolding back at her flat, Raimunda is working as a cleaner in the newly built Terminal 4 building in Madrid-Barajas airport. Elizabeth Cowie notes that 'feminist analysis of film assumes 'woman' as an unproblematic category constituted through the definitions already produced in society – as mother, housewife, worker, sexual partner and reflected in film.'<sup>177</sup> As analysed earlier, the mere task of cleaning can be seen as portraying a very "feminine" task in itself, one to which many women subscribe in their roles as mother, wife and housewife, which even extends to their work life. Almodóvar notes in the script notes that 'Hay dos o tres mujeres más, todas latinoamericanas, limpiando'<sup>178</sup> (There are two or three more women, all of them Latin American, cleaning). It can be suggested that not only is Almodóvar challenging the roles allocated to women in patriarchal society in general; he is also challenging the roles given to marginalised groups as a whole. Not only are the women cleaning, being reminiscent of the establishing scene as a signifier of domesticity, he also specifies that they are Latin American women, pertaining to a marginalised group of immigrants who populate the city of Madrid. Many would argue that Almodóvar himself subscribes to these conventions and norms that place women in such roles in society; however in fact, it could be suggested that instead, the mere fact he is drawing attention to these roles suggest an overt challenging of

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<sup>177</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p.48

<sup>178</sup> Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver: Guión Cinematográfico de Pedro Almodóvar*, Ocho y Medio: Madrid, 2006, p.47

them and a willingness to bring attention to and to re-configure the mindset of modern day Spanish society.

Symbolism is another aspect of Almodóvar's work that can be considered as vital to the analysis of his films. As Raimunda stops for a break during the strenuous cleaning work at the airport in Madrid, the camera cuts to a medium shot of her trying to call home – the reason as to why nobody is answering is not yet known, however Almodóvar's use of the colour red can almost be seen as portraying an omen of what is about to be discovered. According to Juan Eduardo Cirlot red can be considered 'the colour of the pulsing blood and of fire, for the surging and tearing emotions...red is associated with blood, wounds, death-throes and sublimation.'<sup>179</sup> As Raimunda is attempting to call home, approximately half of the shot is filled with a red fire hose as Raimunda is standing adjacent to it. It is extremely prominent in the shot as it appears in clear juxtaposition with the grey atmosphere from outside as torrential rain is pouring. This shot comes to an end with what can only be described as a 'fade-to-red'<sup>180</sup> as the red of the fire hose fills the screen and turns into the red of the Madrid bus that passes Paula as she waits in the rain. This symbolism is continued with further references such as the bus stop post, Paula's polo shirt, the arrival of another red bus, Raimunda's red cardigan, and a prominent red car is passed in the mise-en-scène as Raimunda and Paula are walking through the streets.

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<sup>179</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1971), Jack Sage (trans.), New York: Dover Publications, 2002, p.53

<sup>180</sup> Almodóvar's symbolic playing of the film term "fade-out; fade-to-black: The gradual darkening or disappearance of an image or scene." Tatjana Pavlović [et al], *100 Years of Spanish Cinema*, Malden, MA, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

It is almost as if Almodóvar, in tandem with Cirlot's definition of red symbolising blood, wounds and death-throes<sup>181</sup>, is hinting as to what is about to be discovered as they enter the flat to discover Paco's body face down on the kitchen floor.

Significantly, as Raimunda and Paula enter the doorway of their block of flats, the camera shoots from inside the hall as Raimunda is opening the gates. The bars of the gates are in full focus of the camera's gaze. Molly Haskell affirms 'the circumscribed world of the housewife corresponds to the state of women in general, confronted by a range of options so limited she might as well inhabit a cell.'<sup>182</sup> The shot, commanded by Almodóvar, shows both females behind the bars of the gate as if they were locked behind the bars of a prison cell, with the gates of the doorway seeming almost to be identical to those present in a jail. It is here argued that similar to the boundaries of the photo frame that were discussed earlier, the bars of the doorway – reminiscent of those of a prison, in fact suggest the entrapment of women inside a society from which there is no escape. As Haskell notes, it is the state of women *in general* who are confronted with those limited options in life, Almodóvar is merely drawing attention to that fact through his clever use of positioning of the camera and symbolism of the objects around him.

As Paula explains to Raimunda that Paco told her he wasn't her father and forced himself on her which subsequently led to Paula killing him with a knife from the kitchen; the camera takes Raimunda's gaze and Paula talks directly to the camera.

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<sup>181</sup> Cirlot, 2002, p.53

<sup>182</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.22

This technique used by Almodóvar involves the spectator in the story, and invites the audience to envisage Paco unzipping his trousers and attempting to force himself on and rape the young girl. Although a rather disturbing image, it transports the viewer into the feminine world Almodóvar is portraying, and a sense of understanding is created even though an illegal act of murder has been committed. This sense of understanding is echoed by Raimunda as she says 'Paula. Recuerda que fui yo quién le mató, y que tú no lo viste porque estabas en la calle. Es muy importante que recuerdes eso.' (Paula, remember I killed him and you saw nothing you weren't here. It's very important you remember that.) According to Molly Haskell in her influential essay *The Woman's Film*<sup>183</sup>: 'the themes of the woman's film can themselves be reduced to four categories, often found overlapping or in combination: sacrifice, affliction, choice, competition.'<sup>184</sup> Arguably, the theme of sacrifice can be regarded as influential in this scene as Raimunda tells Paula to say it was she who killed Paco. Almodóvar adds in the script notes that Raimunda in this scene has 'ojos de demente' (demon eyes).<sup>185</sup> Haskell argues that the theme of sacrifice can include the following: herself for her children, her children for their own welfare, her marriage for her lover, her lover for marriage, her career for love, her love for her career<sup>186</sup>. In this specific case, the first option is applicable. Raimunda sacrifices herself for her child; she is more than willing to put herself in line for the consequences of

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<sup>183</sup> Haskell, 1999, pp.20-30

<sup>184</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.24

<sup>185</sup> Almodóvar, 2006, p.51

<sup>186</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.24

murdering Paco, even though Paula committed the crime. This is a prime example that illustrates Haskell's argument; a mother will do anything to protect her child.

The camera cuts to an aerial shot from above as Paco lies in a pool of blood.

Raimunda's first move is to roll up her sleeves and start cleaning. It is almost comedic in effect as she is intent on cleaning away any trace of Paco and the illegal deed that has just been committed. Almodóvar presents another reminder of the symbolism of the colour red as Raimunda puts a paper towel over the pool of blood<sup>187</sup>. The blood quickly soaks in within seconds leaving a shot of red again filling the screen, reminiscent of the "fade-to-red" of the previous outdoor scene. This is continued as the mop water Raimunda is using to mop the floor of the blood also runs red too. The camera jump cuts to what can be considered a repeat of the previous scene in which Raimunda was washing dishes. Almodóvar repeats this scene but this time the knife appears covered in blood as Raimunda attempts to clean the knife. The shot is filmed in exactly the same way, an aerial shot from above – almost as if the premonition from the first dishwashing scene had come true. This symbolic role of red as Cirlot argues is associated with blood, wounds and death,<sup>188</sup> is encapsulated in this scene by Almodóvar as all three symbolic references are arguably relevant to the diegesis of the narrative. Red also has connotations of fire and passion<sup>189</sup> which can be suggested as being the forceful drive behind the death of Paco and the subsequent cover-up by Raimunda. Passion, linked to desire, is

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<sup>187</sup> Cirlot notes that the colour red is 'associated with blood', 2002, p.53

<sup>188</sup> Cirlot, 2002, p.53

<sup>189</sup> Cirlot, 2002, p.54

arguably the law of Almodóvar's filmography<sup>190</sup> and it can be suggested, as the only law Almodóvar believes should be applicable to society.<sup>191</sup>

As Raimunda prepares to dispose of Paco's body, she turns him over, shakes her head in disgust and zips his trousers. This scene can be considered extremely disturbing, as, although not directly portrayed through the camera's lens, the diegetic sound of the zipping of his trousers leaves the suggestion that he was killed in the act of attempting to rape a young girl who knew him as a father. It is also clear to the audience that his phallic member had been left lying in a pool of blood, arguably again disturbing in itself with the implications of incest that are implied.

Almodóvar's exploration of the symbolism of the colour red continues as Paula has changed from a soaking wet red polo shirt, into another red t-shirt. Her neighbour Emilio comes to the door who is also wearing a red polo shirt. As he notices the blood stain on her neck he asks if she is hurt, to which she shrugs off and replies 'Cosas de mujeres' (Women's troubles). This is relevant to the film as a whole.

"Cosas de mujeres" and menstruation in itself are things which only women can fully understand. The "mundo femenino" or feminine world that Almodóvar is creating is almost a "cosa de mujer" in itself. Pedro Almodóvar has himself admitted that his childhood revolved around women, he didn't have any significant male influences in

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<sup>190</sup> See Chapter II, *La Mala Educación* (2004) for an analysis of desire and passion as a driving force of Almodóvar's narratives.

<sup>191</sup> Marvin D'Lugo in relation to *La Mala Educación* notes: 'the old Manichean structure of good and evil that seemed to rule Francoist morality has been replaced by a more compassionate understanding of what Almodóvar has famously called "the law of desire", "Postnostalgia in Bad Education: Written on the Body of Sara Montiel" in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.) *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.381

his life until later on and this is reflected in his work.<sup>192</sup> Therefore it can be understood that he intends to portray this lifestyle through the medium of film, creating a feminine world in which agency and voice are given to the female characters in the film and the spectators viewing it. The reference to women's troubles is a phrase instantly understood by each and every woman in the cinema hall at the time, bringing women together under a shared sense of understanding.

