Mothers, gaze and rape: Almodóvar's cinema and the construction of gender

Gorana Mlinarevic

Recommended Citation

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the Film and Media Studies Commons

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/535
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
Mothers, Gaze And Rape:

Almodóvar’s cinema and the construction of gender

Gorana Mlinarevic

Bachelor of Communication

Faculty of Communication, Health and Science (Media Studies)

2000
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Although often named a ‘women’s director’, Pedro Almodóvar has frequently been attacked by feminist, mainly Anglo-Saxon, film critics. Most of them have found his portrayals of women to be very humiliating. On the other hand, Spanish heterosexual, mainly male, film critics have attacked him for focusing only on portrayals of marginal genders and sexualities. Nevertheless, he has become one of the most, if not the most, commercially successful Spanish film directors.

The intention of this project is not just to analyse Almodóvar’s cinema and the critics’ acceptance/rejection of the same. Rather, the project is intending, through use of ‘la politique des auteurs’, psychoanalysis and a variety of feminist and queer film theories to analyse the way Almodóvar represents gender identities. Through the analysis of occurrences (such as women centred events, absence of father figure, scenes of women’s abuse, gazing, etc) specific to Almodóvar’s cinema I am hoping to use different theories in order to explore the cultural context that provides the starting point for Almodóvar’s work.

The analysis of Almodóvar’s work through ‘la politique des auteurs’ aims to examine Almodóvar’s place within Spanish and Anglo-Saxon culture. This dissertation will attempt to show that Almodóvar, as an auteur, and so his work, can not be analysed as isolated elements but rather as ‘political’ and ‘historical’ agents within the complex cultural context. Through the textual analysis of Almodóvar’s films, mainly concentrating
on his portrayals of women, the thesis will investigate the way Almodóvar constructs the gender identities in his cinema.

plate no. 1 Almodóvar’s game with construction of gender in

_Pepi, Luci, Bom, And Other Girls_
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text;
- contain any defamatory material.
I would like to thank Associate Professor Brian Shoesmith, my supervisor, for his valuable support and advice. Also, I would like to thank Guy McAuliffe for his skilful editorial input. Finally, I thank Jasna Popovic and Russel Furman for their help in printing of this thesis.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Declaration v

Acknowledgments vi

Table of Contents vii

List of Illustrations viii

1 Introduction 1

2 La Politique Des Auteurs:
   La Politique De Pedro Almodóvar 8

3 All About Almodóvar’s Mothers and
   What Has Happened To Fathers 22

4 Law of Gaze and
   Rape Labyrinth 38

5 Conclusion 53

Bibliography 57

Filmography 66
List Of Illustrations

Plate no.

1. Almodovar’s game with construction of gender in *Pepi, Luci, Bom, And Other Girls* iv

2. Women observe men’s exhibitionism in *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* 2

3. Women are the bearers of the look in *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* 3

4. Mother and son continuously share the frame in *All About My Mother.* 4

5. Mother and son continuously share the frame in *All About My Mother.* 4

6. Mother and son continuously share the frame in *All About My Mother.* 5

7. Women unselfishly share the frame:
   - women centred scenes in *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls* 8
Women unselfishly share the frame: women centred scenes in

*Flower Of My Secret*

Women unselfishly share the frame: women centred scenes in

*All About My Mother*

Women unselfishly share the frame: women centred scenes in

*High Heels*

Women unselfishly share the frame: women centred scenes in

*Flower Of My Secret*

Gaultier's futuristic costumes in

*Kika*

Gaultier's futuristic costumes in

*Kika*

Although they immensely love each other, mother and daughter constantly argue.
Almodóvar uses this for the comical relief in the film in

*Flower Of My Secret*

15 Although they immensely love each other, mother and daughter constantly argue. Almodóvar uses this for the comical relief in the film in

*Flower Of My Secret*

16 Ivan’s character is reduced to a voice that dubs Hollywood films in

*Women On The Verge Of Nervous Breakdown*

17 Sacrificial mother, in order to save her daughter she leaves her fingerprints on the gun in

*High Heels*

18 Desire for the identification with mother in

*High Heels*

19 Representation of mother who does not need the reason to hit her daughter in

*What Have I Done To Deserve This?*

20 Representation of condemning mother who
is not interested in well being of her son. They are so distant from each other in

*Mata dor*  

21 Gloria in newly discovered role of mother. She is greeting her son in

*What Have I Done To Deserve This?*  

22 Gloria in newly discovered role of mother. She is farewelling her son: “Don’t ever forget that I’m your mother”, she says to Toni in

*What Have I Done To Deserve This?*  

23 Mother that constantly complains in

*Flower of My Secret*  

24 Father who teaches his son how to forge documents in

*What Have I Done To Deserve This?*  

31
25  Stepfather pretending to be selling Rebeca off to
    local merchants in
    *High Heels*

26  Reference to the Madonna and Child motif in
    *Matador*

27  Male viewer is distanced from the female
    character not just by reach, but also with
    photo camera in
    *Kika*

28  Although gagged and tied to the chair
    Juana is trying to help Kika in
    *Kika*

29  Pepi gains the pleasure from observing
    the violent act in
    *Pepi, Luci, Bom, And other Girls*

30  Pepi gains the pleasure from observing
    the violent act in
    *Pepi, Luci, Bom, And other Girls*
Chapter 1

Introduction

Since his first film, Pedro Almodóvar has been highly acclaimed as a talented film director who, in his films, adores dealing with controversial topics, and gender and sexuality relations. Almodóvar has always been a controversial film maker and it took thirteen films for him to be wholly accepted by the film critics, to be included in selections of highly acclaimed film festivals and win important film awards. His All About My Mother finally succeeded in unifying critics and audiences, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, American and European tastes. The film won Spanish, French, Italian, German, Brasilian, British, Latin, European and American (Academy) film Awards, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago and New York film critics Association Awards, Italian and USA National Societies film critics Awards, and was the first of Almodóvar’s films to be nominated for Cannes’ Golden Palm, winning for him the best director award.

However, even All About My Mother could not avoid the usual discussions about Almodóvar’s representation of gender and sexuality. Although it is obvious that Almodóvar intentionally created the film to invite theoretical interpretation some Spanish movie critics complained that they “failed to recognise themselves as heterosexual men in Almodóvar’s Spain, a nation of lesbians, drag queens and junkies” (Smith, Sept. 1999, 30). On the other hand, some of Almodóvar’s previous films were more easily accepted in Spain, while in USA created debates. Kika, for example, provoked feminists’ fiery reactions with its rape scene (McAlister, July 1994, 1), while its focus on heterosexual
relationships caused disappointments among Almodóvar's American gay audience (Strauss, 1966, 122).

In the analysis of Almodóvar's films the first thing that needs noting is the fact that as much as they appear to be mainstream they do not really conform to the accepted conventions of this form and belong more properly to the European art house tradition. Throughout his thirteen feature length films to date, it is possible to notice the qualities specific to Almodóvar that direct us to look at his work as the product of 'la politique de auteur' the theory developed by the Cahiers du Cinéma critics of the 1950s. I will argue it is more appropriate to talk of 'la politique de Almodóvar' in regards to Almodóvar's corps of work. His films, although narratives, do not follow the classical narrative structure. Rather they follow the narrative structure specific to Almodóvar. For example, 'typical' Hollywood screen narratives in which the bearer of the male (main) look is usually a male character (Lynn, 1988, 17), Almodóvar's narratives do not treat the inclusion of the male look in the frame as the norm(al). (See plate no. 2 and 3).

plate no. 2 Women observe men's exhibitionism in

What Have I Done To Deserve This?
As Almodóvar’s work is mainly influenced by Spanish and Anglo-Saxon (specifically Hollywood) cultures, the analysis of Almodóvar’s work through ‘la politique des auteurs’ will concentrate on examining Almodóvar’s place within those two cultures. The analysis will explore the influence of those two cultures not just on Almodóvar’s work, but also on the audiences and critics’ acceptance of the work.

Almodóvar is one of the few auteurs who successfully avoids exaltation of oppressive gender and sexuality ‘norms’. This ‘avoidance’ of ‘norms’ is not just represented with ‘marginal’ characters, but also with the carefully constructed situations, which, it seems, are products of Almodóvar’s great acquaintance with not just the history of film, but also
with feminist and post-feminist theories, and psychoanalysis. He is freely playing with the theories by using the same principles/characteristics of patriarchy only he reverses the gender/sexuality roles.

