Transgenderism and Transsexuality in Almodovar’s Movies

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INTRODUCTION

“I think the human being gathers all characters: male and female, good and evil, martyr and fool” (Strauss, 2000).

Almodovar likes to transgress norms and representations. He is the kind of autodidact director who has managed to create a personal and recognizable style in cinema. In his colourful pop and ‘kitsch’ atmosphere, Almodovar mixes humor and emotions to focus on passion and desire;

“What interests me most is passion itself. It’s a power you can’t control, which is stronger than you are and which gives rise to as much pain as pleasure... It makes you do really monstrous or absolutely extraordinary things.” (Almodovar, El temps: 1984)

His passion for cinema has pushed him from his village in La Mancha to becoming one of the top trendy European directors. Almodovar started to direct after Franco’s regime came to a fall. Using provocation and frivolity, the director takes revenge for forty years of conservatism, nationalism and authoritarianism. His creations are likely to be eternal returns of womanhood and femininity, tolerance and liberty, fiction and reality. Overall, reversing sex

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and gender roles, he breaks prejudices and traditions of social identities in a patriarchal society. Therefore, transsexuals are not only visible in his work, they are a leitmotiv.

**Whatever we call them: transsexuals, drag queens, cross-dressers, or transgenders – Almodovar refuses to categorize them – these characters blur the frontiers between sex, gender and sexuality.** They may be transvestite for a show, be half or completely operated; these characters choose to express their feminine part for a lifetime or just for a matter of hours. Hence, they usually concentrate on sensuality and eroticism. Almodovar’s work is a tribute to “women, mothers, women who want to be mother, (and) men who want to be women” (final scene of Almodovar’s All about my mother, 1999). Hence, to what extent does Almodovar’s work on transsexuality upset gender dichotomies and masculinity in a patriarchal society?

**FOCUSING ON THE movies in which transsexuals play an important role (The Law of Desire [La Ley del Deseo, 1987], High Heels [Tacones Lejanos, 1991], All about my mother [Todo sobre mi madre, 1999] and Bad Education [La mala educacion, 2004]), I have tried to clarify the stakes of transsexuality in his work, in the light of constructivist theories on gender and sexuality. The analyses led by Nuria Vidal, Richard Strauss, and Paul Julian Smith on Almodovar’s movies gave me a global comprehension of his work. In this article, I study the way Almodovar gives both complex and sensual representations of transsexuality. Then, I demonstrate how these representations break usual sex and gender dichotomies. Finally, I show how his work on transsexuality upsets the ideal of masculinity in a patriarchal society.**

**STAGING TRANSSEXUALITY: GIVING VISIBILITY IN A SENSUAL WAY**

**Imposing a multiple representation of transsexualities** From The Law of Desire to Bad Education, Almodovar breaks clichés about transsexuals. In his movies, they are not reduced to “people who believe themselves to be female and who wish to, or do, live full-time as women” (Gagné and Tewksbury 1997: 483). They choose to mainly express the feminine part of themselves, but still live outside of common sex and gender dichotomies. In The Law of Desire, Tina, played by a woman (Carmen Maura), is a post-operated transsexual who has had a daughter with a lesbian. She nevertheless used to be in love with her father and still has affairs with men. In the same movie, the transsexual actress Bibi Andersen plays a lesbian who is a genuine girl.
Letal, in *High Heels*, is a well-known drag queen who performs imitations of Becky, a famous singer whose daughter he wants to seduce. During the day, he becomes either Hugo or the hyper-masculine Judge Dominguez. Both of these transsexuals differ from Agrado, a half-operated transsexual, played by the genuine woman Antonia San Juan in *All about my mother*. Overacting her femininity, she nevertheless has a penis and breasts. Finally, if a real transsexual playing a post-operated transsexual appears at some points in *Bad Education*, the story mainly focuses on Angel, a straight actor whose ambition leads him into sleeping with a gay director and to play a transsexual in order to succeed in cinema.

Even if they are not at the core of the plots, transsexuals become the focus of the audience attention in Almodovar’s movies. Transsexuals are always performing within the film: they are on stage in order to be more visible. Tina and her daughter perform together in Cocteau’s piece, *La voix humaine*, Letal plays and sings two drag queens show, *pensà en mi* and *recordame*. Agrado is acclaimed after her improvised monologue on stage and Angel plays in a drag-queen show in the movie inside the movie *Bad Education*. Thus, they all perform in cabarets, theatres, and even cabaret in the movie. By doing this, Almodovar plays a game between reality and fiction, in which illusion and imitation organize masquerades. This ‘Russian dolls’ game puts those who are usually marginalised in the centre of our attention. Moreover, these shows usually appear at the climax of dramatic intensity. As Bacchanalians, these performances are qualified by ambivalence and illusion. They do not aim to re-establish the previous old social order as they do in Carnival. On the contrary, they point out the artificiality of our prejudices and the weakness of our reality. Drug scenes are always present and complete the artificial and illusory atmosphere.