In *Volver*, not only does Almodóvar bring to the forefront a sense of shared understanding for females, he also highlights the importance of neighbours in his film. He himself notes that '*Volver* rinde homenaje a la vecina solidaria, esa mujer soltera o viuda, que vive sola y hace de la vida de la anciana de al lado su propia vida'<sup>193</sup> (*Volver* pays tribute to the supportive neighbour, that single or widowed woman, who lives alone and makes the life of her old-aged neighbour the life of her own.) It therefore echoes the sentiment of not conforming to patriarchy's view of what can be regarded as fulfilment on institutions as wife and mother,<sup>194</sup> instead paying tribute to those single women who have possibly not decided to conform to stereotypical roles, a tribute to those who instead live for themselves and for their neighbours. Almodóvar continues 'Female neighbors are an appendix to the family – a necessary and complementary appendix. Many of our mothers ended their lives in

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<sup>192</sup> Disc-two: An Interview with Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver*, An Almodóvar Film, Two-Disc Edition, Madrid: El Deseo, 2006

<sup>193</sup> Almodóvar, 2006, p.196

<sup>194</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.24

the company of such women.’<sup>195</sup> Almodóvar portrays this importance of neighbours through a scene in which Raimunda attempts to gather food in order to prepare a meal (illegally in Emilio’s restaurant) for a film crew who are shooting in the area. One neighbour, Regina, who will be discussed further in the chapter, lends Raimunda the pork for the meal. The closeness of neighbours is portrayed through Raimunda’s dialogue in the scene. She jokingly proclaims that a diet would do Regina good; and as Inés gives her sausages, chorizo and cookies from the north of Spain, Raimunda again declares ‘¡Desde luego, con la glucosa y el colesterol como los tienes tú, parece mentira que traigas mantecados!’ (With the way your glucose and cholesterol are, I can’t believe you brought cookies!) With the humorous, if somewhat slightly insulting, tones that Raimunda uses to acquire the ingredients for the meal, the audience are again brought together in the sense of female camaraderie and solidarity under the umbrella of humour. This neighbourly camaraderie emerges again when Raimunda gives both Regina and Inés more in cash than what they gave her in produce, and again as they help her transport a fridge to the restaurant. The importance of female neighbours helping one another is painted perfectly through the eyes of the camera lens as the women sweat in trying to move the fridge out of the flat. Almodóvar here again reverses the roles, giving agency to the female characters in contrast to what would be expected (with the removal of such a heavy object arguably considered a “male-orientated” task in the eyes of patriarchy). This

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<sup>195</sup> Pedro Almodóvar, Coda, “Volver: A Filmmaker’s Diary”, in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.450



solidarity is further examined as Raimunda promises both Regina and Inés jobs if she continues running the restaurant. Again, Almodóvar affirms and re-affirms that the importance of *Volver* lies in its treatment of the feminine sphere, the solidarity between women that gives back their independent identity which Haskell argues has been lost.<sup>196</sup> It can be justifiably assumed that Almodóvar, in challenging the norms and conventions stereotypical to that of dominant cinema, is in fact attempting to subvert and re-define them, creating a new space for females and marginal groups alike.

In stark contrast, however again through the use of humour, Almodóvar returns to what can be considered a sharp attack on the incestuous, would-be rapist Paco. As the film crew are dining in Emilio's restaurant, the camera cuts to a close shot of the menu board in the restaurant. It has been written by hand, in chalk, however the word 'cerdo' (Pig) in 'carne de cerdo' (Pork) seems larger than the rest of the font, almost as if highlighting the particular word and giving it a certain prominence as if deliberately to be noticed. It is suggested therefore, that "cerdo" meaning pig could in fact be an indirect reference to Paco, who is currently lying a few metres away in the deep freezer. Andy Medhurst observes, 'one of the most compelling aspects of what Almodóvar does: namely, his skill in holding together the serious and the ludicrous...in order to insist on the indivisibility of comedy and tragedy (and all points

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<sup>196</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.24

in between) in the lives he represents.’<sup>197</sup> As Raimunda asks who wants some pork, a slightly humorous double entendre is clearly being referred to. Kathleen Rowe argues, that ‘when women make jokes about men, they invert – momentarily – the social hierarchy.’<sup>198</sup> Although the diegetic characters are not aware of this double entendre, the extra-diegetic spectator is privy to a deep and dark secret about what is lying in the deep freezer. In addition to inverting the social hierarchy and giving Raimunda the agency to make the joke while Paco lies dead, could this double entendre also be a direct attack made by Almodóvar towards those men who mistreat, rape, and abuse women? Does Almodóvar consider these types of men to be pigs in the eyes of the *new* Spanish society that he is creating through the medium of cinema? What is certain, is that in conjunction with Medhurst’s argument of the serious and the ludicrous coming together in this scene – the humorous tones again of Raimunda’s reference to pig, yet the serious element that she has recently lost her husband who attempted to rape her daughter – reflect these complexities that Medhurst argues each and every person faces through life, the portrayal of reality eloquently portrayed here by Almodóvar through his use of double entendre.

The use of comedy and humorous tones is examined at regular intervals throughout the filmic narrative. Medhurst, in his reflective essay on the use of farce in Almodóvar, comments:

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<sup>197</sup> Andy Medhurst, “Heart of Farce: Almodóvar’s Comic Complexities”, in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.124

<sup>198</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and The Genres of Laughter*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995, p.19

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

Almodóvar's films repeatedly connect femininity and comedy, not in the sense of that ignoble tradition of sexist humor in which men make fun of women, but in the sense that women embody the humor of survival, the laughter that gets people through difficult times, what Rowe has called "a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity and joy"...Almodóvar's "return" to both the feminine and the comedic in *Volver* after the relatively masculinised dramas of *Talk to Her* and *Bad Education* might thus be seen as supporting Rowe's claim about laughter as a mode of female empowerment and resistance."<sup>199</sup>

Medhurst's observation that the feminine and the comedic are brought together in the cinema of Almodóvar are of paramount importance in relation to *Volver*. It can be argued that Soledad's house seems to be the main setting for the comic elements of the narrative. Exchanges between Soledad and her "ghost" mother, Irene, illicit real laughter from the audience. As Soledad still believes her mother to have appeared from the dead, thinking she has to do something in order to allow her to rest in peace she asks while in the midst of cutting her hair, 'Mamá...hay algo que quieres que yo haga ¿no?' (Mum...is there anything you want me to do?) and as the audience wait for a in-depth conversation between mother and daughter, Irene replies 'Cortarme el pelo' (Cut my hair). The juxtaposition of the serious and the comedic further enhance the value of the comedy written in the narrative by Almodóvar. This juxtaposition culminates in what can only be considered the infamous fart scene as Medhurst eloquently continues: 'the moment when a daughter discovers that her mother has not died but is in fact still alive should, one might reasonably expect, be a moment of intense emotional depth.'<sup>200</sup> Medhurst's comments on the scene accurately portray the link between the comic and the

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<sup>199</sup> Medhurst, 2009, p.122

<sup>200</sup> Medhurst, 2009, p.118

serious as Raimunda is sat on the toilet to which the camera cuts to a close shot of her face as she sniffs the odour of her mother's farts. As she enters the bedroom where Irene is hiding under the bed, she smells the odour and she, Soledad, and Paula all break into what can be described as "hysterical laughter". This comedic moment brings together three generations of women together in laughter as Raimunda and Soledad explain to Paula stories of the past. What only Soledad and the audience are privy to at this stage, however, is that Irene herself is underneath the bed and just as caught up in the moment as the other three women are. Almodóvar's eloquent filming of this scene by cross cutting to and from shots of Irene under the bed gives the audience unique access to the secret and arguably makes it even more endearing as Raimunda is close to tears from the laughter. Medhurst argues that all of Pedro Almodóvar's films use comedy as 'part of their tonal armory'<sup>201</sup> to which it could be argued again, fits in line with Kathleen Rowe's theory of comedy in film bringing empowerment to the female status and as Rowe notes herself 'beginning to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere'.<sup>202</sup> This scene not only brings together those diegetic characters on the screen, it also includes each and every spectator, who joins in with the laughter, thrusting the empowerment and solidarity of women to the forefront of the narrative and pushing the problem of women's universal oppression to the background.

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<sup>201</sup> Medhurst, 2009, p.121

<sup>202</sup> Rowe, 1995, p.12

It could also be argued, however, that Almodóvar uses this pivotal moment of the narrative to challenge yet another convention rife in dominant cinema. As mentioned previously at the start of this chapter, drawing on Kaplan's eloquent suggestion that the camera unconsciously fragments and fetishizes the female body, rendering it phallus-like in order to diminish the threat of castration felt by the male gaze,<sup>203</sup> the camera cuts to a close up of Irene's face under the bed and then directly cuts to a reverse shot to what Irene's gaze sees; a fragmented image of Raimunda's feet in high wedges. Although, naturally, Irene is not fetishistically fragmenting the image to suit her own voyeuristic needs, the argument could be put forward that instead, Almodóvar by portraying this image, is in fact challenging the conventions of dominant classic cinema and incorporating voyeuristic techniques in light of Linda Williams's statement that 'what is a film, after all without voyeurism?';<sup>204</sup> This adheres to the argument that cinema has been traditionally dominated by the male gaze,<sup>205</sup> a legacy that has been perpetuated up to the present day. Almodóvar in his portrayal of the fragmented shot of Raimunda's feet arguably overtly criticises this legacy in cinema that has fragmented and fetishised the female image for centuries.