The analysis of the way Almodóvar constructs gender identities within his cinema will concentrate on two very notable characteristics. As one of the specificities of Almodóvar's work, there is a consistency of portrayals of women as the driving force of the narrative. Unlike the patriarchal norms of power relations in which the father figure is the most influential factor in the child's (gender and sexuality) development (see Freud, 1973, 125-222), Almodóvar's films explore relations between mothers and their children (see plate no. 4, 5 and 6). Almodóvar is striving to demonstrate to his female audience the danger of following the positions given by patriarchal order.
As with the representation of absent/bad fathers there is consistency in his representation men as rapists. Almodóvar’s ‘rape scenes’ created the critical debate in which English (and German) speaking audiences attacked Almodóvar for the ‘negative’ political content of his images while Spanish (and French) critics displaced those images into ironic humour or pastiche (Smith, 1994, 112). It appears that this ‘misunderstanding’ has emerged from the different cultural backgrounds and different reading positions. English speaking audiences, it seems, read the scenes without considering the context of the whole film. However, Almodóvar constantly plays with the viewing positions. Not only is he aware of the audience’s look, which he continuously provokes, but, within those critical scenes, he also positions his characters in viewing positions. It is this positioning that is of importance. Allocation of the viewing positions is what constructs gender relations during the ‘rape scenes’, and not the ‘act’ itself. If we consider Kaplan’s (1997, 7) observation that both the look and the gaze are symptomatic of important aspects of culture then Almodóvar’s ‘game’ with viewing positions might be of considerable
interest in the analysis of his construction of gender identities within the scene and the film.

In the two chapters, “All About Almodóvar’s Mothers and What Has Happened to Fathers” and “Law of Gaze and Rape Labyrinth”, Almodóvar’s work will be analysed from a cultural studies perspective. Cultural studies is the name given to a variety of disciplinary approaches which focus on the relations between social divisions and meanings - or more exactly on the way in which social divisions are made meaningful (Hartley, 1994, 71). In particular, I will draw on the varieties of psychoanalytic and feminist film theories that have developed within cultural studies to explain the ways in which gender roles are constructed in culture.

Almodóvar, in his work, avoids representation of oppressive gender and sexuality ‘norms’. By bending genres, mainly through comedy and melodrama, he creates his ‘narratives’. The characters within those ‘narratives’ are placed in very controversial situations that end up being resolved in not necessarily less controversial manners. While great humour and fantastic colourful sets can be ‘blamed’ for the audiences’ acceptance of Almodóvar’s films, so Almodóvar’s ‘ignorance’ of the ‘political correctness’ could be the cause of critics’ scepticism. Or maybe it is their concern for the preservation and protection of certain ‘political’ theories/groups, put into question by Almodóvar’s, mainly gender and sexuality, rhetorics, that needs to be blamed for those animosities? This question will be more attentively analysed through discussion of Almodóvar’s rape scenes and feminist film theories.
During the analysis of some characteristics common for Almodóvar's cinema I wish to demonstrate that Almodóvar, aware of psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theories' examinations of the gender and sexuality constructions in Spanish and American culture (and even Western culture, in general), is challenging patriarchal discourse. I am hoping to show that, within his filmic space, he is trying to create society without 'norm' restrictions on gender and sexuality.
Chapter 2

La Politique Des Auteurs: La Politique De Pedro Almodovar

I was introduced to Almodóvar’s films with *Women On The Verge Of a Nervous Breakdown* somewhere around 1989. At that time I was in my teens and was under the influence of Hollywood. I was just starting to discover European directors and American independent productions. *Women On The Verge Of a Nervous Breakdown* made a really big impression on me. I was delighted with the choice of female characters offered by Almodóvar. Although ‘physically’ and ‘psychologically’ different types, all of Almodóvar’s women are not ashamed to use their feminine qualities when confronting the problems which seemed, at the beginning, insoluble to them. Since then I have succeeded in ‘catching up’ with Almodóvar’s films and have made great ‘friendship’ with them.

plate no. 7 *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls*

plate no. 8 *Flower Of My Secret*
Almodóvar's consistent portrayal of women as driving forces in his narratives achieved him the title 'women's director' (see plate no. 7-11). Almodóvar's "complex but plausible characters" (Evans, 1996, 11) are "vehicles for a female identification or projection, which inspires comedy and pathos in equal measures" (Smith, 1994, 2). This "equally measured inspiration of comedy and pathos" (Smith, 1994, 2) is, probably, what
attracts the attacks of critics such as McAlister (July 1994, 1) who accuses Almodóvar of misogyny, humiliation and fetishisation of female characters, and Fernández Santos (Jan. 1990, 35) whose faint praise presents Almodóvar as a director of brilliance rather than depth. Almodóvar’s ‘over the top’ portrayal of female characters may easily appear as just another comedy genre specific ‘non human’ characterisation of women, which Sharon Smith (1990, 14) considers not to be something that any self-respecting person could identify with.

However, the role of a woman in Almodóvar’s films does not revolve purely around her physical attraction. Female physical traits are what interest Almodóvar. The main preoccupations of female characters, the mating games that they usually play with the male characters, something Smith (1990, 14) noticed decades ago, but still very common in Hollywood, do not emerge in Almodóvar’s cinema. Almodóvar’s women are open and honest. If they have any interest in male characters at all they immediately let them know. Sexi in Labyrinth of Passion, Pepa in Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, and Clara in Live Flesh are all unambiguous in their relationships with the male counterparts. Similarly, Kika in Kika undergoes her emancipation only when she leaves the ‘non-communicating’ surrounds that she lived in. It is, more likely, that Almodóvar’s male roles revolve around the ‘mating’ games they play with their partners. The characters of Ricki in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! and Victor in Live Flesh function only in order to allure Marina and Elena, respectively. Even Pablo’s character in Law of Desire finds himself in the centre of the game Antonio plays with him.
As already briefly mentioned in the introduction, Almodóvar's cinema can not be viewed as mainstream. As Smith (1994, 102) points out, "it makes sense to read Almodóvar not with reference to the Anglo-American dichotomy of 'art' and 'entertainment' but with reference to the distinction that Richard Dyer and Gienette Vincendeau claim is common in France and Italy: 'auteur' versus 'mainstream'". According to Vernon and Morris (1995, 13) 'la politique des auteurs' was established in mid-1950s by young critics from a Parisian film journal Cahiers du Cinéma, soon-to-be film-makers, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol (among others), who "sought through their against-the-grain readings of classic Hollywood cinema to distance themselves from the excessively literary cinema de qualité of their immediate French forebears" (Vernon, Morris, 1995, 13). For Bordwell and Thompson (1997, 465), "an auteur usually did not literally write scripts, but managed nonetheless to stamp his or her personality on genre and studio products, transcending constrains of Hollywood's standardised system".

All those characteristics, in some ways, can be assigned to Almodóvar's cinema. All his films, with their direct and indirect references to Hollywood films, represent Almodóvar's 'against-the-grain reading of classic Hollywood cinema'. Manuela from All About My Mother is nothing like her Hollywood 'inception', evilly ambitious, Eve Harrington from All About Eve. In his reference to Hitchcock's Rear Window Almodóvar, in Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, chooses to place Pepa, the female character in the voyeuristic position that, in Hitchcock's film, was reserved for the male protagonist (James Stewart).
Further Almodóvar’s ‘stamping of his personality on genre (in his case melodrama and comedy) that transcend the constraint of Hollywood’s standardised system’ goes as far as attempting to establish a new genre “Almodrama” labelled by Cuban critic Cabrera Infante (Smith, Sep. 1999, 28). “Almodrama” is considered to be a genre of “unusually wide interest: as attractive to film theorists as to fashionistas and as remarkable for its masterful cinematic technique as for its new commitment to social critique” (Smith, Sep. 1999, 28).

Truly, Almodóvar’s films with their constant refusal of patriarchal norms and morals, as well as with their contradictory avoidance of ‘political correctness’ offer themselves easily to different theoretical interpretations. His, 1987, Law of Desire, for example, offers the ground for inquiry into a development of cinematic representation of gay male subjectivity (see Jackson, 1993, 63-81). Equally, his consistent attentiveness to clothes and colour matching, as well as to designer clothes and sets can inspire fashion talks. Matching kitchen’s tablecloths and Kika’s and Ramona’s dresses or Andrea Scarface’s futuristic Gaultier costume in Kika (see plate no 12 and 13) and Chanel suits and accessories in High Heels, hardly can remain unnoticed by the viewers.
However, these are just some of the qualities that Almodóvar uses to mix with already established genre rules. When talking about *Labyrinth of Passion* he points out:

"... It means telling a story which belongs to one genre in the style of another... In fact *Labyrinth of Passion* is a mixture of several genres: pure comedy, action films, musicals, realist, romantic films... Such radical eclecticism is characteristic of all my films.... At the end of century one tends to take stock; it's not a time for inventing new genre, but rather for reflecting on what has occurred, a time where all styles are possible." (Almodóvar, 1996, 26)

He accepts that he has his own style but does not think that he is so original as inventing a new genre. Almodóvar's films are fairly recognisable in their constant playful reversals of generic rules. For example, when representing society and its values Almodóvar uses melodrama rules in order to create spectatorial resistance towards the same (Vernon, 1995, 59-72). In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, following the rules of
melodrama, the society that Almodóvar exposes to the spectatorial resistance is the 
society in which women always get in trouble because of men. However, reversing the 
generic melodramatic rules, Almodóvar allows only to the women that turn their attention 
away from men to succeed in resistance to the breakdown.

