

The Persistence of the Spanish Female Stereotype in Contemporary Cinema

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The cinema is the fictional world where passive consumption is most exploited, a microcosm of spectacular domination. As noted by the French sociologist, Guy Debord, the Spectacle is nothing but "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 7). In this globalized era, our understanding of the "Other" is shaped by the fragmented images provided to us by the mass media. In a consumer society, "human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed" (10). The spectacle, as a product of consumerism, dominates the field of cinema by turning it into a mere economic product. As any other consumer good, films are considered as commodities whose main and sometimes only object is to be financially profitable. Due to the increasing costs of production, cinema has become more dependent than ever upon branding, advertising and product placement, as illustrated by Morgan Spurlock's documentary, *POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, and its freedom is therefore more and more limited by financial strategies and profit margins.

Cinema establishes and/or promotes a social canon, and also articulates what the consumer needs and must have. Since it can only provide a fragmented view of our environment that nevertheless reaches a wide variety of recipients, the creation of stereotypes has become a trap into which directors can easily fall.

As a mediator of social relations, the spectacle conditions and distorts female identity through this fragmented vision. Not only the identity, but the female body itself becomes a consumer good, hence the overwhelming amount of female nudity and the recurrent fragmented projection of individual sexual parts of the female body on the screen. Female identity in cinema traditionally falls into one of two main categories: the angel or the devil. The "angel in the house"

represents the ideal woman: devoted exclusively to her husband and children, idealized to the point of suffering the same lack of corporality as the occidental figure of womanhood represented by the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, the devil woman pursues her desires and follows her instincts to achieve her goals in life. These *femmes fatales* are always portrayed as very attractive, and very active and open to sexuality. Since these *femmes fatales* do not fit in the angel stereotype, their actions are seen as destructive and dangerous because they threaten the patriarchal order.

Not only can we find gender stereotypes in the cinema, but also racial or cultural static representations. For this study, we have focused on the persistence of Spanish female stereotype by analyzing the sexual and racial markers that continue to promote a somewhat archaic vision of the Spanish woman in contemporary cinema. For this purpose, we have chosen Pedro Almodóvar as an example to explain how difficult it is to escape from these stereotyped representations of the Spanish woman. Spanish cinema is internationally known for producing explicit images of nudity, violence, and sex. This reputation has raised much controversy when Spanish movies are released in other countries, for example the USA. Almodóvar is one of the main directors whose movies perpetuate this reputation. The attempt to release his movie *Átame!* in 1989 prompted the U.S. rating association to create yet a new rating, NC-17, in order to distinguish it from the traditional R rating and the pornographic X. Another of his films, *Kika*, had to be released unrated in 1993 due to the humorous rape scene it contains.

However, when studying Almodóvar's cinema it is important to contextualize it. The violence, nudity and sexuality present in his first movies must be understood in the context of the Spanish *movida*, the period of free expression and artistic explosion in a variety of fields that followed Franco's death in 1975, after 36 years of dictatorship and National Catholicism. Almodóvar is internationally known for his transgressive discourse that attacks everything considered acceptable by the canon established by Franco's rule, such as Catholicism and the traditional view of sexuality. His first films reveal many aspects of society that the Spanish patriarchal system had hidden and censored throughout the years. Mark Allison argues that Almodóvar

symbolizes a "free and democratic Spain...capturing with his films the excitement of a liberated nation" (Allison 3). Almodóvar's self-declared pro-feminist position and his tendency to empower women as main characters in his movies have positioned him as a "women's director." His films challenge the established order and give voice to marginal characters or groups that have been silenced by the values of the patriarchal system. In a male dominated medium such as cinema, Almodóvar focuses his works on his female characters' worries and existential problems, and attempts to provide an insightful view of the female world. The positive and sensitive representation of female characters in his films can sometimes sharply contrast with the portrayal of male characters, which are presented as less significant within the economy of the narration.