In conjunction with the voyeuristic aspects related to the male gaze, Mary Ann Doane has observed that 'womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed...To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image...The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted

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<sup>203</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

<sup>204</sup> Williams, 2000, p.212

<sup>205</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40

by a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity.<sup>206</sup> This theory of the masquerade can be applied to the filmic narrative as Raimunda is getting ready for the film crew's wrap party which is being held at Emilio's restaurant. The camera films from behind Raimunda as she is putting on makeup, again with a considerably spectacular cleavage, in full focus of the camera's lens. It could be suggested that the act itself of putting on makeup is in fact almost like the painting on of this mask of femininity which can be worn or removed, as Doane suggests. However this "feminine" image, the made-up woman with dark, mascara-enhanced eyes and red lips is arguably what it is to be feminine in the eyes of phallogentric society, the feminine conforming with the ideals of male desire. The mirror image in this scene is present as a substantial portrayal of the reflection of what women should be like in the eyes of patriarchy; pretty to look at, in order to deflect from the fact she compensates, as Juliet Mitchell argues, for her 'inferior clitoris...by making her whole body into a proud substitute. She has to develop her threatened narcissism in order to make herself loved and adored. Vanity thy name is woman.'<sup>207</sup> In the same shot to the left hand side corner of the mirror, a hairspray bottle is prominent, also serving to foreground the masquerade, despite its substantially phallic shape. Claire Johnston argues that 'all fetishism, as Freud has observed, is a phallic replacement, a projection of male narcissistic fantasy'<sup>208</sup>. In the following scene this idea is continued as Raimunda, Soledad and Paula stand adjacent to the bar. Alcohol

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<sup>206</sup> Doane, 2000, pp.502-503

<sup>207</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.116

<sup>208</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema", in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.34

bottles, the necks of which can be considered phallic in shape, are visible in the background. It is almost as if Almodóvar is trying to portray the reminder that even though the only characters in the shot are female; in the sphere he has created where women and marginal groups are given agency, a space and a voice, there is a constant reminder lurking behind them of the customs and conventions that have governed not only dominant Hollywood cinema, but Spain as a whole. This considerably strengthens the argument in Kaplan's view that the unconscious fetishising of the female form takes place in order to find the phallus and minimise the castration threat<sup>209</sup> felt through the male-dominated gaze. It is almost as if Almodóvar is presenting his theory of how to resist, subvert and re-define cultural traditions, but at the same time reminding the spectator that there is some way to go in changing engrained values that have been present in Spanish society for centuries.

In continuing with Almodóvar's attempts at the subversion of filmic norms and conventions related to dominant Hollywood cinema, another reversal and challenge of these norms is portrayed through the filmic narrative. Molly Haskell has argued, '...in films...working women...were given a pseudo-toughness, a façade of steel wool that at a man's touch would turn into cotton candy.'<sup>210</sup> *Volver* offers the reverse of this situation; instead, the opposite of Haskell's argument has occurred. Raimunda has called Emilio to tell him that she's taken over the restaurant without his

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<sup>209</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

<sup>210</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.29

permission to which his initial reaction is obviously angry. However, using some sort of “woman’s power” that Almodóvar equips his protagonist with, knowing Emilio has always had a soft spot for her; Raimunda tells him that Paco has left her, leading Emilio to develop an instant sympathy for her and her situation – any remnants of his anger disappearing as quickly as they appeared. It could be considered farfetched to argue that Almodóvar has completely turned the tables around, and in doing so, Molly Haskell’s argument that the tough façade that turns into cotton candy that women have apparently possessed for centuries is now in fact relevant to men. Raimunda in this scene has the upper hand, she is in control and she is manipulating the circumstances to her own gain. It is Emilio however whose angry façade is subsequently turned to cotton candy, as Haskell phrases it, giving Raimunda full agency in this scene.

Not only does Almodóvar provide this agency for women in his films, he can also be considered to be a great advocate of any sort of ‘Otherness’<sup>211</sup> at all. As the female neighbours come together again to carry the freezer containing Paco’s deceased body, Regina proclaims to Raimunda: ‘No tengo trabajo, no tengo papeles, tengo que hacer la calle para poder sobrevivir.’ (I have no job, no papers, I have to work the streets to survive) Steven Marsh argues:

A great deal of the activity in which the women in this film engage is illegal, both before and after the murder. Raimunda, for instance, occupies a restaurant and sets up a catering business without informing its owner; her sister Sole runs a

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<sup>211</sup> Simone de Beauvoir suggested that “To be the Other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent – in short, the mere body”, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (Trans). 1952, New York: Vintage Press.



*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

clandestine beauty salon; Raimunda's neighbour, Regina, is an undocumented immigrant who earns her living as a prostitute. All three women work, that is, in what is known in Spain as the "submerged" economy.<sup>212</sup>

It could be suggested that Almodóvar is portraying the mere reality and situation of modern day Spain; however, it could also be argued that his portrayal of this submerged economy could be considered an attack on the options available to women, and other marginalised groups, who are trying to make a living in the world of work. The legal work as mentioned previously in this chapter that Almodóvar gives to Raimunda is as a cleaner, a feminine, domestic job that does not offer the most substantial of salaries at the end of the month. Without the influence of the stereotypical 'breadwinner' male member of the family, Almodóvar presents to the spectator the lengths to which people will go to put food on the table for themselves and for their children. Not only does Almodóvar portray women's situations in the Spanish labour market; he also documents that of an illegal immigrant, 'an "illegal alien" placed within the national body'<sup>213</sup> which undoubtedly presents an image of 'the changing body politic of Spanish demographics.'<sup>214</sup> Almodóvar himself, in an interview with Peter Besas has said;

All of my characters, almost all of them women, are absolutely self-reliant. Not only have they been liberated of all ideologies, but also of all morality. They are quite amoral. The concept of good and bad almost never concerns them. Theirs is a world

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<sup>212</sup> Steven Marsh, "Missing a Beat: Syncopated Rhythms and Subterranean Subjects in the Spectral Economy of *Volver*", in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.345

<sup>213</sup> Marsh, 2009, p.352

<sup>214</sup> Marsh, 2009, p.352

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

in which only pain and pleasure are experienced. If there's any theme common to my films it's a striving for absolute individual freedom carried to the extreme.<sup>215</sup>

The realistic portrayal of life and the agency given to these roles must be commended in the subverting of traditional conventions in relation to film. By bringing the issues to the forefront of the agenda, Almodóvar transports these ideas to the minds of Spanish society, a society that is changing at a rapid pace after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975.

However, at the forefront of *Volver* as a film come the resonances to its title proper; to come back, to return. Arguably, the most significant return of the film is Irene's return to her daughter, Raimunda, which culminates in what can be described as the most important sequence of the film and one to which Almodóvar declares 'one of the reasons why I wanted to shoot *Volver*; I've cried every single time I've corrected that part of the script.'<sup>216</sup> It is in this particular sequence that the audience are finally told that Irene is not actually a ghost, even though it has been believed throughout. The revelations are vast: it turns out to be Raimunda's own father who raped her and got her pregnant, with Paula turning out to not only be Raimunda's daughter, but also her sister; Irene admits to setting fire to the hut with Augustina's mother and her husband inside and going into hiding until now. The story, documented through Almodóvar's script is told so well that it is almost as if the image is being

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<sup>215</sup> Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy*, Denver, Colorado: Arden Press, 1985, pp.216-217

<sup>216</sup> Pedro Almodóvar, "Coda: *Volver*: A Filmmaker's Diary", in Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, Minneapolis, MN, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.461

portrayed through Irene's eyes. The spectator is transformed back to the moment when she torched the hut, and comprehension and sympathy also exist with this further illegal act as it has stemmed from such a monstrous occurrence between Raimunda and her father. It is therefore in this sequence of images that the spectator realises how all the cogs fit into place; Raimunda's insistence on protecting Paula and doing everything in her power to make sure she survives her ordeal are completely comprehended.

The significance of the film's title can be debated at length, however; arguably the most accurate significance comes from the director himself: '*Volver* es un título que incluye varias vueltas, para mí. He vuelto, un poco más, a la comedia. He vuelto al universo femenino...He vuelto a la maternidad, como origen de la vida y de la ficción. Y naturalmente, he vuelto a mi madre. Volver a La Mancha es siempre volver al seno materno.'<sup>217</sup> (*Volver* is a title that includes various returns for me. I've returned, a little more, to comedy. I've returned to the world of women...I've returned to motherhood, as the origin of life and fiction. And naturally, I've returned to my mother. To come back to La Mancha is always a return to the womb.)

Almodóvar's return to his mother is echoed in the final scenes of the film as Raimunda proclaims, 'Te necesito mama, no sé cómo he podido vivir todos estos años sin ti.' (I need you Mum. I don't know how I lived all these years without you) However it could be argued that in returning to his mother and the metaphorical

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<sup>217</sup> Almodóvar, 2006, p.191

womb of La Mancha, Almodóvar is again returning to his roots and the “mundo femenino” which he describes as the feminine universe, the world of women. In giving a lead role to female characters throughout the film, Almodóvar strives to challenge, subvert and permanently change those ideals and values engrained in patriarchal society that subordinate women to inferior, silenced positions. As Pilar Aguilar notes, ‘La mayoría de los filmes siguen negando a las mujeres el estatuto de sujetos del relato, siguen relegándolas a una función secundaria, subordinada al protagonista masculino.’<sup>218</sup> (Most films continue to deny women the status of subjects of the narrative, they are still relegated to a secondary role, subordinate to the male protagonist). What is certain to be true, is that Almodóvar challenges this tendency to the utmost, creating a space<sup>219</sup> for women and marginal groups, giving them the platform to have a voice and to carve their own destinies. The juxtaposition of extremely serious aspects and laughter-provoking comedic aspects take *Volver* beyond the unique genre of comedy, as Andy Medhurst notes, ‘*Volver* is not, strictly speaking, a comedy. After all, it begins in a graveyard, tells a story in which rape, sexual abuse, terminal illness, and three murders are pivotal, and juggles a thematic dialectic between betrayal and redemption.’<sup>220</sup> However, this negation of the genre of comedy in itself can only be considered as the ultimate compliment to Pedro Almodóvar as the intertwining of the serious, the tragic, the painful; with the

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<sup>218</sup> Aguilar, 1998, p.182

<sup>219</sup> Arguably, Almodóvar’s film can be described as feminist relating to Luce Irigaray’s definition of the term in creating ‘a space where women can be speakers/agents as women’, Luce Irigaray & Margaret Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.129

<sup>220</sup> Medhurst, 2009, p.131

comedy, the love, the laughter and the hope for the future, all come together to make *Volver* what makes it special, and subsequently come together to make *Volver* Almodóvar's arguably most pioneering film in relation to gender and Spanish film in 21<sup>st</sup> Century cinema.