However, as pointed out by Vernon and Morris (1995, 13), in the United States auteurism 
has favoured the distribution and reception of European and other foreign films as a 
framework for a certain critical and spectatorial ‘horizon of expectations’. In the case of 
Almodóvar’s cinema those ‘horizons of expectation’ have been varying. Morgan’s (1992, 
29) expectations of Almodóvar’s films were ‘to celebrate the formal fluidity and stylistic 
electicism consistent with normalisation of sexual fluidity and rejection of gender-based 
judgements’, but ultimately he was disappointed with Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! For 
similar reasons Dieckmann (Fall 1990, 76) wrote that “if Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! 
demonstrates anything, it is an inverted insight into the unique strengths of Pedro 
Almodóvar’s prior films- where even the most ludicrous action seems beyond scrutiny 
under the laws of desire”.

Nevertheless, as Almodóvar (1996, 123) stresses he is a ‘mixture of things’. Indeed, 
Almodóvar’s films have introduced us to a mixture of characters. We have been 
introduced to an ‘enthusiastically masochistic housewife’ (Lucía in Pepi, Luci, Bom and 
Other Girls) and to ‘nymphomaniac pop-star’ (Sexi in Labyrinth of Passion). Also, we 
have met with a ‘junkie lesbian’ Mother Superior in Dark Habits and a ‘working woman 
rubbed by her labour’ (Gloria in What Have I Done to Deserve This). We have been
allowed to sympathise with the ‘mysterious, difficult to define’ character of Angel in *Matador* and ‘marginal anxious to gain access to ‘normal’ life’ Ricki in *Tie Me Up Tie Me Down*. Together with Tina a ‘transsexual that is overacting womanhood... the role of her life’ in *The Law of Desire* we have been invited to free ourselves of the fears that are imposed on us by the constructed norms of the society we live. In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* Pepa, Marisa, Candela and Lucia tell us a story about the ‘women who in some ways have been pushed towards nervous breakdown through disastrous relations with men’, while paraplegic basketball player Fleetwood in *Live Flesh* teaches us a life lesson. Furthermore, we are intrigued with the triple role of ‘drag queen Leta, undercover cop Hugo and mild-mannered judge Dominguez’ in *High Heels*. And finally, we are invited to share the feelings of sadness and joy with ‘always optimistic’ Kika in *Kika*, with ‘lonely woman’ Leo in *The Flower of My Secret*, and with Manuela a ‘woman who has lost too much’ in *All About My Mother*.

As Evans (1996, 31-2) notes, judged by Francoist standards, Almodóvar’s characters seem transgressive in their preference for rock and roll or fundamentalist Christianity over more mainstream tastes in music or religion, while at other levels, they remain flawed and compromised. Also, those characters are placed in a mixture of situations, problems and solutions. Some of them need to regain their self-respect, while others need to make their revenge. Some need to save themselves from ruin and rescue their optimism, while others need to discover their sexualities, and find love.
In his films Almodóvar shows that one thing can be represented from a number of different angles. Almodóvar represents the gender oppression that patriarchal system imposes on everyone but the orthodox system representatives through addressing the issues of taboos. Such issues are addressed in representation of incest in Labyrinth of Passion where the fathers are represented as the incestuous characters, and rape in Kika where the men are rapists and serial killers. Similarly, the gender oppression can be seen through Almodóvar’s portrayals of ‘typical’ patriarchal or feminist situations. In What Have I Done To Deserve This? the audience is introduced to the ‘typical’ patriarchal family, while Manuela in All About My Mother is a ‘typical’ product of feminism, an independent single mother.

Kinder (Fall 1987, 34) considers that this ‘mixture’ represents Almodóvar’s curious ways of resisting marginalisation. “Never limiting himself to a single protagonist, he chooses an ensemble of homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, doper, punk, terrorist characters who refuse to be ‘ghettoized’ into divisive subcultures because they are figured as a part of the ‘new Spanish mentality’” Kinder (Fall 1987, 34). Even though she notes Almodóvar’s avoidance of ghettoization, she still forms the ‘horizon of expectation’ that characterises American views formed in regards to European auteurism according to which it is always expected from an auteur to follow certain methods he/she introduced in previous films. Not only does she expect something from Almodóvar’s films, but also she sets her expectations for new Spanish mentality’. Here, I would agree with Georgia Brown’s (Nov 1993, 3) argument that due to America’s selective ‘import’ of certain foreign auteurs - for example Spanish cinema was perceived as wholly embodied in the person of
Luis Buñuel (later Saura, and still later Almodóvar) - the disregard to historical and cultural specificity as well as national context has been produced within theoretically inflected treatments of the cinematic author.

All situations Almodóvar's characters find themselves in are produced within the mixture of American and Spanish cultures/cinemas, both of which have had great influence on Almodóvar. Almodóvar's films appropriate their own 'American dreams' for Spain which has something important and perhaps unexpected to tell us about the present moment in both cultures (Vernon and Morris 1995, 18). An auteur can not be analysed in isolation but rather as a 'political' and 'historical' individual within the complex cultural context.

As Almodóvar refuses to deal with the part of Spanish history, the era of Franco's rule, Hollywood films provided him with the alternative to historical references (see Vernon, 1995, 59-63). On the other hand, the good, willing, liberal, socialistic Spanish government of 1980s provided him with great freedom (and favourable financial support) of expression (see Smith, 1994, 1-7). Almodóvar's first film Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls, deals almost entirely with the topics that were forbidden for the cinema under Franco's rule, only a few years earlier (see Smith, 1994, 15-20). Almodóvar's characters are contemporary characters, and the only history they have is associated with Hollywood. In Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown Pepa and Ivan's history is connected with Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden's roles in Johnny Guitar, the film we
see they are dubbing, while in *All About My Mother* Manuela’s past (and whole life) revolves around *A Street Car Named Desire*.

Feminist studies of authorship acknowledge that although both history (culture) and biography (gender) crystallise in the notion of "author as individual", some important elements must still be inserted into a theoretical context which denies such individuality (Fliterman-Lewis, 2000, 18). Fliterman-Lewis suggests that:

The resolution of the paradoxical emphases of authorship is achieved by combining both tendencies to produce "authorship" as a tripartite structure, comprising (1) authorship as a historical phenomenon, suggesting the cultural context; (2) authorship as a desiring position, involving determinants of sexuality and gender; and (3) authorship as a textual moment, incorporating the specific stylistics and preoccupations of the filmmaker. At the same time, each of these components of authorship implies the other two, for they exist in a perpetually dynamic relation (2000, 18).

Almodóvar’s cinema is a product of the equal mixture of all the components of authorship. Some critics claim that Almodóvar’s sexuality has had a big influence on his work and ‘success’. O’Toole (Autumn 1990, 270) states that: "a gay sensibility, Almodóvar’s is not one that is content merely to like or love; it must adore". Similarly, Mandrell (1995, 41) notes that “Pedro Almodóvar’s international renown and the spectacular commercial success of his later films are due in no small part to careful marketing and cultivation of the international gay community”. Even Vito Russo (1995, 14) declares, with respect to *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, that it is “a film that probably couldn’t have been made by a director who happens to be heterosexual”. However, I would suggest that authorship as a desiring position, in the
case of Almodóvar, does not always involve determinants of sexuality and gender. As Smith (1992, 199), writing about Law of Desire has noted, "by placing itself on the side of 'woman' (on the side of love, loss, and timelessness) Almodóvar's cinema of gay male desire 'crosses the line' between male and female narrative, makes possible a certain pleasure in the place gendered as female, a pleasure which should not be dismissed as vicarious".