Nevertheless, some of his representations of women or female experiences have been highly criticized. Almodóvar, even in his attempt to transgress a certain female identity, still keeps portraying some specific stereotypes that contribute to purport the traditional image of Spanish women. For instance, one of Almodóvar's most recurrent representations of women is that of the hysterical, desperate housewife exhausted by her unrewarding routine and feeling trapped in a no-exit situation. We tend to relate these somewhat grotesque and neurotic women to the Spanish famous actress Carmen Maura, one of Almodóvar's first muses, whose role in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*) is one of the most convincing representation of the hysterical and desperate housewife stereotype. This film revolves around the story of Gloria, an unhappy housewife -living in the poor suburbs of Madrid with a misogynistic husband, a male prostitute son, and a neurotic mother in law- that deals with the tragedy of her ridiculous everyday life in a sarcastic as well as slightly surrealistic manner. This portrayal of women as hysterical and neurotic does not end with the portrayal of the typical housewife character, but remains a constant trope which is to be found in all Almodóvar's films, with no exception.

Hysteria is intrinsically linked to Almodóvar's imaginary and characterization of women. Not only the very female characters describe themselves as hysterical but also the titles of the movies

introduce the viewer into this mindset: *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown*) is a canonical example.

The fact that the expression [hysteria] is so widespread in present-day Spain as to designate virtually any feeling of exasperation, confusion, or impatience does not so much empty it of content as point to a curious success. Hysteria spills over into popular discourse, becomes trivial, banal, and common, so common that it can characterize anyone and everyone (Kakoudaki 336).

However, the historical use of this term has never been banal, even less from a feminist perspective. "For centuries the understanding of hysteria was a prisoner to its etymological origin in the Greek word for uterus" (Bernheimer 2). In effect, ancient medicine considered the uterus to be a mobile and independent organism, whose movement inside the female body could provoke the disease of hysteria. The relationship between this term and the female womb immediately excluded men from the equation. Even more significant is the fact that hysteria was often linked to sexuality. If abnormal sexual activity was considered to be the cause of the uterus displacement, "the recommended treatment . . . is, quite simply, marriage and pregnancy. Thus was established a diagnosis of female sexual disturbance, and a cure by submission to the yoke of patriarchy" (Bernheimer 3).

The cause-effect connection between this "female" disorder and the submission of women to patriarchy makes the fact that Almodóvar chooses this trait as the foundation to construct femininity a worthy object of study. The traditional stereotype of the Spanish woman as passionate and governed by her instincts and emotions is all the more apparent when the female protagonist is in love. For instance, in *La flor de mi secreto* (*The Flower of my Secret*), Leo -the protagonist- is totally lost in her solitude. She lives for an absent husband that ends up leaving her for another woman, namely her best friend. Her extreme emotions, bordering on mental illness, cause her to become destructive and chaotic, and eventually lead her to

attempt suicide.

The stereotype of the Spanish woman as passionate and neurotic when it comes to love relationships can be found in the works of other directors as well, who are also internationally acclaimed as independent and transgressive directors in spite of perpetuating the same archaic representation. We cannot ignore for example the film *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, by US director Woody Allen, which presents María Elena (Penélope Cruz) as a neurotic avant-garde artist, involved in a love-hate relationship with her ex-husband (Javier Bardem) which leads her to several attempts to kill him and herself. However, their deep love keeps on bringing them together and allows them to hold on to a relationship that does not work and never will. The beauty and sex-appeal of Penélope Cruz is mixed with her psychological instability, creating extremely comical situations. It is precisely the contrast between María Elena's character and the two American women that highlights this stereotype of the Spanish woman being passionate verging on the most hysterical and schizophrenic stage.

In Almodóvar's movies, the woman can fit into a third stereotype, closer than ever to the Virgin Mary, that which is known in Spanish as *la madre coraje* (Mother Courage): Mother Courage represents the ideal mother, who is ready to do anything for her children, and who overcomes the most difficult situations in order to better serve her family. A first reading of this stereotype of woman might seem positive, and it is one of the reasons why Almodóvar, who always emphasizes the *madre coraje* in his films, has been considered a women's director. This representation of the mother clashes with the image of the father, who is normally absent and bears much of the responsibility for the mother's mental instability.

However, the apparent moral superiority of the Almodóvar's archetypal mothers is undermined for two reasons. First, the viewer feels that those mothers owe that female strength to the fathers that have left them: they are present only because the father is absent. Secondly, the mistakes that the fathers commit are never punished or condemned. Not only Almodóvar's women forgive the absent fathers, but so does the recipient due to the internal coherence of the film. Believing that those *madre coraje* are independent because they are

able to fight for themselves against their fate is to ignore the determining effect that men have had on their lives.