## **Chapter IV**

# **Redefining the Gaze in *Los Abrazos Rotos***

### **Redefining the gaze in *Los Abrazos Rotos***

Nine years into the 21st Century Spanish Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, and three feature films later<sup>221</sup> enters *Los Abrazos Rotos (Broken Embraces)*, 2009, into the vast filmography of Almodóvar – a film considered somewhat technically and emotionally complicated due to its twists and turns and fragmented narrative structure full of flashbacks and repressed memories. The story tells the tale of a blind screenwriter and former film director, Mateo Blanco who also lives by the name of Harry Caine: a pseudonym used as his own single identity since a horrific car accident fourteen years earlier in the island of Lanzarote, Spain that left him blind and killed the love of his life, Lena. Since this devastating incident, Mateo Blanco has lived as Harry Caine, blocking out the memories of the past and insisting that Mateo Blanco the film director died in Lanzarote in the arms of Lena. The narrative takes the spectator from 2008 back to the 1990s through the medium of storytelling as Harry Caine explains the story to Diego, his writing assistant and son of his ever loyal production director, Judit García. The recent death of Ernesto Martel, a wealthy businessman in the Spanish finance market and the re-appearance of his son Ernesto Junior sparks Diego's interest in the silence that has encompassed both Harry and Judit for

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<sup>221</sup> Each feature film of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century made to date have been studied in this volume: Chapter 1 *Hable con Ella (Talk to Her, 2002)*, Chapter II *La Mala Educación (Bad Education, 2004)* and Chapter III *Volver (To Return, 2006)*.

fourteen years. In numerous flashbacks to the 1990s the story unfolds, revealing a deep and dark history of “amour fou” as Mateo falls in love with Lena, Ernesto’s mistress, provoking a tale of passion, jealousy, obsession, love, lust and death into the films of desire that Almodóvar is so renowned for producing.

From the outset of the narrative as the opening credits roll, Almodóvar provides the spectator with the world so close to his heart that becomes and inevitably is the world of the narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos*; the film set. This opening scene is shot through the camera’s viewfinder – framing in its image a dark haired woman testing the shot before Lena and Mateo Blanco take position. This specific positioning of the spectator behind the camera reflects Teresa de Lauretis’ argument that ‘the cinematic apparatus, in the totality of its operations and effects, produces not merely images but imaging. It binds affect and meaning to images by establishing terms of identification, orienting the movement of desire, and positioning the spectator in relation to them.’<sup>222</sup> In Almodóvar’s technique of filming behind the camera that is in turn filming a scene of a film-within-a-film; he is inviting the audience into the world that produces desire, the world that attracts the spectator’s gaze through the camera’s gaze<sup>223</sup>; the technological processes of filmmaking, hidden in dominant classic cinema, is now exposed in its totality. De Lauretis

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<sup>222</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Oedipus Interruptus”, in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.85

<sup>223</sup> The concept of the gaze will be introduced further in the coming analysis, referring back to previous chapters relating to the male gaze. According to Laura Mulvey, there are three gazes: that of the camera, the spectator and the male protagonist in the diegesis. Mulvey argues that in dominant cinema each of these gazes are considered male, fetishising and fragmenting the female form, rendering it arguably devalued and worthless of being a whole entity. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Feminism and Film*, 2000, Oxford: OUP, pp.39-40



continues her analysis of the apparatus by suggesting that the gaze of the camera at the diegesis, the gaze of the spectator at the film and the intradiegetic gazes of the characters within the narrative 'intersect, join, and relay one another in a complex system which structures vision and meaning'.<sup>224</sup> Almodóvar, through his initial positioning of filming from behind the apparatus, provides the means by which the spectator is privy to this complex system that de Lauretis argues structures vision and meaning; a meaning that often relays from the dominant command of patriarchal structures such as the Hollywood film industry itself, but also of patriarchal society as a whole; often subtly injecting meaning, ideals, values, structures and stereotypes that the spectator absorbs in his or her state of looking at the screen, empathising with characters' plights and fully immersing his or herself in their lives for the duration of the running time of the narrative. Christian Metz in his pioneering work titled '*The Imaginary Signifier*'<sup>225</sup> again takes his analysis behind the technical processes of filmmaking, reflecting in the sense of Apparatus Theory what Almodóvar is portraying through this opening scene:

When I say that 'I see' the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release...releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, pointed yet recording.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> De Lauretis, 2000, p.87

<sup>225</sup> Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier", Robert Stam and Toby Miller(eds.) *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, pp.428-431

<sup>226</sup> Metz, 2000, p.415

By Almodóvar's positioning of the opening scene, transporting the spectator behind the lens of the camera, he is inevitably giving the audience the power of understanding the origins of the gaze he or she will spend the next two hours engrossed behind. Not only that, but it can be furthermore implied that he is providing the audience with the origins of meaning as de Lauretis previously suggested; the framing of the female character within the boundaries of the framed image through the camera's lens could even be considered as a first attempt to challenge those structures and engrained values so intrinsic to patriarchal social structures. The framing of the image possibly suggesting the entrapment of women in patriarchal society, tied to boundaries and limitations that shall be discussed in much depth throughout this analysis.

The following scene portrays the introduction of Harry Caine with the voiceover of Harry himself proclaiming his double-identity through his pseudonym: 'Mateo Blanco y Harry Caine compartieron la misma persona...yo.' (Mateo Blanco and Harry Caine shared the same body...mine.) This concept of identities being fluid and not a fixed black and white binary relates back to Judith Butler's view of the concept of performativity;<sup>227</sup> however, in taking Butler's argument a step further from its aspect of gender and instead relating it to the individual, it could be suggested that each individual persona is not bound to one identity yet can, in fact, carry many within the

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<sup>227</sup> Butler argues that feminism in its definition of gender as two black and white dichotomised entities has made a great error, arguing instead that gender is fluid and not fixed, and that each individual in themselves almost "acts" out what can be considered a gender performance. This performance is performed regardless of whether it fits into the binaries of what is culturally considered to be "true" gender. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge:London, 1990, pp.171-90.

same physical body. Just like Mateo Blanco and Harry Caine share the same body, this personal identity to who Mateo Blanco was previously has now been re-defined, re-configured and invented by himself to suit his own desires and needs. Leslie Broyles in an influential article on the subject of gender identity in Almodovarian Cinema alludes to this point by arguing; 'Hay una distancia entre nuestro ser y nuestra identidad, que lo hace posible manipular o controlar nuestra identidad por medio de cambios a nuestro discurso performativo.'<sup>228</sup> (There's a distance between our being and our identity, which makes it possible to manipulate or control our identity by means of changes to our performative discourse.) This suggestion at the outset of the film narrative puts into practice the fluidity of identity as a concept – further constituting the argument that those identities prescribed to us by patriarchal institutions such as those stereotypical roles produced through the institution of dominant classic cinema can indeed be re-defined, re-configured and instead a new form of representation invented just like Harry Caine has done with his previous identity of Mateo Blanco.

This new life that Harry leads as a blind scriptwriter has enabled him to manipulate his identity to suit his own needs and desires, including the primal desire which is further developed as he brings home a blonde female who helped him cross the road and has now entered his flat to read his paper to him. It becomes clear to the spectator however that Harry isn't as interested in the paper as he is in the attractive

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<sup>228</sup> Leslie Broyles, *La Identidad de Género en el Cine Almodovariano*, <http://www.csun.edu/inverso/documents/Broyles.pdf>, 2010, p.2 (Last accessed 11.01.2011)

blonde female. Almodóvar plays with dominant classic cinema's portrayal of the female as lack<sup>229</sup> filming a medium shot of the stranger as she reads the paper. To the left in the background of the shot is a lava lamp<sup>230</sup>, phallic in shape. Christian Metz in his analysis of the apparatus also analyses the idea of props within the mise-en-scène of a shot, suggesting:

The fetish proper, like the apparatus of the cinema, is a *prop*, the prop that disavows a lack and in doing so affirms it without wishing to. A prop, too, which is as it were *deposited* on the body of the object; a prop which is the penis, since it negates its absence, and hence a partial object that makes the whole object loveable and desirable.<sup>231</sup>

Almodóvar in his positioning of the lava lamp to the left of the shot in which we are introduced to the blonde female both disavows and affirms the lack of the phallus that the female provides in this screen, therefore minimising the threat that she may inevitably cause through her presence on screen. Juliet Mitchell's psychoanalytical perspective seems to agree with Christian Metz in this instance, suggesting that the fetish, in this case the lava lamp, 'substitutes for the missing phallus of the woman...asserts the very presence of it'<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of castration, Ann Kaplan notes that fragmentation can be seen as a form of fetishism, arguing that 'the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat' drawing on Mulvey's argument that 'men, that is, turn 'the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'...' 'Is the gaze male?', *Women and film: both sides of the camera*, London:Methuen,1983, p.31

<sup>230</sup> The lava lamp, phallic in shape, can also be seen in *Hable con Ella (Talk to Her)*, 2002) and previously studied in Chapter I of this volume.