Even Almodóvar (June 1990, 38) himself, on a few occasions, tried to stress that he might be gay, but his films are not and he has:

never wanted to be ghettoized in this way. Nor have I campaigned on behalf of one single aspect of my persona. I'm even critical of the militancy of certain groups I'm supposed to be in sympathy with. For example, I don't take part in the gay movement in America. I much prefer a mixture of things. (Almodóvar, 1996, 123)

Factors such as Spanish culture and history, the punk movement (Movida), Hollywood cinema and provincial La Mancha (the place Almodóvar was born and grew up in) sometimes have greater influence on Almodóvar than his gender (or sexuality). If some of Almodóvar's films fail to live up to progressive Anglo-American norms it is because Almodóvar can not subscribe himself to forms of resistance which evolved in response to the triumph of the British and North American Gay Rights Movement in the eighties (Smith, 1994, 3). Almodóvar comes from a nation whose understanding of issues (such as gender, nationality and sexuality) that his films deal with "may well be more sophisticated than their own" (Anglo-American) (Smith, 1994, 3). When talking about production of Law of Desire, Agustín Almodóvar pointed out:
Almodóvar’s cinema is a cinema of complex character. It arises as a product of a specific net of circumstances that influenced the formation of Almodóvar’s individuality. It can only be understood and viewed as an outcome of the merging of two cultures, Spanish and American (Hollywood). As some humorous characteristics are more likely to be a product of Spanish contemporary situation, so the formation of his character’s individuality is more likely to originate in the Hollywood classics. The mother-daughter relationship in Flower Of My Secret, in which there is a constant mutual criticism, even in ridiculous situations, a characteristic of Mediterranean mother-daughter relationships, creates humorous relief for the film (see plate no. 14 and 15). Likewise, in Women On the Verge Of Nervous Breakdown, Ivan’s character is introduced through the words he speaks while dubbing Johnny Guitar, the Hollywood classic (see plate no. 16). Almodóvar’s rejection of the patriarchal system that was so glorified during Franco’s rule, is contrived through the rejection of the classical Hollywood norms.
Although they immensely love each other, mother and daughter constantly argue. Almodóvar uses this for the comical relief in the film.

Ivan’s character is reduced to a voice that dubs Hollywood films.
The most notable characteristic of Almodóvar's films is the absence of father figures. Rather than dealing with fathers, the main signifiers of a patriarchal society, Almodóvar chooses to explore relationships between mothers and their offspring. From an analysis of the mother–daughter relationship in High Heels Smith (1994, 123) suggests that Almodóvar's narrative is framed within Kaplan's (1990, 126-37) dichotomies of "good" and "bad" mothers, sacrifice and sensuality, identification and desire (see plate no. 17 and 18). Almodóvar's mothers are just the opposite of Lacanian argument according to which, mother is seen as lacking by the child because she has no phallus (Nelmes, 1996, 230). Furthermore, as Kinder (Spring 1992, 40) notes Almodóvar's High Heels allows the daughter to voice her love for her mother. In his thesis Girard (1977, 50-67) foregrounds the homoerotic undertones of the Oedipus theory. However, in Almodóvar's work, as argued by Kinder (Spring 1992, 40), this thesis also applies to the Oedipal heroine. Clearly that is the homoerotic desire to love/imitate/become the parent of the same sex (in this case, the mother) rather than the heterosexual desire for the other (in this case, the father). According to Silverman (1988, 124) this negative "Oedipal complex" is essential to feminism because it "makes it possible to speak for the first time about a genuinely oppositional desire which challenges dominance from within"
representation and meaning, rather than from the place of a mutely resistant biology or sexual 'essence'.

Almodóvar’s ventures with mother characters and their desires, portraying them as both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, are directly conflicting techniques to psychoanalytic theory in which, as Naomi Segal (269, 1992) points out, mother’s knowledge and mother’s desire generally go unexamined. Contrary to psychoanalysis Almodóvar ‘obsessively’ examines the mother’s desires.

Almodóvar’s ‘bad’ mothers don’t necessarily love their daughters, they are selfish and pleasure-seekers. Almodóvar (1996, 27) recognises them as a certain type of Spanish mother:
She is often frustrated and embittered because her husband has either disappointed her or left her and so she becomes cruel towards her child. Often in the streets you see a child fall over and the mother instead of helping him/her up, gives him/her a slap. It's very Goya-esque, Spanish image, a negative maternal image which occurs circumstantially in the universe of my films yet corresponds to the nature of that universe (1996, 27)

He does not justify their behaviour. Some of those characters are minor characters that only get enough time to establish themselves for the possibility of recurring in some future Almodóvar films. Such are the mothers of the little girls in The Labyrinth of Passion and What Have I Done To Deserve This (see plate no. 19). Those characters, although ‘injured’ by patriarchal system, do not have a desire to ‘fight’ it. They rather ‘fight’ their children (products of their relationship with the patriarchal representatives) than search for the escape from the chains imposed by (un)desired (patriarchal) order. There are mothers such as Angel’s mother in Matador – ‘the castrating mother’ - who constantly judges and condemns her son and is responsible for his terrible neurosis and guilt complex (see plate no. 20). She actually perpetuates all of the terror imposed by the old Spanish system (Almodóvar, 1996, 56-7). There are the mothers like Antonio’s obsessive German mother in The Law Of Desire who constantly spies on him and therefore forces him to hide his real sexual identity. The mothers are, in general, incapable of love, the characteristic that for Almodóvar is the main vehicle for resistance to the patriarchal order and one of the greatest feminine qualities. He does not like them, and, therefore, does not treat them kindly as they refuse to resist the patriarchal order.
plate no. 19 *What Have I Done To Deserve This?*

Representation of mother who does not need the reason to hit her daughter.

plate no. 20 *Matador*

Representation of condemning mother who is not interested in well being of her son. They are so distant from each other.
However, not all Almodóvar’s mothers are incapable of love. Even some of the ‘bad’, ‘selfish’ mothers learn how to express their love towards their children. Almodóvar does not blame Gloria in *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* for the ‘sacrificing’ of her son in order to purchase consumerist goods/beauty product. It is ‘utterly normal’ that she ‘places’ her youngest son in the dentist’s ‘care’ so she can spend the money on purchasing a hair curler. Both actions are ‘very feminine’. She does what ‘every mother would do’: she secures her son’s future. Also, like most of the women in the consumerist society, she gives in to the temptation of an advertisement. Although Almodóvar can not represent for Gloria a female desire outside patriarchy (she remains sexually frustrated throughout the film), he refuses to make her responsible for her family’s predicament (Smith 1994, 62). He does this not just by consistent shooting from her point of view, but also by representing her as a ‘good enough mother’ (Segal, 1992, 267). In addition, Gloria, towards the end of film, decides to break out from the slavery that patriarchal society imposes on her. She kills her husband. Almodóvar does not accuse or punish her. We just see that, at the beginning of a ‘new life’, she is confused and lost: she even intends to commit suicide. But seeing the image of her son approaching home saves her life. Motherhood is what inspires her new independent life, life without patriarchal chains (see plate no. 21 and 22). Only when she resists the patriarchal system is she allowed to become a ‘good’ mother and show her feelings.
What Have I Done To Deserve This?

Gloria in newly discovered role of mother. She is greeting and farewelling her sons. “Don’t ever forget that I’m your mother”, she says to Toni (plate no. 22) on their farewell.

Similarly, in High Heels, when Becky turns her attention (and love) towards her child, instead of men, she becomes an ‘admirable’ character. She sacrifices herself in order to save her daughter (see plate no. 17):

She says she wasn’t generous. In fact, she was rather mean towards her daughter, but she wants to leave her her most precious heirloom: her fingerprints on the gun. These fingerprints represent the love she feels for her daughter, which is why Rebeca treasures them so dearly (Almodóvar, 1996, 108)

Also, the character of mother in The Flower of My Secret, a character based on Almodóvar’s mother (Almodóvar P, 1997, 2), is represented as a ‘border line’ mother character representing both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers. She is a selfish and self-centred mother, constantly complaining and talking about her problems and needs (see plate no.
However, in a crisis, when she sees her daughter suffering, she is compassionate:

MOTHER

Just what I was thinking, .... Such a pity, my love! So young, yet already like a cow without its cow-bell!

LEO

What do you mean a cow without its cow-bell?

MOTHER

I mean... lost... wandering, aimless, like me...

LEO

Like you?

MOTHER

I too am like a cow without its cow-bell, but it's more normal at my age... That's why I want to live here, in the village. When a husband leaves his wife because he's died or gone off with another woman, for it makes no odds... we must go back to where we were born... visit the local hermitage, chat on the doorstep with the neighbours, go to evening prayers with them, even though you're not a believer... because if we don't, we lose our way like cow without its cowbell.

Kaplan (1990. 126-7) argues that some mothers who are accused by some feminists, of attempting to inculcate patriarchal 'feminine' attributes in their daughters, are, in fact, as much victims of patriarchy themselves. The mother in Flower Of My Secret corresponds
to this description. She ‘understands’ that her daughter is ‘lost’ without ‘patriarchal management’ and she sympathises with her, but she is also ready to offer her advice (that worked for her) on how to survive without that management.