Not only does Almodovar make transsexuals visible by staging them, he also wants to reconcile them with the public space. In a key scene of *The Law of Desire*, Tina comes back home on a hot summer night. Realizing municipal agents are hosing down streets in Madrid, she asks them with eagerness to be refreshed. She exults in an orgasmic way when they point the water hose on her (Vidal, 1988: 170):
- *Come on! Hose me! Don’t be shy! Hose me! It’s so hot, I’m suffocating. Tonight, I can’t bear it. Stop! Stop!*
- *Come on! The hydrotherapy session’s over.*
- *Ah! How gorgeous!*
- *How do you feel?*
- *I’ve always dreamed of something like this. A bit heavy. I didn’t think it would be that heavy, but it was great. Let’s go and get drunk.*

This scene resembles sexual intercourse. The sexual fulfillment that Tina experiences in the street may appear as the reconciliation between transsexuality and public space.

**Finally, Almodóvar’s use** of music, costumes, colours, kitsch and camp esthetics is magnified with the apparitions of transsexuals. It creates a cinema of saturation and focuses even more of our attention. During his first show in *High Heels*, Letal wears a wig, earrings, necklace and bracelets, has make-up on his face and nonchalantly wanders in a spangled dress, fishnet stockings and platform shoes. The settings (streets in Spain, façades, house interiors, stages) are always colourful, almost saturated. This leads to an enhancement of transsexuals’ visibility.

**Staging involves** the looks of others. Showing transsexuals in a very visible way increases the audience’s curiosity and leads us to question sex / gender alternatives to the binary system. Overall it shows how the perception of others is central when defining ourselves. In *High Heels*, a discussion between Letal and a narrow-minded straight man points this out:

- *What is your real name?*
- *I’m like the song ‘I’m whatever you call me.’ My friends call me Letal.*
- *Letal is male or female?*
- *It depends. For you I’m a man.*

**Letal’s disappointed tone** shows how dependent on the others transsexuals are to be recognized as authentic social actors. Thus, Almodovar concentrates the sensual intensity on these characters. Far from being ridiculous, transsexuals are the most appealing characters in his movies.
Seducing the audience through sensuality

The striking point in Almodovar’s movies is the extreme femininity of transsexuals. Far from being funny parodies, transsexuals embody more than any female character the sensual eroticism of femininity. In The Law of Desire, the short apparition of the (real) transsexual Bibi Andersen playing a mother back home is striking in her imposing presence. Her daughter in the movie underlines it:

- Mum, you are so beautiful.
- I know.

Angel (played by Gabriel Garcia Bernal) in the show at the beginning of Bad Education is also extremely sensual. Appearing in a twinkling dress that looks like a female naked body, Angel sings languorously watching the audience lovingly meanwhile caressing her body with a red rose. Her ability to feign abandonment enhances the erotic scope of the performance. Each time a transsexual performs, her red lips glow, her costume emphasizes her female (fake or not) forms; her gestures, behaviours and dances are full of delicacy. Furthermore, transsexuals are the characters who really dare to show their (female) bodies. In The Law of Desire, Tina explicitly arranges her bra, or spreads her legs even though she is wearing a miniskirt. All of them at some point show off endless cleavage. This assumed femininity combined with the androgynous ambivalence of the characters completes their erotic dimension. Transsexuals are not only visually omnipresent; they embody sensuality and are meant to arouse desire. At the least, nobody remains indifferent.

Moreover, it is often through transsexuals that passion and desire are expressed. In Almodovar’s work, desire is seen as at the origin of life and at its end. As suggested in the quotation in the introduction, Almodovar’s interest in desire and passion is central in his movies. His production company is called Deseo S.A. (‘desire’ in Spanish) and the name appears at the beginning of every movie. Passion is the explicit final word in Bad Education, and represented by the fire at the end of The Law of Desire. Finally, the reference to Tennessee William’s piece A Streetcar named Desire, in All about my mother, corroborates Almodovar’s affinity for this theme. But if transsexuals generally behave with femininity,
their erotic urges are expressed in a virile way: Angel’s intercourse with Enrique while half asleep at the beginning of *Bad Education* is zealous, even bestial. This ambivalence between femininity and virile erotic urge is even more interesting when it points out how desire is a driving force of transgression.