<sup>231</sup> Metz, 2000, p.431

<sup>232</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.85

However the characterisation of a blind male protagonist within the narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos* adds a further confusing dimension to the previously mentioned idea of the 'male gaze'.<sup>233</sup> As Mulvey eloquently argues, the male gaze is portrayed through three avenues; the male spectator, the camera behind which is the male filmmaker and the male protagonist. However, this idea of the gaze is somewhat distorted when the male protagonist is in fact blind with no scopic possibilities whatsoever. The dominant cinema arguably has a tendency to fragment the female form within the scopic vision of the male gaze, however in this instance there is no scope for this identification with the male protagonist. Mulvey argues that the spectator 'projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.'<sup>234</sup> Almodóvar in this scene provides an oppositional outlook on this concept of 'woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look'<sup>235</sup> as Harry Caine is no longer an active controller of the look in the physical sense of its meaning. Instead, it could be suggested that Almodóvar provides the spectator with what can be considered an oppositional gaze within the narrative. Mary Ann Doane raises this question by asking, 'even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent

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<sup>233</sup> According to Mulvey, and developed further in footnote 3, there are three 'gazes' in film, all of which are male, functioning exclusively in line with male desire. These three male gazes are the camera, the audience and the male protagonist. 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>234</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.41

<sup>235</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.42

her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?’<sup>236</sup>

It is argued therefore that Almodóvar does exactly this: as the blonde female is describing herself physically to Harry Caine, she intimates that she is wearing “unos vaqueros ajustados” (tight jeans), the camera immediately cuts to an extreme close shot of a crotch – it would be considered almost natural in dominant cinema that this extreme fragmented close shot would be that of a female fragmented image;<sup>237</sup> however it becomes apparent that the shot is instead a shot of Harry’s crotch, as he suggestively repeats the word ‘ajustados’ (tight), for emphasis. As the camera cuts further to a reverse shot, it becomes clear to the spectator that the owner of the gaze fragmenting Harry’s crotch was in fact the female character as she gazes at his genitalia. This could almost be considered what should arguably be deemed oppositional fragmentation, reversing the norm and instead appropriating a new oppositional outlook on desire and the gaze which has been stereotypically male hitherto.

However, in providing this oppositional outlook, Almodóvar presents a reminder that this is just one small step forward in a lifetime of engrained patriarchal values and that it will inevitably take time to further appropriate the tendencies of filmmaking to modern day society. Teresa de Lauretis suggests, in line with dominant cinema, that ‘the woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of

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<sup>236</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” in Stam, R & Miller, T (eds), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, p.498

<sup>237</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.31

the male character(s).<sup>238</sup> The previous oppositional gaze Almodóvar provides is short lived as the reminder that these are in fact engrained values and tendencies linked to patriarchal society and in turn reflected in film is provided through Harry as he touches the female and the camera follows his touch and focuses on a fragmented shot of her breasts cupped in his hands. Although Harry's scopic regime is missing, that of the camera and of the male spectator still remains; both are male, presenting the fragmented shot of the breasts as desire, again suggesting 'woman as icon'<sup>239</sup> for the pleasure of the male gaze.

The characterisation of females in his film leads this discussion to the characterisation of the main female protagonist: Magdalena, known throughout the film as Lena. Through a flashback to 1992 the spectator is presented with the background to Lena and Mateo's love affair as the spectator is shown Ermar Capital – the empire created by Ernesto Martel in the 80s. Lena is introduced to the narrative through her professional role as secretary to Ernesto Martel and her familiar role as daughter to her father who is gravely ill with cancer and her mother who is trying to keep the family unit together. Almodóvar provides a sense of strong female characterisation as Lena and her mother help their weak father into the taxi as he is released from hospital to die. This scene portrays the family unit together during times of hardship – the powerful strong father figure that patriarchy builds has been broken down in this scene and it is both women of the family who have to

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<sup>238</sup> De Lauretis, 2000, p.87

<sup>239</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.42

inevitably take a stronger stance in order to keep the family unit tight. Arguably, this could not only be a portrayal of strong female characterisation, but as an attack on the idea of patriarchy as a whole, with the father being the pinnacle of the family unit – Almodóvar’s portrayal of family often considers and takes a more matriarchal form, and this is reflected in his film narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos*.

It can be noted that Lena in her role of trying to care for her father and in turn her mother as she struggles to deal with his illness determines the lengths to which she will go to earn money. Again, the spectator is provided with fluid identities through the characterisation of Lena and her pseudonym as a ‘working girl’ as Severine.

Broyles argues this point in relation to Almodóvar’s 1986 film *Matador* by suggesting:

Un cambio de ropa la ayuda a alternar entre dos identidades, la de una abogada respetada y la de una femme fatale matadora. En su traje profesional, actúa el papel de mujer profesional durante el día. De noche, se viste de ropa exageradamente femenina para efectuar el rol de seductora asesina.<sup>240</sup> (A change of clothes helps her alternate between two identities, that of a respectable lawyer and that of a killing femme fatale. In her professional attire, she acts the role of professional woman during the day. At night, she dresses in extremely feminine clothing to become the role of seductive killer.)

Almodóvar directly re-portrays a similar scene in *Los Abrazos Rotos* as Lena calls Madame Mylene looking for some extra work as she urgently needs money. It is suggested through this scene that the extra work is of a sexual nature as the shot cuts from Lena in her professional attire to a post-phone call shot of Lena in a bright red see-through considerably sexy dress. Heavily made-up, there is a stark contrast

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<sup>240</sup> Broyles, 2010, p.2



to the Lena seen previously working for Ernesto. Broyles further argues the case of gender as construct, 'los instrumentos usados en la construcción de feminidad como maquillaje, ropa, etc., enfatizan desde el principio la artificialidad de la identidad femenina'<sup>241</sup> (The instruments used in the construction of femininity such as makeup, clothing etc...emphasize from the outset the artificiality of the feminine identity.) The importance here of the sudden change from professional secretary to a type of femme fatale in her seductive red dress suggests again the fluidity of identity. Broyles refers to it as the artificiality of the feminine identity; however, it could be considered as more of an inclination to deem the identities fluid rather than fixed. Not only does Mateo/Harry in his role as male protagonist appropriate his identity for his own needs and desires; Almodóvar offers the female protagonist the same option – Lena's identity changes for the need of money in order to send her father to a private clinic.

However, this appropriation of a desire to make things happen is short lived as the camera cuts from the image of Severine to a shot of Lena in bed – there is again a further stark contrast to the previous scene as she wears no makeup and is instead in a totally natural state as she calls Ernesto to inform him her father is dying. Molly Haskell eloquently argues, '...in films working women...were given a pseudo-toughness, a façade of steel wool that at a man's touch would turn into cotton

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<sup>241</sup> Broyles, 2010, p.2

candy'.<sup>242</sup> Up until this precise moment in the film, Lena has been portrayed through the camera's lens as a tough professional woman who insists on fending for herself even through the toughest of times (including turning to a trade of selling herself through the adult market to make money). However as Lena calls Ernesto informing him of the plight of her father, this 'façade of steel wool' as Haskell puts it is quickly broken down as she inevitably sells herself to Ernesto in exchange for him taking care of her father in a private clinic. The independent, professional Lena is quickly broken down under the control of the patriarch represented by Ernesto. Christine Gledhill puts forward the argument that 'the patriarchal subject is constructed as a unified, consistent, but illusory identity – a 'self' whose words appear to give it control of a world to which it is central'.<sup>243</sup> In combination of both Molly Haskell and Christine Gledhill's arguments, it could be suggested that under the power of the patriarchal subject Ernesto, the steel wool professional façade of Lena melts as she succumbs to the known protection that Ernesto and his powerful patriarchal empire provide.

In a flashback to Madrid in 1994, Almodóvar transports the spectator to this patriarchal world that Lena has inevitably settled into becoming mistress to Ernesto Martel. The camera shoots a medium shot of Lena as she is in front of the mirror, doing her makeup and curling her eyelashes. Mary Ann Doane in her influential article 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', draws on Joan

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<sup>242</sup> Molly Haskell, "The Woman's Film", in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.29

<sup>243</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations" pp166-179 in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.167

Riviere's pioneering theory of the masquerade,<sup>244</sup> questioning the reasons behind 'why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity, in other words, foreground the masquerade'.<sup>245</sup> She further argues that the masquerade 'in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance...to masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image'.<sup>246</sup> Lena in this scene by doing her makeup and curling her eyelashes can be seen to be foregrounding the masquerade – however, it is important to bear in mind that this mask, that can be worn or removed as both Doane and Riviere suggest, is a mask worn portraying femininity as patriarchy itself views it. For the act of putting on makeup needs to be analysed in itself – for whose benefit do women put on this mask? Could it be, as Doane suggests, in order to manufacture a distance between oneself and one's image?<sup>247</sup> Or is it in fact for the benefit of those at the top of the hierarchy, the dominant social structures that have engrained their ideals and values on society for centuries? For it can be argued that the act of putting on makeup is to make oneself desirable to the male, to play the mating games in luring the male's attention and, in turn, attraction to the female image. Lena furthers this argument later in the narrative as she says 'si hubiera pensado que estabas muerto no me

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<sup>244</sup> Joan Riviere argues that 'Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.', "Womanliness as a Masquerade", *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality*, Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek (ed.), New Haven, CN: College and University Press, 1966, p.213

<sup>245</sup> Doane, 2000, p.502

<sup>246</sup> Doane, 2000, p.502

<sup>247</sup> I would agree wholly with this argument as it could be suggested that Lena in the film narrative uses her attractive qualities in order to get what she wants – in order to become an actress, she needs the financial backing of Ernesto who is the producer and financier of Mateo Blanco's film. By wearing the mask, Lena lures Ernesto under her spell, making herself up for him and sleeping with him until her desires for Mateo take over her desires for fame and fortune. Doane, 2000, p.502

habría maquillado para ti' (If I'd thought you were dead I wouldn't have got made up for you.) This again brings to the forefront of the debate the idea of femininity as constructed according to the needs and demands of patriarchal values of what a woman ideally should be in the eyes of the Law of the Father. Almodóvar's positioning of Ernesto's presence in the shot as Lena is curling her eyelashes in the mirror is of extreme importance as it suggests the presence of patriarchal structures in the determination of the ideal femininity of a woman.