Almodóvar creates a female identity mainly based upon male perception. For this reason, even in his attempt to overcome archaic female identity, Almodóvar still promotes the traditional binary opposition between man and woman: woman's identity can only be understood in function of that of the male, and women are only defined *vis-à-vis* the opposite sex. Most of the critics state that Almodóvar deconstructs the female identity by redefining gender, and often mention the film *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my Mother*) to argue their point. However, *All About My Mother* tells precisely the story of a woman who, after her son's death, feels the need to find the whereabouts of his transsexual father, Lola. When the mother realizes that her friend Rosa (Penélope Cruz) is pregnant and infected with AIDS by the same man, she decides to take care of the baby. The mother ends up forgiving Lola and stands up for him in an argument with Rosa's mother. As we can see, women's actions and decisions are conditioned and determined by the presence and the actions of a male, and their independence is not the result of free will, but rather a by-product of a situation that has been created by a masculine element.

The main positive aspect about Almodóvar's films that the critics praise, even from the feminist field, is his apparent transgression of all established social structures: "It is his flamboyant visual style and his treatment of gender and sexuality which have stamped an overarching identity on his films" (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 115). However, one should not mistake the concepts of gender and sexuality. When interpreting Almodóvar's work, there is an intention to subvert both categories, but this seems to be achieved only when it comes to sexuality (and not even at all times). The fact that all female characters' lives and identities revolve, with no exception, around men's leads us to the conclusion that he is not as successful when subverting gender. Undoubtedly, his works do not reconstruct a compulsory heterosexual system; all types of sexual orientations are represented and celebrated. Sexual taboos that had been historically marginalized in Spain by National Catholicism have also become positive icons honored in his films. Nevertheless, the

eternal binary oppositions that confront and prioritize masculinity over femininity keep finding their way to organize reality in Almodóvar's movies. While he creates morally superior female characters, they are still prisoners of the gender laws that build their identities in relation to men.

Even if we consider that Almodóvar is generally more successful when transgressing sexuality than gender, the spectator still perceives the persistence of some stereotypes in the construction of homosexual women characters. As stated by Mark Allison, Almodóvar does not feel the need to compensate decades of repression by incorporating a positive or politically correct portrayal of his homosexual characters (101). Even though *Pepi, Luci, Bom* already presents female homosexuality in the roles of two of the main characters, *Kika* is the perfect example to prove our thesis. Rossy de Palma plays the role of Juana, an extremely stereotyped lesbian figure. She is characterized by traits conventionally linked to masculinity: aggressiveness, strength, and other physical traits such as a moustache. The masculinization of this character becomes clear when Kika decides to make her up in a more feminine way, and she feels strange dressed up in women's clothes. We have found this category of women of extreme interest, as Almodovar's treatment of sexuality has always been considered transgressive and subversive for the established order. However, even bearing this fact in mind, his portrayal of homosexual women draws from the archetypical images that compose western social imaginary. Nevertheless, and as affirmed also by Allison, this is not the case when creating homosexual male characters: "Unlike Juana's moustached lesbian, Almodovar's early gay men are not stereotyped" (104).

The last stereotype we find in Almodóvar's movies is that of the female prostitute. Prostitution, a recurrent feature in Almodóvar's movies, is presented as a chosen profession, as an activity that the female characters enjoy doing, as shown by the character of Agrado, a transsexual prostitute in *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my mother*). In one of her scenes, she even says "they call me La Agrado... because I've always tried to make people's lives agreeable." Here she is making a pun with her name "Agrado" (I please), and the fact that she likes pleasing. The sexual exploitation of these women

is portrayed in a trivialized way, which lessens the impact of female objectification, but reinforces the stereotype all the same.

This representation of women as objects is crucial in the discourse of *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*), where the female character is in a coma, which obviously prevents her from acting as a subject. The very title of the movie is quite ironical, taking into account the medical condition of both female characters. In Spanish, the title of the movie ("speak with her") suggests a two way conversation. However, what actually takes place in the film is not a conversation with the woman in a vegetative state, but a male monologue. The trivialization of female objectification crosses the limits when a rape scene is described as a romantic act between the male nurse and the comatose female patient. This treatment of sexual violence against women is not only romantically described in *Hable con ella*, but it is also presented as something beneficial for the raped woman, since she happens to wake up from a four-year long coma after the aggression.