**plate no 23.** Mother that constantly complains in

*Flower of My Secret*

In addition, Almodóvar’s mothers love their children even if they turn out to be criminals. In *Kika*, the mother of the alleged killer and rapist, when interviewed by Andrea Scarface for her reality show *Today’s Worst*, does not believe the allegation about her son although Andrea poses the ‘live footage’ of the murder scene. She believes more in her motherly instinct than in the television program which is just a ‘construction’.

Almodóvar’s ‘good’ mothers are women with ‘feminine’ qualities, but also mothers that love their daughters and sons. They live their lives, but they are also there for their children. Unlike Hollywood (Kaplan, 1990, 128), Almodóvar’s mothers are single and all
combine mothering with work. Almodóvar’s cinema is the total opposite of the cinema
Kaplan based her argument on:

Narratives that do focus on the Mother usually take that focus because she resists her proper place. The work of the film is to reinscribe the Mother in the position patriarchy desires for her and, in so doing, teach the female audience dangers of stepping out of the given position. (Kaplan, 1990, 128)

Almodóvar’s cinema is doing the reverse – it teaches the female audience the danger of following the positions given by patriarchal order.

Throughout Almodóvar’s films, we discover ‘All about his mothers’, but we rarely find out much about the fathers. It is not that the father’s characters are completely absent, but their appearance is reduced to a minimum. In eight out of thirteen films that Almodóvar has made to date we are, in some ways, introduced to the father characters. In most of the cases these fathers are passive characters like Sexi’s gynaecologist father in Labyrinth of Passion who, as it turns out desires his daughter (as opposite to child’s desire for father). Similarly, Lucía’s father in Women On the Verge Of a Nervous Breakdown is capable of nothing else but flattering his daughter in order to keep the status quo (the patriarchal relationship within family).

Furthermore, father’s characters are reduced to voices: the voice ‘over the phone’ in Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls that cuts Pepi from the inheritance or the voice ‘from the past’ in Law of Desire that persuaded Tina to change her sex. During the course of Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown Angel never meets his father Ivan. Actually, we are
not even sure if Ivan is ‘aware’ of Angel’s existence, but we know that he is not aware of Pepa’s pregnancy. Ivan, mainly reduced to a voice when communicating with other characters, as representative of patriarchal system, is just depicted as a seducer who cannot deal with responsibilities – he just runs away from them. Ivan is “a theatre of broken dreams and desires, a confection of images projected for the purpose of exploitation rather than as a celebration of redemption through love” (Evans, 1996, 50).

Similar, to Ivan’s situation, the father’s character in *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* does not notice the absence of his son. He, as father, is only capable of teaching one of the sons how to forge documents and imitate signatures. He does not ‘really’ provide or care for them, and therefore his sons do not ‘truly’ miss him when he dies.

**plate no. 24** Father who teaches his son how to forge documents in

*What Have I Done To Deserve This?*
For (newly) liberated mothers and daughters, the fathers in Almodóvar’s cinema represent just reminders of a negative past. As Manuela in All about My Mother says about Esteban’s father: “Lola’s got the worst of men and women” and Eva’s modern mother in Matador: “I loved your father and what good did it do?”. Fathers as the strongest representatives of the patriarchal order are the ‘worst’ enemies of Almodóvar’s women.

Furthermore, even when Almodóvar decides to create ‘metaphorical’ replacements for the father, such as the characters of priests and stepfathers, they are ‘emotional’ invalids – senseless patriarchal prosecutors. Rebeca’s ‘stepfathers’ in High Heels represent danger for her relationship with her mother. They are the enemies that she needs to fight (and kill) in order to secure freedom (from patriarchy) for herself and her mother. For Rebeca, this process of liberation is quite a long process. She starts her ‘fight’ after the incident in which her stepfather, as a tease, starts pretending to be selling her to some merchants (see plate no. 25). Not long after the incident, she successfully ‘gets rid’ of him, the enemy. However, she does not secure the win. Instead of ‘staying forever’, inseparable from her mother, she is placed in the care of her father (as her mother leaves for another continent) who, although good-natured, is still a patrimonial character. When Rebeca gets a second chance to ‘reunite’ with her mother, and once more tries to secure mother’s love, another ‘stepfather’ interposes himself as a threat (even though, as prevention, she marries him before her mother returns to Spain). The ‘stepfathers’ as the traps of patriarchal system, temptations her mother can not resist, represent the threat for Rebeca’s (and Becky’s) emancipation.
Likewise, the priests pose multiple characteristics of the oppressive system. Firstly, in the role of ‘spiritual’ fathers they control the mothers’ pathos (as in Matador). And secondly, in The Law of Desire Almodóvar, equalling them to the ‘natural fathers’, represents them as the abusers. Tina, while she was a very young boy, was abused by both her father and her choirmaster: she was betrayed by the only two men she has really loved.

In Labyrinth of Passion Queti is also abused by her father. Abandoned by his wife, her father confusing Queti with her mother rapes her every other day (Smith, 1994, 26). Although Queti is trying to ‘bring him to his senses’ he refuses to ‘open the eyes’ saying that she has a split personality. He is ignorant, refuses to accept the changes, he still continues his oppression and Queti has not got a choice other than to abandon him.
Almodóvar's films, it seems, confirm Deleuze's (1971, 52-4) proposal that the father's functions can be replaced by distributing them among three types of mothers: Oedipal, hetaeriac, and oral. Oedipal mother is considered to be a bad mother, the victim par excellence whose daughter has been given the preference over her and is positioned as an incestuous partner (Deleuze, 1971, 52). Hetaeriac mother can be considered as a 'border line' mother who is in the process of transformation. She is an institution "designed to destroy Oedipal mother and make the daughter an accomplice" (Deleuze, 1971, 54). Oral or 'good' mother, as an ideal of masochism, "is expected to assume all the functions of the other female figures and in taking on those functions she transforms and sublimes them" (Deleuze, 1971, 56). As Barbara Morris (1995, 92) notes:

In *Law of Desire*, Antonio's fascist mother corresponds to the role of punishing Oedipal mother; and Tina's ex-lover, the hetaeriac mother, is associated with, if not outright prostitution, then a career supported by men. Tina embodies the oral mother in whom father and mother coexist, a factor enhanced by her transsexual metamorphosis.

Similarly, in *Labyrinth of Passion* the functions are distributed among Toraya, the ex-Empress of Tiran (and thus ex-stepmother of Riza), Queti's mother and Sexi's psychologist Susana. Toraya as Oedipal type of mother ends up being Riza's first heterosexual sexual experience. Queti's mother, like Tina's ex-lover in *Law of Desire*, is 'supported' by men: after an argument with one she just returns to the other. And Susana becomes Sexi's psychologist in order to seduce Sexi's father: she 'cares' for Sexi, so she could 'care' for her father.
In *Matador* ‘reversed’ Oedipal type can be assigned to Angel’s castrating mother: Angel’s castration anxiety is aggravated by his mother’s (and not father’s) threats. The hetaeric mother type, in some ways, can be assigned to Eva’s modern mother: she enforces her daughter’s modelling career so they can have a ‘luxurious’ life. The ‘oral’ mother, in this case, can be assigned to Angel’s psychologist Julia: Almodóvar even explicitly implies this in one shot where he positions Julia and Angel as a suggestion of the Madonna and Child motif (see plate no. 26).

Almodóvar has maintained this distribution of the father’s functions in *All about My Mother*. Manuela can be considered as ‘potential’ Oedipal mother. Her son could not identify with the parent of the same ‘sex’ (the family triangle did not exist), but as she was the only ‘external object’ her son met before he died (the ‘accident’ that prevented Manuela from turning into the Oedipal mother) she was the inevitable choice for
direction of his phallic erotic urges. Rosa’s mother can be considered to represent the hetaeric mother, as she is a forger: she does not create she just reproduces art. Manuela is also represented as the ‘oral’ mother as she “embraces the lives, loves and the babies of the women she meets” (Smith, Sept 1999, 30). She is an ‘oral’ mother to Huma, Rosa and Rosa’s child. Finally, Manuela’s role of ‘oral’ mother to Huma (dependent on kindness of strangers) is passed on to La Agrado, “a transsexual well endowed in both the male and female departments” (Smith, Sept. 1999, 30).

Almodóvar’s fatherless fictions, and the narratively tangential representatives of the patriarchy - that as Morris (1995, 92) argues, in the case of Law of Desire, are inscribed within a subversive homoerotic context - can be read against Deleuze’s (1971, 42-60) work on masochism which provides a psychoanalytic model empowering the mother and absenting the father from its contractual discourse:

The transfer of the functions of the father on to the three mother-images is only one aspect of the phantasy. The main significance of the phantasy lies in concentration of all the maternal functions in the person of the oral or ‘good’ mother. It is mistake to relate masochism to the theme of the bad mother. There are of course bad mothers in masochism (the two extremes of the uterine mother and the Oedipal mother) but this is because the whole tendency of masochism is to idealize the functions of the bad mother and transfer them on to the good mother (Deleuze, 1971, 54).