However not only do patriarchal structures arguably influence the ideal femininity of what a woman should be, they also considerably influence what can only be described as the patriarchal 'norm' when the attention is turned to sexuality within the narrative. Paul Julian Smith has extensively researched on the topic of questioning homosexuality in Spanish writing and film in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and many of his arguments can be directly applied to films of the present day. He eloquently argues that homosexuality 'presented both as a mimicry of the heterosexual (an attempt to recreate its structures) and as a deviation from it (a perversion of the natural order.)'<sup>248</sup> This 'perversion of the natural order' that Smith subscribes to is overtly insinuated in the diegesis of *Los Abrazos Rotos* through the patriarchal figure of Ernesto as his ex wife calls him regarding the fact his son, Ernesto Junior, has been caught wearing her dresses. He instantly casts this idea as negative and out of the ordinary stating that his ex wife deliberately made him

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<sup>248</sup> Paul Julian Smith, *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p.141

effeminate in order to humiliate him. Ernesto turns to Lena and proclaims, 'La madre me ha dicho que es un poco maricón...Si le invito, me gustaría si me dijeras si es verdad, o si crees que tiene arreglo' (His mother says he's a bit of a fairy...if I invite him, I'd like you to tell me if it's true, and if you think it can be fixed). This statement instantly suggests the idea of homosexuality as wrong; as a deviation and perversion of the natural order to which Paul Julian Smith notes. This is further emphasised by the dialogue of his sexuality being 'fixed' – as if the sexual 'norm' according to patriarchy should be the default setting of sexuality as a concept, and that the re-setting of sexuality can be applied almost at the click of a button in order to 'fix' this perversion. However, Almodóvar in the placing of this overtly homophobic discourse within the narrative instead strives to tackle it, to reverse and re-appropriate what is considered the norm within the structure of his narratives. Almodóvar, as has been seen in the previous films analysed in this volume, further presents homosexuality as naturally existent within his scripts, just like it is naturally existent in present day society. His homosexual characters require no 'coming out',<sup>249</sup> yet instead exist.

Smith continues his analysis of sexuality suggesting:

We find no 'Good Homosexuals' in Almodóvar. Unlike Eloy de la Iglesia in the previous decade, he is not concerned with affirming the dignity of a homosexual identity which had been deprived of access to the cinema.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Smith discusses the problematic of the closet and coming out and the fact Almodóvar rarely addresses this concept in his film narratives, 1992, p.5

<sup>250</sup> Smith, 1992, p.202

This suggestion by Smith is again subtly portrayed in *Los Abrazos Rotos* by the character of Ernesto Junior, who is also known by his screen name of Ray X. The characterisation of Ray X provides not only the catalyst to the cathartic revelation of the hidden secrets both Harry Caine and Judit García have been guarding for fourteen years; yet Ray X also adorns the narrative with its almost evil, villain-type mysterious character. Almodóvar finds himself under no means obligated to provide his narrative with a 'Good Homosexual' as Smith notes; neither does he feel a necessity to characterise his villain as a stereotypical heterosexual 'macho' man. Ray X, formally known as Ernesto Junior, is sensitive yet strong. In his characterisation of homosexuality as existent and normal along with a blatant critique of homophobic discourse in patriarchal society and reflected in film, Almodóvar continues to provide a platform upon which marginalised groups begin a process of de-marginalisation.

This process of what could be considered de-marginalisation is examined further by Almodóvar through his varying characterisation of the persona of Lena throughout the narrative. The professional Lena witnessed by the spectator in the initial sense is now, under the guise of the mistress of Ernesto Martel, relegated to the role of Ernesto's housewife. Molly Haskell provides a crucial theory to the analysis of the female in *Los Abrazos Rotos* by arguing:

The circumscribed world of the housewife corresponds to the state of woman in general, confronted by a range of options so limited she might as well inhabit a cell. The persistent irony is that she is dependent for her well-being and 'fulfilment' on

*Redefining Gender in Twenty-First Century Spanish Cinema: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*

institutions – marriage, motherhood – that by translating the word ‘woman’ into ‘wife’ and ‘mother,’ end her independent identity.<sup>251</sup>

It is through the role of housewife that Almodóvar examines, challenges and subsequently reconstructs the stereotypes and engrained values patriarchy has served to society. As Lena insinuates that she wants to work, Ernesto suggests ‘¿No ibas a redecorar la casa?...hay que cambiar muebles, alfombras, lámparas...’ (Weren’t you going to redecorate the house? You have to change the furniture, carpets, lamps...). Lena’s instant dismissal of this type of ‘work’ leads Ernesto to concede he will hire a decorator but that Lena will need to guide him so ‘así de paso, aprendes’ (that way, you’ll learn). The insinuation made by Almodóvar here, in tandem with Molly Haskell’s argument of woman as housewife so limited in her options she might as well inhabit a cell<sup>252</sup>, suggests the idea of women under patriarchy as the ‘home maker’; that the males of the family will go out to work and be the breadwinners while the females make the home and prepare it for their offspring. The independent identity that Lena first possesses at the outset of the film has been ended through her role of mistress of Ernesto. However, Almodóvar’s wish to break the bars of the cell that the female inhabits in her role as housewife is fruitful in the narrative discourse as Ernesto worries that Mateo will give Lena a leading acting role in his coming film, to which she replies; ‘no cambiaría nada excepto que yo también trabajaría, cómo tú’ (nothing will change, except that I’ll be working too, like you). This idea of employment equality within the patriarchal

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<sup>251</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.22

<sup>252</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.22

household unit evidently disturbs Ernesto as he quickly asks Lena to marry him – reinforcing Molly Haskell's argument that by turning the word 'woman' into 'wife' will inevitably end her independent identity.<sup>253</sup> Laura Mulvey joins the debate on marriage in her analysis of the Proppian tale<sup>254</sup> arguing that the 'rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence'.<sup>255</sup> It could be however further noted, that the idea that Ernesto's proposal of marriage to conform to her destiny as a woman will tempt and pull Lena away from her desires to work and become an actress, is instantly broken through Lena's quick rejection, suggesting that they are fine as they are due to their co-habitation for over two years. In contrast to a celebration of phallic omnipotence as Mulvey suggests, it could be argued that the rejection of marriage in this case is a rejection of phallocentric omnipotence in society as a whole; Lena's determination to work and change the boundaries set down for her through her role as Ernesto's mistress could almost be considered as metaphorical to Almodóvar's determination to work to change the boundaries implied to females through the medium of dominant film.

Almodóvar continues this redefinition of gender boundaries within the film discourse through his characterisation of strong female characters. Not only is Lena in her initial scenes a professional and hardworking bilingual secretary to Ernesto Martel, the narrative provides the spectator with further strong characters such as that of

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<sup>253</sup> Haskell, 1999, p.22

<sup>254</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946), in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.126

<sup>255</sup> Mulvey, 1999, p.126



Judit García, Mateo's well known agent and production director, again, bilingual as she appears in scenes speaking English with American scriptwriters. This strong female characterisation is further continued through the medium of the humorous element of the professional lip reader that Ernesto employs in order to deconstruct Ernesto Junior's inaudible documentary footage from behind the scenes of the film set. This is again another attempt by Almodóvar at creating the professional female within his films – the lip reader is evidently educated to a high level, breaking the boundaries previously discussed as woman as housewife, subscribed to the engulfing and limiting confines of woman as house maker. Even through the fictional script '*Chicas y Maletas*' (*Girls and Suitcases*), almost arguably reminiscent in an self-tribute to his script of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*), 1988, that Mateo Blanco is filming throughout the narrative is the audience introduced to Chon – a Government Minister of Social Affairs. This is a further example of the female in a raised level of employment and therefore social status. Leslie Broyles notes that 'los personajes femeninos...rechazan de una forma u otra su condición de victima y actúan para liberarse de los roles sociales femeninos que son la causa de su insatisfacción'<sup>256</sup> (the feminine characters...reject in one form or another, their condition as a victim and they act to free themselves of the social feminine roles that are the cause of their dissatisfaction). The character of Lena reinforces this argument by protesting to Ernesto Junior to remind his father 'que ya soy mayor...y libre' (that I'm a grown up...and free). This is arguably, in line with

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<sup>256</sup> Broyles, 2010, p.6

Broyles' argument, a possible reflection of the type of woman Almodóvar is intent on portraying through the powerful weapon<sup>257</sup> that is the medium of film. The image of a woman who is free; released from the incarcerating silence, absence and marginality that patriarchy and in turn dominant Hollywood cinema has allocated to her. Almodóvar's attempts at breaking with these stereotypes in dominant cinema of woman as housewife, mother and wife (as Haskell suggests) portrays the wider attempt he has been making in each and every feature film, especially those of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; to redefine and re-appropriate issues of gender to suit an ideal society free from the confining restraints of patriarchal stereotypes.