There are rape scenes in almost every Almodóvar's film, and this violence is always trivialized to the extent that women do not seem to suffer from it and sometimes even enjoy it; the aforementioned film, *Kika*, was indeed much criticized after its international release due to its humorous treatment of a hardcore rape scene. This specific use of the rape motif in Almodovar's cinema remains problematic; it may point to certain liberation of sexuality by transcending some of its most obvious taboos, however it also purports the very primal notion of violence against women, which remains a cultural reality in today's Spanish society.

Sexual violence is the main form of physical violence against women, and it is still extremely rooted in our society. Fiction, as a space dominated by spectacle, keeps representing these negative aspects of our society, but needs to find mitigation strategies that somehow justify and even trivialize the situations presented. In "Representación cinematográfica de la violencia de género: femenino y masculino en el cine comercial español" Asunción Bernárdez examines a series of strategies often implemented in cinema in order to soften the images of sexual violence against women. First of all, a very common mitigation mechanism is to present female sexual

desire as nymphomania. Since those female characters are represented as hypersexual, it is more difficult for the spectator to condemn the scene of violence. Sometimes even the female characters do not understand those sexual aggressions against them as such, which ends up neutralizing any type of criticism. Almodóvar, in his attempt to transgress traditional female roles, frequently provides women with such a strong sexual desire that places they are on the edge of nymphomania. In *Laberinto de pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passions*), all sexual boundaries are crossed when the protagonist, the rock singer Sexi, actually experiences this disorder. Her sexual addiction is softened and trivialized the same way other practices, such as prostitution, are positivized in Almodóvar's movies.

"Indeed, those who choose prostitution as a career are usually likeable characters in Almodóvar" (Allison 97). Agrado, from *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my Mother*), is the perfect example of this positivization process. Through Agrado, we can also analyze another mitigation strategy found in Almodóvar: the representation of sexual aggressions against women as mere anecdotes. After being beaten up by a male client, this character assumes the act to be part of her job and considers it a normal event in her life as a prostitute.

Finally, the very representation of the male aggressor might also become a useful mitigation strategy. They are very often presented as "abnormal" people, suffering from a pathology that justifies their actions. This is the case of Benigno, in *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*), whose evident obsession with his female patient leads him to believe that a real love relationship exists between them. Also Paul Bazzo, in *Kika*, is a prison escapee and a rapist suffering from hypersexuality. Therefore, these characters are not morally condemned, neither by the female victim nor by the spectator.

According to DeFleur and Dennis, cinema has an extremely active role in the transmission and understanding of the Other, and directors can determine up to a certain extent how society views its own minorities. Stereotypes are comfortable and easy ways for the majority to refer to and understand minorities. They are often unrealistic, and tend to promote unreliable generalizations that give rise to negative feelings by associating negative characteristics with certain groups. For this reason, Kanahara states that "prejudice often

finds its way into collective consciousness through stereotypes" (quoted in Brewer 8).

Taking this into account, the perpetuation of female stereotypes by such an acclaimed director as Almodóvar turns out to be very dangerous especially when the culture (and the gender) portrayed remains unfamiliar to the viewer. While acknowledging the effort that directors like Almodóvar consciously make in order to transgress the traditional representation of female identity, it must be pointed out that they themselves are not entirely free from the preconceived notions that pervade collective consciousness.

Feminist film scholars have discussed the misogyny of mainstream media, and particularly the film industry, which often portrays women as passive and reified. However, they do note that the female roles in film today have expanded beyond their original roles from several decades ago. Almodóvar is doubtlessly one of those directors who have consciously tried to deconstruct static women with no sexual desire of their own and exclusively devoted to their men. The problem might be found in the tools that are used to pursue such deconstruction.

"The mismatch between Almodóvar's apparent intention and critical perceptions of his films seems to be rooted in the 'liberal' approach underpinning his treatment of all social structures" (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 116). His deconstruction process might be successful within the framework of his fictional world. However, the audience is always going to be influenced by social constraints and rules that will shape their understanding of these new female identities. The viewers "inhabit a world in which the repression of women is too deeply entrenched within social and psychological consciousness for such representations to be entirely free from misogynistic interpretation" (116). Despite Almodóvar's efforts, it is still possible to notice a recurrent stereotyped and sometimes objectified vision of Spanish women in his films, which remains ideologically questionable, and which tends to indicate that, for all our new found feminine consciousness and affirmation, we are still prisoners of the archaic notions that have constructed a passive and subservient female identity.

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