I would argue this is true for Almodóvar. The majority of his ‘bad’ mothers transfer into the ‘good’ mothers. In All About My Mother the motherhood of the youngest Esteban (Rosa’s son) is ‘allocated’ to Manuela only when she was ‘ready’ to transform into the
'oral' mother. Manuela, who previously in the film was denied the right to be mother as she was inclined to become an 'Oedipal' type, had to be 'trained' - she was 'oral' mother to Humia, and than Rosa - in order to 'deserve' the right to mother Esteban (after Rosa's death). Deleuze's (1971, 55) argument that "the symbolic order as an internatal order in which the mother represents the law under certain prescribed conditions" can be applied to Almodóvar's films.
Chapter 4

Law Of Gaze And Rape Labyrinth

Intrigued with McAlister’s review of Pedro Almodóvar’s *Kika* (July 1994, 1) in which she states that she “found it very difficult to sit through, much less laugh at an interminable rape scene” and that she “really can’t imagine that many women would find this little gem funny” I started questioning my own understanding of the scene as I was one of those “few women who found that little gem funny”. The first time I saw *Kika* I was with three other female friends (all in our 20s and all influenced with feminist and post-feminist thoughts) and I clearly remember all four of us laughing during the mentioned scene. So, at least, I wasn’t the only woman that was ‘amused’ with the “interminable rape scene”. After the first encounter with the film I saw it at least a dozen times and not once (even after reading McAlister’s review) was I offended by the scene. Once I even screened the scene (for other purposes) to a class of media students and I noticed that everyone (regardless of sex) was laughing away at it. We all, somehow, understood that the scene, although “played for laughs” as some critics tend to interpret it, was not encouraging rape nor derogating female character. Rather, Almodóvar was using it for the process of construction of gender relations within the film.

However, as mentioned earlier, I was intrigued with McAlister’s statement so I started searching for the other reviews of the film. Interestingly enough I could not find any
reviews written by a woman (with the exception of McAlister’s review). With the exception of James Berardinelli (1994, 1) who points out that: “the movie is likely to offend as many as it appeals to, and I felt a little of the pull in both directions“ and Morgan (1994, 48) who criticises Almodóvar with the “lengthy protraction of Kika’s rape scene suggests less a distancing effect than a reluctance to recognize when enough is enough” all other male reviewers, after noting their awareness of possible offensiveness of the scene, chose to state the opposite.

Joe Brown (May 1994, 1) seeing Kika as, “the kitschy collage” notes that “it doesn’t matter that ”Kika“ doesn’t make sense -- doesn’t even try to make sense. It's just so much fun to watch... Almodóvar actually plays a drawn-out rape scene for laughs -- and gets away with it. Pedro Sena (1993, 1), after admitting that it is “slow to develop, and at times just plain, compared to other Almodóvar films”, declares that “Kika, still stands as a fun film to watch, despite its occasional bad taste, here and there”. And finally, Frank Maloney (1994, 1), who although would prefer if the film “had concentrated more on Andrea Scarface and less on Kika, a not very interesting person before her rape” suggests that:

Kika gets to do a little growing up in the course of the film and it is she who must suffer the now infamous rape of the film, infamous because the scene is played for laughs... It’s what comes afterwards that is the real rape in this case, the police, the husband, and especially the helmeted camera of Andrea who wants to interview the victim as she’s comes out of the shower. This is the point that critics who condemn this film miss. There is nothing funny about this second rape. It’s far and away the more damaging and leads directly to bloodshed and death.... I highly recommend Kika to you (Maloney, 1944, 1)
Nevertheless, the fact is that the USA release of *Kika* created certain controversy. According to Jones (1997, 2) although there were calls for an X rating, the film ended up with a NC-17 rating. It is very interesting to note that, although America helped to launch Almodóvar’s international career (Strauss, 122, 1996), after his exploiting of a long rape scene for comic effect, some ‘true’ fans declared they were no longer willing to follow him anywhere (Hartl, 1997, 1). In contrast, Spanish audiences accepted the film (Almodóvar, 128, 1996).

Smith (Jan 1994, 8) even claims that the scene provoked a lot of laughter from the young, mainly female audience on the night he saw the film in the massive Palace of Music Theatre in Madrid. However, as Smith (January 1994, 8) further points out *Kika*’s humiliation does not come so much from the rape act itself as from its television screening by another female character. Consequently, it appears to me that American audiences/critics are more concerned with the scene’s immediate impact than with reading it within the context of the film.

Almodóvar does not make any concessions to political correctness and there are times, after laughing, audience end up feeling guilty for having done so (Brunette, 1998, 1). The rape scene in *Kika* might be “politically incorrect” as it is played for laughs, but the fact is that Almodóvar is proposing that “physical rape may not be as damaging as the media rape committed by greed-driven reporters” (Hartl, 1994, 1).

The questions such as what are the consequences of the scene, how are they presented and who is the most affected by them arise. *Kika* does suffer both physical and media
rape, but she was suffering even before that. Her ignorance is the source of the suffering. Only when she is confronted with the truth in a most brutal way does she decide to take responsibility for her own life.

Yet, it is important to note the fact that it is the rape that is chosen to motivate the strengthening of the female character. The rape, as an example of ‘the methods used for taming women’, belongs to one of the two contradictory matters that help the re-establishment of the patriarchal system in mainstream cinema. While discussing Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Deidre Pribram (1988, 1) notes:

> Women is not a subject in her own right but the object by which patriarchal subject can define himself. Mainstream cinema’s contradictory/complementary representations of women as either idealised objects of desire or as threatening forces to be ‘tamed’ are not attempts to establish female subjectivity but rather reflect the search for male self-definition.

In *Kika*, Almodóvar is not interested in representing the ‘taming’ process as the process of search for the male self-definition. Rather it becomes the process of search for the female self-definition. The male character is not of any interest for the further development of the film.

In addition, there is another issue that needs to be considered. As I mentioned earlier, McAlister’s review of *Kika* is the only review written by a female reviewer that I could find. It is published on The University of Maryland women’s studies web page. It is the only completely negative review that categorises *Kika* as a boys’ film. This fact further
raises the question of the possible ‘polarisation’ of the film’s interpretation into male/female polarities. The constant Gender Studies question arises: “is a female viewing of a certain scene, in this case one representing an act of sexual assault that man commits over woman, completely different/opposite to a male viewing of the same scene?”

Laura Mulvey (1990, 28-41) emphasises the importance of the patriarchal viewpoint in the cinema. According to her the pleasure gained from looking is a male pleasure and the looking position in cinema is directed by the male. Susana Brownmiller (1975, 20) goes even further in analysing of social intercourses presenting us with the portrayal of male villainy and female victimisation. However, in regards to Almodóvar’s cinema, I would tend to agree with Molly Haskell (1997, 129-30) when she states that

The power in a relationship is not invariably on the side of the male – the distinction between coercion and collusion is a fine one, and in our sexual tastes more than in any other aspect of our lives we are at the mercy of reflexes formed by early experiences and emotions prompted by a tangle of needs that are inaccessible to logic. This is one reason why the sex is so difficult to generalise about, or to politicise into male/female polarities. The minute you describe a sexual experience to another person, it is transformed by the listener or reader into something else, in accordance with his or her fantasy life.

In the case of his cinema, I would dare to suggest Almodóvar is trying to create the viewpoint that would contradict patriarchal discourse. He is attempting to create the ‘look’ that is directed at both male and female:

In the film as it stands, Kika starts by resisting Paul, but the second he puts the knife at her throat she becomes practical and tries to persuade him he has a lot of problems she can solve. This doesn’t indicate any
pleasure on her part: it shows her optimism. It demonstrates the strength
women can call on in difficult, not to say critical
situations” (Almodóvar, 1996, 133-4).

Almodóvar is hoping that his audience will not confuse the real and representational.
Kika is just the character that he created. He decides to ‘sacrifice’ her body by submitting
it to the physical insult/pain. In exchange he enables her to develop and strengthen her
feminine traits/qualities. In contrast, Paul’s character does not develop any further. He is
what he was before the act: convicted, mentally unstable, erstwhile porno star incapable
of differentiating reality from the representation. Therefore, differing reactions of women
on the rape scene in Kika are not so surprising. While McAlister (July 1994, 1) and some
other female audience find themselves offended with the physical attack on Kika seeing
violence as the prime problem, as expression of patriarchy, other women (including
myself) are more interested in Kika’s reaction to the tragedy: she is not defeated, she
stays optimistic. Here, it appears that Almodóvar is using the scene for construction of
gender identities within the film.