**Finally, transsexuals’ remarkable** sense of humor completes the seduction of spectators. Agrado in *All about my mother* arouses laughter and applause during her monologue in which she demonstrates, by numbering all her surgical transformations, how authentic she is. Her half-naïve spontaneity is touching and contrasts with the heavy social concerns present in the movie (death of a son and the HIV issue for instance). Agrado is less an erotic icon (contrary to Garcia Bernal in Angel or Miguel Bosé in *Letal*) than one of the most fresh and touching characters in Almodovar’s work. In his way, Agrado also arouses attention and sympathy.

**Almodovar openly** represents transsexuality in his movies, and challenges our perception of differences. He stages extremely sensual transsexuals who manage to arouse desire more than any female character. Desire, which is likely to be Almodovar’s motto, is depicted as the driving force in human behaviours, and not as guilt, but a source of fulfillment. Finally, his personal aesthetics is full of colours and ‘kitsch’. This atmosphere climaxes with the performances of transsexuals. Thus, they concentrate the dramatic intensity. Why is transsexuality a *leitmotiv* in Almodovar’s movies? The answers may fit in his personal vision of sex, gender and sexuality in society.

**TRANSSEXUALITY HIGHLIGHTS TRANSGENDERISM:**

**Driving ideology of gender dichotomy and Freudian discourses**

In 1966, **Godard’s** New Wave movie *Masculin, Féminin* came out. Through the existential doubts of two archetypal individuals, a girl and a boy, he meant to study the hopes and anxieties of a whole generation. This movie was perhaps innovative in its cinematographic dimension, but certainly perpetuated prejudices about sex roles and reinforced the male / female dichotomy.

**The general opposition** male / female is indeed still deeply rooted in social representations in the Western culture. Indeed, it has been emphasized and internalised for centuries through biological, medical, philosophical, religious, societal and political discourses. Based either on Nature or Culture,
these normalisations of social relations and identities have dominated social representations. Even if a few doctors evoked the possibility of a gender intermediary or a Third Sex (Hirschfeld, *Die Tranvestiten*, 1910), for decades into the 20th century, the general idea remained that sex defined gender (Krafft Ebbing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886). The other general idea that ruled centuries of sex role dichotomy was prohibition of gender ambiguity. This idea remained central until the 1980’s and the 1990’s. On this matter, Lacan wrote in *Des femmes et des semblants*:

“Masculine or Feminine is the first difference you make when you meet a human creature, and you are used to making this difference without any doubt” (Lacan, 1997).

In his mind, man and woman are only imaginable in terms of opposition to each other. So to speak, this dichotomy is natural and culturally interiorised, and is not intelligible in another way than through antagonism. This binary system has been questioned by radical feminists such as Blackwood, Butler or McKinnon, but still remains the dominant one in social representations.

In terms of sexuality, heterosexuality (even if it is a recent concept) has been seen and interiorised as the ‘norm’ for centuries. ‘Deviant’ practices were symptomatic of medical pathologies, madness. ‘Abnormal’ homosexuality became a social and medical issue, a disease that had to be cured, during the 19th century. Freud increased this dichotomy between the ‘normal’ heterosexuality and the ‘abnormal’ homosexuality by introducing implicitly the ideas of sexual development and hierarchy of sexualities (Katz 1998). Even if today homosexuality is hardly seen in Western culture as an abnormal medical disease, it is thought of in opposition to heterosexuality in social representations.

Finally, some research in gender and sexual studies nowadays suggests that transsexuality does not break this gender dichotomy but reinforces it. In *Coming out and Crossing over, identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community*, Gagné and Tewksbury (1997) affirm, after having interviewed transsexuals, that transsexuality reinforces gender dichotomies as almost the majority of men aspired to be “treated as ladies”. According to them, the expression of a third gender is rare and limited to the transition period from manhood to womanhood. They claim that interactions are so central to our ability to define ourselves (so to speak in terms of male / female) that it is almost impossible
to think in another way than in opposing male and female. Hence, most of them ‘cross over’ the dichotomy more than ‘come out’ of it. Therefore even in transsexuals’ social representations, the gender dichotomy would remain the dominant one. This system doesn’t make sense according to Almodovar. Through transsexuals, he makes fun of the so-called normativeness.

**Parody of normativeness: criticism of Freudian theories through sexual provocations**

Through his sexual and gender provocations, his multidimensional and complex idea of transsexuality, Almodovar challenges the essentialist discourse on ‘normality’. Sex doesn’t define gender, nor does it determine sexuality. There is no natural link between these categories. Almodovar suggests that none of them are fixed forever. Individuals can change their sex, gender, and sexuality through their life, and even express both of their sides at the same time. These ideas are central in *The Law of Desire*, which came out in 1987. Tina changed her sex and became a woman, although she had a child with a lesbian. At the end of the movie, she falls in love with a man. She used to feel as a boy when she was young but then became a woman and behaves in a feminine way.