However, in Almodóvar's attempts to destabilise and subvert existing traditions in order to redefine the discourse of cinema – he must first construct, deconstruct and reconstruct those existing traditions already in place. One of these traditions crucial to the film narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos* is voyeurism and scopophilia.<sup>258</sup> Mulvey draws on Freudian theory of scopophilia as the pleasure in looking, arguing that it exists in the form of 'pleasure in looking at another person as object'<sup>259</sup> further suggesting that at an extreme level it turns into a perversion 'producing obsessive voyeurs and peeping toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.'<sup>260</sup> The idea of a peeping tom is repeatedly alluded to throughout the film through the character of Ernesto Junior in his role of filming a documentary of Mateo and Lena's film set for Ernesto Martel

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<sup>257</sup> Kaplan, 1983, p.34

<sup>258</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.37

<sup>259</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.37

<sup>260</sup> Mulvey, 2000, p.37

and his professional lip reader to analyse. Up until the previous scene when Lena rejects Ernesto Junior and insists she is a free woman he has always shot his documentary on set, as agreed with Mateo from the outset. However, in an extremely obsessive attempt to watch Lena, Ernesto Martel instructs his son to film out with the documentary in the studio and in order to please his father, Ernesto Junior accepts. The camera cuts to Ernesto hiding in the dark as he films Lena meeting Mateo. This shot is filmed through Ernesto's camera; handheld as the image shakily zooms out filming Mateo enter the block of flats. There is a fade to black as the shot resumes with a silhouette of Mateo and Lena kissing through a balcony window. Mulvey further notes that these conditions and conventions mean that the spectator is given an 'illusion of looking in on a private world'.<sup>261</sup> Both Lena and Mateo do not know they are being watched – the power is in the hands of the voyeur, Ernesto Junior, subsequently in the hands of his father as he knows of the secret affair, and in turn, the power is also in the hands of the spectator. However this power the voyeur upholds in what Christian Metz deems the scopic arrangement<sup>262</sup> requires an adequate distance 'a gulf, an empty space, between the object and the gaze'<sup>263</sup> in order to keep this arrangement of power through the scopic sense intact. The mere fact Lena and Mateo do not know they are being watched gives Ernesto Martel the power over his mistress; however Almodóvar is quick to break this scopic arrangement and hand the power to the strong female

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<sup>261</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.37-38

<sup>262</sup> Metz, 2000, p.421

<sup>263</sup> Metz, 2000, p.421

character Lena as she catches Ernesto Junior filming her outside of the film set. This is fully conveyed in the following scene which can arguably be considered one of the most moving scenes in the film narrative as Almodóvar makes clever use of bringing the filmed documentary images to reality as Lena interrupts the lip reader narrating the previous voyeuristic scene Ernesto Junior had filmed. Lena enters saying 'enfócame' (focus on me), and lip reads the scene herself as she speaks directly to the camera's lens, directing both her extra-diegetic and diegetic speech to Ernesto himself; informing him that she has just been with the man she loves who loves her too and that he no longer needs to spy on them because there is now nothing to hide. This closing of voyeuristic desire and the bridging of the distance gap that Metz eloquently alludes to is emphasised through Lena's direct gaze at the camera – subsequently gazing directly at Ernesto and at the spectator too. Broyles' suggestion that 'las mujeres...se muestran más fuertes e independientes que los hombres' (women...portray themselves as stronger and more independent than men) seems to echo resonantly in this scene as Lena makes her choice to be with the man she loves.

However the presence of patriarchy is never to be underestimated as the metaphorical patriarchal figure of Ernesto pushes Lena down the stairs in what can only be described as a beautifully melodramatic series of images. The camera cuts to a close shot of modern artwork stating 'Je t'aime', possibly suggesting the juxtaposition of both the true love between Lena and Mateo and the false love between Lena and Ernesto. Kaja Silverman argues that disavowal and fetishism can be considered as 'certain strategies deployed by classic cinema for concealing that

loss<sup>264</sup> of the object. Fetishism, specifically in relation to phallic images of fragmented body parts, is cleverly deployed in this scene, arguably not only concealing the imminent loss of Lena to Ernesto, but also the loss of Ernesto's patriarchal and omnipotent power. The camera pans out to reveal a medium close shot of Lena which sharply cuts to an extreme close shot of Ernesto's feet walking up the stairs. His ankles, phallic in shape suggest the power of the phallus; and its patriarchal bearings are evident as the sound of Ernesto's heavy footsteps overpower the audio. This phallic image is mirrored by Almodóvar this time with Lena's phallic shaped legs and bright red high phallic heels – another powerful image of femininity as she walks towards Ernesto, proclaiming that she is leaving him definitively. To the left of this shot is another artwork, this time portraying the image of three knives – also arguably phallic in shape, yet also possibly representing the ominous death of Lena and the three-way triangle of deceit that is occurring within the narrative.

Paul Julian Smith suggests that the concept of the angle of the camera possibly denotes the idea of class structures within a filmic narrative.<sup>265</sup> The camera angle from above, according to Smith, looks down on an impoverished character; while the camera angle looks up from the impoverished character to the bourgeois. It is here that I would like to argue the case for these camera angles as Smith suggests, could in fact, in the narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos*, reflect not class structures but

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<sup>264</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects", in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.100

<sup>265</sup> Smith, 1992, pp.141-142

patriarchal structures. As Ernesto pushes Lena down the stairs, a reverse shot of Lena's view is portrayed by the camera's lens as she looks up to see Ernesto, powerfully puffing out his chest – the image of the patriarchal man looking down on the now powerless and helpless female. She tries to move to escape Ernesto but is helpless and in pain. Sharon Smith eloquently argues this point by suggesting that the role of a woman in film almost certainly revolves around the mating games she plays with the male characters,<sup>266</sup> arguing even when she is the main character 'she is generally shown as confused, or helpless and in danger, or passive'.<sup>267</sup> This is portrayed directly in the stair scene as Almodóvar places Lena in a helpless state; she has suddenly, at the push of the patriarch, been transformed from a strong independent woman leaving the life that was the cause of her dissatisfaction, into a helpless and passive woman, trapped under the physical and emotional presence of Ernesto as she suffers a broken leg along with other injuries. As he rushes down the stairs declaring 'date la vuelta mi amor, yo te ayudo' (turn over, my love, I'll help you) the solemn extra-diegetic music suggests Lena is again trapped within his power. Reminiscent of the initial scenes of *Los Abrazos Rotos*, Ernesto proclaims 'yo me encargo de todo' (I'll take care of everything), again deeming Lena to her passive and helpless state, entrapped within his world through his money and power. This particular scene could be described as almost disturbing as Ernesto comes across extremely caring and worried for her; the idea of domestic violence within

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<sup>266</sup> Sharon Smith, "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research", in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.14

<sup>267</sup> Smith, 1999, pp.14-15

patriarchal structures is subtly hinted through his attitude as if it were an accident when it is clear to both Lena and the spectator that he did in fact intentionally push her down the stairs in order to cease any action of her leaving him definitively. This emotional blackmail is felt through Lena's gaze at Ernesto as she appears confused, emotionless, helpless and trapped.

In the following scene as Lena returns home, Ernesto thanks her for her discretion on the matter and promises to do what she wants as long as she promises to stay with him. Almodóvar provides Lena with the chance to regain agency in some sense as she makes Ernesto promise to let Mateo finish the film shoot in any way he desires. However, this agency is short lived and not complete; she is not in full control of her agency as she is stuck 'with' Ernesto as he is still the producer and financier of the film.

The death of Lena brings to the forefront another relationship, the hidden former relationship of Mateo and Judit. Now that Mateo has lost the love of his life and his sight he refuses to continue being the same man he once was, declaring 'Mateo ha muerto' (Mateo is dead). 'Las imágenes son la base de su trabajo...vivir en la oscuridad supongo que para él es la muerte' ( His work revolves around images...I guess that for him living in the dark is death). Judit now takes the place of Mateo's eyes as he leaves the hospital as Harry Caine; his former life is buried with Lena in her grave and only reappears fourteen years later with the re-appearance of Ernesto Junior. As Judit takes Harry's gaze and leads him as he takes his first steps as a blind

man the camera cuts to a reverse shot of his gaze which, as he is now blind, is a black image filling the whole shot. This shot powerfully conveys the male gaze<sup>268</sup> as void, as no longer powerful, objectifying and fragmenting – surpassing the norms set by patriarchy owing the male gaze a sense of ultimate ownership of the gaze in film.

The final scenes of the film convey in absolute the attempts Almodóvar has made and continues to make in the redefinition of gender within contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish cinema. As Diego attempts to reconstruct some of Mateo's photographs, the camera pans out to reveal a table full of fragmented, torn and shredded pieces of photos; many of which contain embraces between Mateo and Lena; now broken embraces that Diego feels is his duty to reconstruct. These broken embraces could metaphorically be argued to represent the broken fragments of representation in film; existing dominant traditions and values exist in broken fragments, piece by piece building stereotypes which cannot be considered true to modern day society. Almodóvar, just like Diego, feels it is his duty as a filmmaker to reconstruct and in turn reconfigure these representations to provide a more accurate outlook not only in Spanish film but in dominant society as a whole. The film culminates with an extremely powerful phrase; 'las películas hay que terminirlas, aunque sea a ciegas' (films have to be finished, even if you do it blindly). This connotes the idea that not only do you have to finish films even if you do it blindly; yet metaphorically you have to keep striving to finish what you aimed for in the beginning, even if other people are blind to it. Breaking the stereotypes and

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<sup>268</sup> Mulvey, 2000, pp.39-40



barriers patriarchy inflict on society and subsequently reflect in dominant film has been Almodóvar's passion throughout his career so far as a filmmaker, and arguably, he has not ceased in his efforts to deconstruct, construct and reconstruct the image of gender as portrayed through the medium of film. Almodóvar will finish this passionate mission, even if the world is blind to it; piece by piece his reconstruction, redefinition and refiguring of broken fragments will culminate in the destabilisation of traditions and the creation of a 'New Spanish Cinema' through a redefined gaze in film.