Furthermore Kaplan’s (1997, 6) statement that “the film site allows speculation on how
changes in looking relations may mitigate sexism and homophobia”, or even more so the
question: “Who is allowed or forbidden to look?” need consideration. Almodóvar does
not just empower the spectators to look but also, he positions his characters, within his
films, into voyeuristic roles. In Kika, during the rape scene, two voyeurs are present and a
third, ‘neuter’ one assumed. The first voyeur is Ramon, Kika’s boyfriend, who as the
representative of patriarchal system, watches Kika in order to control her, as well as for
his own pleasure (see plate no. 27):
RAMON:
The police don’t know who is the voyeur. He didn’t identify himself.

NICOLAS:
How do you know?

RAMON:
Because it was me. I am the one that called. I see the house from my studio. I like watching Kika.

NICOLAS:
Besides spying her you gave the tapes to Andrea?

RAMON:
I didn’t say that.

NICOLAS:
So what the fuck did you say?

RAMON:
I was watching when she was in danger and I called the cops. That’s it.

NICOLAS:
That’s it?

RAMON:
I didn’t film what was on TV. Someone Andrea knows or she herself did it.

However, during the rape scene, unlike the patriarchal heroes, Ramon is a passive viewer. He does not run to save his ‘heroine’ he just simply ‘calls the cops’ and continues watching, but this time, he is not necessarily watching the act for personal enjoyment.
The second voyeur is Juana, Kika’s lesbian maid and, also, Paul’s sister. She is also in love with Kika. Although tied to a chair and female, both prerequisites for passiveness, she is trying to help Kika (see plate no. 28). In some ways she is positioned into the classical ‘hero’ role. But she does not use force; something that the masculine patriarchal hero would definitely use. She uses her feminine qualities, she is negotiating.

plate no. 27 male viewer is distanced from the female character not just by reach, but also with photo camera

plate no. 28 although gagged and tied to the chair Juana is trying to help Kika

Kika

The rape scene in Kika is not a solitary occurrence in Almodóvar’s work. It is worth noting that one of the first scenes that Almodóvar introduces to his audience in his first feature length film is a rape scene. It could be said that, similar to the portrayals of absent/bad fathers there is consistency in Almodóvar’s films, in representing the men as rapists.
Almodóvar's 'rape scenes' create the critical debate in which the English (and German) speaking audience attacked Almodóvar for the 'negative' political content of his images while Spanish (and French) critics displace those images into ironic humour or pastiche (Smith, 1994, 112). It could also be said that this 'misunderstanding' has emerged from the different cultural backgrounds and different reading positions of the various critics/readers. English speaking audiences, it appears, read the scenes without a contextual reading of the whole film. Similar to McAlister, Anne Billson (Dec 1991, 7) in her analysis of the scene of attempted rape in Matador, is more concerned with the possibility that the scene is played for laughs than with the 'message' the scene conveys.

However, I would tend to agree with Smith (1994, 68) when he, in regards to Matador, states that it seems likely that Almodóvar is not aiming for humour in the attempted rape sequence:

> Almodóvar is concerned not with the victimisation of the woman, but rather with the internal conflict of the man: Angel identifies with his master Diego, but is unable successfully to imitate his actions. Hence while feminism has taught us to see rape as social conflict between individuals, Almodóvar here disavows the problem of male domination (Eva is considerably more self-possessed than Angel) and focuses on the psychic conflict within individuals produced by the impossible demands of fantasy (Smith, 1994, 68).

Even, in Kika, as Almodóvar (1996, 134) points out, humour in the rape scene emerges from the fact that the rape lasts so long that the horror of the act becomes irrelevant and the every day life worries (that the humour always arises from) spring to Kika's mind: "If I'd written only half the scene it would have stayed merely violent."
And the violence is exactly what the Hollywood audience would expect from the scene. In the last decade, Hollywood films, generally, have avoided the representation of rape scenes. However, even when 'shown' those scenes are usually just 'assumed' scenes of 'assumed' violence. Films such as Leaving Las Vegas, A Time to Kill, The Accused, Bad Lieutenant, The General’s Daughter show the rape scenes as merely violent. These scenes are usually portrayed with hand held camera that causes nausea among the audience (and not necessarily because of the act itself). The films take on very self-righteous, enlightening and enlightened stance, while also wallowing in all the titillating, graphic details of the crime.

For radical feminist theorists the sexuality, specifically as expressed in male violence, is the cause of women’s oppression and absolved by the institutionalisation of heterosexuality (Dworkin, 1981, 14). The early work of the Women’s Movement on rape generated the assumption that “if there is not a natural balance between men and women than there is a ‘natural imbalance’ – men naturally have power, women are powerless; men are by nature sexually violent, women are destined to be victims – or that there is an ‘unnatural imbalance’ – power relations are socially constructed and can be socially transformed” (Stern, 1992, 201). Susana Brownmiller (1975, 200-5) reinterprets rape as an act of violence, not sexuality, the threat of which intimidates all women. According to Hague (1997, 51) Brownmiller argues that rape is “an alliance of masculine sexuality’s aggressive, violent and dominating position with respect to femininity’s allegedly inherent passivity". Some other feminists, such as MacKinnon (1997, 44) “see the rape,
including its violence, as an expression of male sexuality, the social imperatives of which define as well as threaten all women". Either way, rape has been developed as a generalised metaphor: rape as (violent) oppression of all women by all men (Stern, 1992, 203).

Almodóvar's rejection of violent representation of rape scenes in which the female character is frightened is what prompts some critics to assume that this representation carries negative connotations. Although Paul is aggressive, Kika is not intimidated. She stays optimistic in order to survive the veritable hell she lives in (Almodóvar, 1996, 93). Almodóvar uses the rape scene to hearten, till then, a quite superficial female character. At first, Brownmiller's (1975, 104) "allegedly inherent female passivity" might appear to be an appropriate description for Kika's character. However, although a 'thirteen-stone' man is on top of her, and although he threatens her with a knife, two factors that force her to stay 'psychologically passive', she is psychically incredibly active. She is aware that, as a representative of the 'female world' her mental strength is what she has to use to defeat her physically stronger attacker. Once more - like in Matador- Almodóvar is stressing the female mental strength. While Paul is obviously mentally unstable, Kika is able to rationalise even in those unfortunate circumstances. Furthermore, even the immense length of the rape scene provides Almodóvar with an opportunity to interact the act of rape with other simultaneous occurrences in order to further ridicule male characters: they are voyeurs, corrupted cops and mentally challenged rapists.
Almodóvar has the power in choosing the destiny of his characters. Although Almodóvar does not avoid ‘physically’ hurting his female characters (he submits them to rape and ‘demonic powers’, he gags them) when treatment of femininity requires problematic form (Evans, 1996, 41), he also chooses to save them from the same when it is possible. As Smith (April 1998, 8) notes, while reviewing Live Flesh, Almodóvar rejects the rape motif offered him by Rendell (she is author of the book that the film is based on), as her Victor, unlike Almodóvar’s, is a serial rapist. Similarly, in All About My Mother Almodóvar chooses to place Manuela in a spectatorial position so she can react and save Agrado from being raped. In Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, Ricki is aware that rape will not solve his problem: he will not be admitted into a women’s world by oppressing them. Marina does not fall in love with him because he gags her, but because he sacrifices himself (gets beaten) for her.

Even in his Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls, a film that in my opinion contains Almodóvar’s only problematic rape scene (the second rape scene which does not have any major influence on the further development of characters) Almodóvar instructs his female audience that it is not physical (patriarchal) but mental (feminine) strength that can convert men. As it appears, physical violence does not always affect the one that it is intended for – it might as well affect his innocent twin brother. Truly Pepi, as a witness in voyeuristic (spectatorial) position, does gain the pleasure from looking at the violent act (see plate no. 29 and 30). However, as it appears later in the film, this pleasure was invoked for all the wrong reasons. The ‘punished’ (beaten) man was not the
policeman/rapist, but his good natured twin brother. The revenge is accomplished only when Pepi using her feminine intrigues 'steals' the wife from the repulsive rapist.

plate no. 29  

Pepi gains the pleasure from observing the violent act in  

_Pepi, Luci, Bom, And other Girls_

The second rape scene that goes unpunished and, it appears, unnoticed by many critics and most of the film's characters (all but Luci) takes place in front of us, is problematic. Even though Pepi finds herself in a voyeuristic position during the film she is not empowered, like Manuela twelve films after, to save from victimisation anyone else but herself. She does not get the chance to help fellow sufferer as her voyeuristic pleasure is directed towards something else (making the autobiographical film). Without any strong reasons, as policeman (Luci's husband) is already portrayed as an evil man, Almodóvar allows him to deceive and rape Luci's naïve neighbour. She is punished for believing the men.
If we consider Kaplan’s (1997, 7) observation that both the look and the gaze are important aspects of culture then Almodóvar’s ‘game’ with viewing positions might be of great interest in the analysis of his construction of gender identities within the scenes and his films. The possibility is that just the positioning of viewers helped Almodóvar to succeed in establishing, as Kinder calls it “a mobile sexuality as a new cultural stereotype for a hyperliberated Socialist Spain” (1997, 3). As argued by Doane (1990, 43) “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”. Therefore, it is important to note whom is Almodóvar aiming the visual pleasure for.

The greater part of Almodóvar’s cinema is concerned with voyeurism, which, as already mentioned, plays a big role in determining gender roles. De Laurentis argues that feminist film theorists (amongst which she emphasises Laura Mulvey and her Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema and Stephan Heath and his Narrative Space)

Had been writing on sexualization of the female star in narrative cinema and analysing the cinematic techniques (lighting, framing, editing, etc.) and the specific cinematic codes (eg. the system of the look) that construct woman as image, as the object of the spectator’s voyeuristic gaze; and they had been developing both an account and a critique of the psycho-social, aesthetic, and philosophical discourse that underline the representation of the female body as the primary site of sexuality and visual pleasure (1987, 13).

However, it could be said, Almodóvar’s films, while composing images of femininity, do not aim to be deconstructive. While analysing What Have I Done to Deserve This,
Vernon (Spring 1993, 30), stresses that “the film holds out the possibility of rescuing an alternative, subversive visual pleasure that does not depend on an enunciatory structure grounded in sexual difference, and more particularly, in the repression of feminine in favour of the masculine”. Almodóvar and his cinema have been known for the love of sex and gender fluidity, the hostility to the fixed positions of all kinds which anticipated by a full decade the critique of identity politics now common place in Anglo-American feminist and queer theory (Smith, Jan 1994, 10).

The rape scenes in Almodóvar’s films are never constructed to invoke any kind of male (voyeuristic) pleasure. Although some of the scenes spur laughter, it does not essentially mean that the humour (if there is any) from the scene undermines women and their position in the film. They might not represent the rape as violent, but unlike many Hollywood films (such as The Accused, General’s Daughter, Leaving Las Vegas) they never question the responsibility for the act. It is the men that commit sexist crime against women and no other ‘creatures’ are blamed for that.
Unlike us, who are still living in patriarchal society and are influenced by some of its norms, Almodóvar’s characters have more freedom to deal with some topics that are taboos for us. Some of the scenes in his films might shock us and insult our ‘moral’ judgments. On the other hand, some of our reactions, such as laughing during ‘politically’ incorrect scenes, might mortify us. And that is exactly what Almodóvar wants.

Almodóvar is there to shock and surprise us. His hostility towards the patriarchal system and its norms is what ‘forces’ him to concentrate on the construction of gender and sexuality within his films. And this ‘concentration’ is what creates an auteuristic ‘pattern’ that contradicts the constraints of the mainstream filmic system.

He does not want to be labelled. He mixes genres, mixes the rules. He rather uses than conforms to any norms (patriarchal, feminist, or ‘queer’). His characters are allowed to be whatever they feel comfortable with. However, Almodóvar does not always support their behaviours. While he does not morally judge them – Almodóvar’s women do kill men, but their crimes are not punished or condemned – he totally rejects their behaviours that support patriarchy – both men and women that propagate patriarchy are condemned.
This constant boldness confuses the audiences/critics used to a standardised system of representation. That is why many, after maybe liking one of Almodóvar's films, allow themselves to be disappointed with Almodóvar's 'surprises' surfacing in his following film. Nevertheless, in Spain, Almodóvar's films are as visited as 'mainstream' films (Smith, 1994, 5).

Even though Almodóvar’s films deal with ‘universal’ issues (at least for Western cultures), they still depict Spanish mentalities. The Spanish audience has an advantage in watching films in their native language with an already established cultural pre-knowledge. On the other hand, in Spain, as well as in the rest of Europe, Hollywood is considered to be ‘mainstream’. Moreover, the rejection of the existence of the Francoist system inspires Almodóvar to place the history of his characters into Hollywood, and therefore secures cultural pre-knowledge for American (and wider) audiences. Therefore, it appears that the Spanish audience, after liberation form ‘dark ages’ of Francoist rule (that in all spheres supported patriarchal system), is more inclined towards accepting some ‘abnormalities’.

Spanish Radio and Television Law, instituted in 1980 established Media (specifically Television) as:

... an essential vehicle for the information and political participation of citizens, for the formation of public opinion, for the dissemination of the culture of Spain and its nationalities and regions, as well as being a major way of ensuring that freedom and equality are truly and effectively implemented, with particular attention being given to the
protection of minorities and non-discrimination against women. (cited in Aguilera and Perales 1994, 111)

Since his beginnings (his first feature length film was realised in 1980), Almodóvar was allowed (forced) to create liberated characters that are equal in all their rights. The Law with its close attention on citizens' rights creates the atmosphere of tolerance among the viewers and producers that helped Almodóvar to develop his freedom of expression.

However, the fact is that, even in Spain, until All About My Mother, Almodóvar was not accepted by film officials. It could be objected, as Brunette (2000, 1) notes in regards to success of All About My Mother, "that what Almodóvar has succeeded in doing is simply making his film less "Spanish" and thus more palatable to an international (read: American) audience". But this does not explain the 'sudden' change in reception of Almodóvar's work among Spanish film critics. The possibility is that Almodóvar "has finally got all his cinematic oars pulling, marvellously, in the same direction" (Brunette, 2000, 1).

Nevertheless, the film still engages in the themes characteristic of Almodóvar. Women are still the centre of the film. The voyeuristic pleasure is, again, assigned to women. The film depicts mother characters and, again, stresses the 'absence' of fathers. And, even, some male characters are represented as rapists.

Almodóvar does not deal with some weighty topics in the way some feminist theorists would like him to. He does not portray the rapist in accordance with Susana...
Brownmiller's statement (1975, 200) "the profile of the forcible (read violent op. auteur) rapist falls at a point midway between the profile of the man who commits aggravated assault and the man who commits robbery". He does not represent rape scenes as merely violent. He does not deal with the motivation of the occurrence. His rapists are 'mentally' deficient (unlike female characters that are mentally strong) and he does not care for their well being. Almodóvar does not care about social consequences of rape. For him, rape is just another (together with father centred narratives, and visual pleasures directed toward men) example of patriarchal oppression that he fights by rejecting (and redirecting) the standardised cinematic (voyeuristic) rules of 'gazing' directions.
Bibliography


    Date of access:07.05.2000.


Berardinelli, J. (1994) Kika, A Film Review by James Berardinelli


Brunette, P. (2000) *A Delightful Soap Opera*


Available on: http://www.film.com/reviews/

Date of access: 11/09/2000

Hartl, J. (1994) In the Spirit of Almodóvar

Available on: http://www.film.com/reviews/

Date of access: 11/09/2000


Available on: http://www.roughcut.com;
Date of access:07.05.2000.


Maloney, F. (1994) *Kika: review for German reviews* 
Available on: [http://www.rec.arts.movies.reviews](http://www.rec.arts.movies.reviews)
And: [http://www.de.rec.film.kritiken](http://www.de.rec.film.kritiken)
Date of access: 11/09/2000-10-09

McAlister, L. L., (July 16, 1994) A film review by Linda Lopez McAlister on *The Women's Show WMNF -- FM (88.5)* Tampa, FL

Available on:


Date of access: 07/05/2000


Russo, V. (November 1988) Man of La Mania: Pedro Almodóvar on the Verge… Film Comment 24 (6)


Sena, P. (1993) Kika: review for German reviews

Available on: http://www.rec.arts.movies.reviews

And: http://www.de.rec.film.kritiken

Date of access: 11/09/2000-10-09


Smith, P. J. (Sep.1999) Silicone and Sentiment Sight and Sound 9 (9), 28 -30

Smith, P. J. (January 1994) Future Chic Sight and Sound 4 (1)


64


Filmography of Pedro Almodóvar

   *All About My Mother* (1999) (Europe: English title) (USA)

2. *Carne trémula* (1997) (original title)
   *En chair et en os* (1997) (France)

   *Fleur de mon secret, La* (1995) (France)


   *High Heels* (1991) (Europe: English title) (USA)

6. ¡Átame! (1990) (original title)
   *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) (Europe: English title) (USA)

   *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) (Europe: English title) (USA)


10. ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?! (1984) (original title)

*What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) (Europe: English title) (USA)

11. Entre tinieblas (1983) (original title)

*Dark Habits* (1983) (Europe: English title) (USA)


*Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) (Europe: English title) (USA)


*Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Other Girls* (1980) (Europe: English title) (USA)