# Conclusion

## **Conclusion**

The overall aim of my research has been to examine, analyse and argue the case for the evolving portrayal, cultural conception and, most importantly, the redefinition of gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century filmography of Pedro Almodóvar. Cinema can be considered as a reflection of social values, ideas, morals and changes – the reflections of which can be transported through the filmic narrative arguably resulting in processes of contestation and change in not only the minds of the spectators in the auditorium, but in the mind of society as a whole. As previously cited in the introduction to this research, cinema has ‘provided a key means by which to refigure national identity or, indeed, to challenge its very foundations.’<sup>269</sup> This challenging of foundations and breaking of boundaries, stereotypes and engrained ideals pertaining to patriarchal, phallocentric society has been crucial to this analysis of representations of gender as reflected in film. Psychoanalysis has been used as a tool, in the midst of a gender-based theoretical framework, to not only provide a contemporary insight into Almodóvar’s recent work; but to deconstruct, analyse and gain in-depth insight into strategies used by Almodóvar in order to challenge these repressive stereotypes of gender and sexuality throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> Century filmography.

Chapter I in its analysis of the 2002 film *Hable Con Ella (Talk to Her)* examines how the representations of femininity and masculinity, pertaining to the active male and

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<sup>269</sup> Steven Marsh & Parvati Nair (eds.), *Gender and Spanish Cinema*, Oxford: Berg, 2004, p.3

passive female dichotomy,<sup>270</sup> have arguably challenged earlier stereotypes of invisibility inflicted on the silent<sup>271</sup> image of females in film; and in turn initiating the transformation from object to subject in the filmic narrative and diegetic discourse. This silent image of females in film, and subsequently in society, is portrayed eloquently by Almodóvar through his characterisation of both female protagonists in a comatose state in hospital. It is through this passive and motionless state that the two male protagonists bond with connotations of homosexuality arguably exposing and redefining sexuality and gender issues in the narrative. It is submitted that Almodóvar, in his exposing of stereotypes and representations pertaining to the ideals of patriarchal society, in fact challenges these stereotypes and arguably breaks them, giving both females *and* males roles in film that destabilise and subvert existing traditions. His characterisation in lead roles of marginal characters in the film reinforces the idea that challenging the authoritarian patriarchal values that are firmly engrained in the roots of society can in fact be re-appropriated, re-formed and re-figured; creating a new way of thinking the sexual and providing a redefinition of gender representations at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The aim of the analysis of Chapter II has been to deconstruct the portrayal of crossed identities and performance in the 2004 film *La Mala Educación (Bad Education)* specifically in relation to the sexuality of the male protagonists of the film. With the

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<sup>270</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Feminism and Film*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>271</sup> E. Ann Kaplan puts forward the idea that 'patriarchal myths function to position women as silent, absent, and marginal'. "Is the gaze male?", *Women and film: both sides of the camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.30

majority of the male characters in the narrative engaged in either homosexuality, homoeroticism or transvestism it is argued that these representations of the male gender are overt criticisms and challenges of the engrained ideas existing in patriarchal society that deem homosexuality as marginal, unnatural and until relatively recently, unlawful.<sup>272</sup> Through the examination of identity, performance and coded discourse which can arguably be noted as an attack on religion, phallocentrism and its values and conventions, Almodóvar takes his active role as filmmaker to the next stage, moving from the subjugation of the feminine so ever present in dominant Hollywood cinema, into giving females and other marginalised groups full agency and a space for their own discourse in what has been a largely male-dominated environment. The male-dominated discourse of *La Mala Educación* provides a uniquely appropriate platform onto which the wider issue of marginality in society can be discussed, deconstructed and subsequently re-constructed; in turn, stretching the boundaries of Spanish film in contemporary Spanish society and epitomising the idea of a “New Spanish Cinema” into which marginalised groups have importantly as much protagonism as any other group in society.

The return to the feminine world is portrayed in Chapter III, through the analysis of the 2006 film *Volver (Return)* as Almodóvar this time provides a platform for his strong female characters to have a voice and be an active agent in Spanish Cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Almodóvar, in the filmic narrative of *Volver* and characterisation of

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<sup>272</sup> See Paul Julian Smith *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film 1960-1990*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992 for an in depth analysis of the history of sexuality in Spanish film and society from dictatorship to democracy.

his protagonist, Raimunda, brings to the forefront of the agenda the plight of the female in society, striving to break the boundaries of the stereotypical roles assigned to women in film, ending her independent identity.<sup>273</sup> In his strong characterisation of female roles in the narrative, Almodóvar strives to challenge, subvert and permanently change those ideals and values engrained in patriarchal society that subordinate women to the inferior, silenced positions that were exposed in Chapter I in relation to *Hable con Ella*. Almodóvar challenges this tendency to the upmost, creating a space<sup>274</sup> for women and marginal groups, giving them the platform to have a voice and to carve out their own destinies.

The final chapter culminates in the ultimate redefinition of the gaze in the 2009 film *Los Abrazos Rotos (Broken Embraces)* as Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze<sup>275</sup> in film is challenged through the characterisation of a blind male protagonist. Not only does this pose a difficulty in the portrayal of the female image through the eyes of the male protagonist; it also provides a unique opportunity for Almodóvar to subvert this existing tradition of fetishising and fragmenting<sup>276</sup> the female image to suit the

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<sup>273</sup> Molly Haskell, "The Woman's Film", in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: EUP, 1999, p.24

<sup>274</sup> Arguably, Almodóvar's film can be described as feminist relating to Luce Irigaray's definition of the term in creating 'a space where women can be speakers/agents as women', Luce Irigaray & Margaret Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.129

<sup>275</sup> According to Mulvey, there are three 'gazes' in film, all of which are male, functioning exclusively in line with male desire. These three male gazes are the camera, the audience and the male protagonist. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Feminism and Film*, 2000, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp.39-40

<sup>276</sup> Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of castration, Ann Kaplan notes that fragmentation can be seen as a form of fetishism, arguing that 'the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat' drawing on Mulvey's argument that 'men, that is, turn 'the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'...' 'Is the gaze male?', *Women and film: both sides of the camera*, London: Methuen, 1983, p.31

needs of the male creator and patriarchal male-dominated society as a whole. *Los Abrazos Rotos* presents a platform onto which the powerful tool of psychoanalysis can be used to deconstruct, construct, re-construct and, in turn, arguably redefine portrayals of gender that exist within the narrative and are reflections of those portrayals pertaining to dominant society. The metaphorical patriarchal image of Ernesto Martel serves as a reminder of the centuries-old legacies of sexual and gender discrimination that has taken place in film and society respectively; and also provides a stepping stone onto which the female protagonist can challenge archaic gender politics, redefining and re-appropriating her gaze to a new contemporary era of Spanish filmmaking.

However, the narrative of *Los Abrazos Rotos* presents the spectator with a reminder that these redefinitions and re-appropriations are a work in progress as the film ends with a powerful phrase that encapsulates the crux of this analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish Cinema: 'las películas hay que terminirlas, aunque sea a ciegas' (films have to be finished, even if you do it blindly). Breaking the patriarchal stereotypes and barriers evident in society and subsequently reflected in film has been Almodóvar's passion throughout his career, and arguably, he has not ceased in his efforts to deconstruct, construct and reconstruct the image of gender as portrayed through the medium of film. This passion will continue through his work, even if the world is blind to it; and piece by piece his reconstruction, redefinition and refiguring of

broken fragments will culminate in the destabilisation of traditions and the creation of a 'New Spanish Cinema' through a redefined gaze in film.

This redefined gaze of femininity and masculinity can be argued to have evolved not only in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but furthermore, in Almodóvar's 21<sup>st</sup> Century filmography itself. The evolutionary process of femininity from the silent image of the female in *Hable con Ella*; the overly effeminate drag queen in *La Mala Educación*; the feminine world in *Volver*; and the oppositional gaze brought to focus through the lack of the male gaze in *Los Abrazos Rotos*: ultimately leads to the conclusion that in his two most recent films, Almodóvar has provided a platform which gives the female agency and a valid voice. In turn, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has also allowed for a new representation of the masculine: the sensitive characterisation of Benigno and Marco in *Hable con Ella*; the protagonism of the homosexual male in *La Mala Educación*; and the destruction of the patriarchal and male gaze in *Los Abrazos Rotos* are each arguably vital aspects to the subsequent redefinition of gender in Almodóvar's contemporary Spanish Cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair have argued that cinema is a tool to convey social messages, having the 'capacity to reinforce, challenge and subvert configurations of identity',<sup>277</sup> suggesting that it puts forward endless possibilities to 'transform, refract and breach the imagined horizons of social identity'.<sup>278</sup> It is this argument exactly that I believe encapsulates the work of Almodóvar, not only in his pioneering work of

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<sup>277</sup> Marsh & Nair, 2004, p.1

<sup>278</sup> Marsh & Nair, 2004, p.1



the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but in his portrayals of gender and sexuality in his contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century filmography to date. The work of Almodóvar provides an international source that has the capacity to penetrate society and its subsequent configurations in relation to the representations of gendered and sexual identities. These new images of gender representations appear at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in which the focus is characterised by the tensions between subjective experience and the broader social collectivity. Almodóvar attempts to not only expose, but overtly challenge the dominant patriarchal ideals and values that have influenced and continue to influence Spanish Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, contesting repressive stereotypes and practices throughout contemporary Spanish film. It is therefore argued that Almodóvar is the backbone behind the creation of what could be considered a “New Spanish Cinema” unto which the representation and perceptions of gendered identities can be regarded as having moved towards a sense of sophistication. Being merely one decade into contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish Cinema to date Almodóvar establishes a cinematic genre, which has redefined and continues to re-define gender in Spanish Cinema for a new generation.

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