First, this demonstrates that sex, gender, and sexual categories are socially constructed and useless when we escape from social conventions and follow our desires. Then, it shows how innovative the director has been, transgressing relatively early (in the 1980’s) sex, gender, and sexual norms and dichotomies.

**Gender and sexuality are a matter of performance**

*Almodovar also makes* fun of the way these categories have been constructed or at least reinforced. *High Heels* is the story of a passionate but destructive mother/daughter relationship. Rebecca (Victoria Abril) has always admired, loved and tried to imitate her mother, Becky (Marisa Paredes), a famous Spanish singer. This passionate love for her mother has annihilated her personal fulfillment and led her to kill the intermediaries between them (basically her mother’s lovers). She finally has a love affair with Letal, a famous drag queen known for imitating Becky. This implicit reference to Freud’s theories inverses and in this way upsets his *Oedipal complex* whose protagonists are always family members from the opposite sex. As heterosexuality is socially constructed, why would young boys be attracted to their mother, and girls to their father? That’s what Almodovar suggests in *High Heels*. 
An ironic reference to Freud is made in *The Law of Desire*: Tina was in love with her father when she was a young boy (another negative Oedipal complex). She had an affair with him until her father convinced her to be operated in order to become a girl. She did it but her father abandoned her immediately after. Thus, Almodovar parodies Freud’s theories illustrating the *anxiety of castration* at face value (Smith 2000). Gender and sexuality are certainly not fixed during our childhood, as Freud affirmed, they are a matter of performance.

Gender is instable and artificial, a matter of performance

In *High Heels*, *Letal*, alias Hugo, alias Judge Dominguez is one character, who metamorphoses into an ultra-feminine drag queen on stage, and into an ultra masculine judge during the day. I have already described *Letal’s* stage costume in the first part. Judge Dominguez has a beard; *aviator* sunglasses (which codes masculinity in Hollywood movies), wears a suit and behaves in a genuine masculine way.

*Letal*: “I can turn into whatever you want… Tell me what kind of man you like and I’ll turn into him”.

None of these attitudes seems to be more ‘natural’ (since they are not) than the other. As sex does not define gender, nothing prevents a man from being as masculine or as feminine when he decides to do so (the inverse is obviously possible). A scene in *Bad Education* relevantly illustrates this idea. Angel (G. G. Bernal) wants to play Ignacio, a transsexual in Enrique’s new movie. He goes to a drag-queen show to study how to behave in a feminine way. He takes notes and carefully reproduces drag queen gestures during the imitation of Sara Montiel. Then he goes to the dressing room to ask her for lessons:

- *What are you doing here if you are not a journalist?*
- *I’m an actor, and I would like you to help me to prepare a role.*
- *Which role?*
- *A transsexual who imitates Sara Montiel…*
- *That’s me! Why don’t they give me the role?*
- *Because, man, you are not an actor… you are just a fag…*
- *What you need to learn first is manners in order to be a lady.*
- *Ok, sorry… so, what else do you teach me?*
- *(in an extreme effeminate way) And with what are you going to pay me, honey?*
- *(laughing) That’s exactly the type of things I need to learn!*
This scene illustrates two important ideas. First, womanhood is a matter of ‘lessons’: as young girls learn how to behave in a feminine way, men can learn it as well. Second, there is no need to be an effeminate ‘gay’ male to be willing and able to play a girl. Sex does not determine gender; also sexuality does not define a fixed gender. Gender is a mutable category that is learned and performed, independently from sex and sexuality. Talking about Tina, in The Law of Desire, Almodovar said:

“The only truth in Tina is artifice. Artifice, not deceit... Artifice is her only truth, and if the individual is not insane, she knows she’s artificial and enjoys the imitation of what is essential to a woman, the most intimate part of being female” (Vidal 1988: 183).

Therefore metamorphoses are possible.
changes do not prevent him from being authentic when he performs Hugo, as well as Letal and Judge Dominguez.

It seems that authenticity is the core of Almodovar’s conception of identity. Identity is plural, moving and complex. Then, nothing is innate: individuals don’t have any ‘nature’. Thus, authenticity is not the expression of our personal ‘nature’, which does not make sense, but is the free expression of our aspirations, whatever the perception of society. That is what Agrado suggests in her monologue in All about my mother. She claims that her authenticity lies in “her silicone and her sentiments”:

“I’m very authentic. Look at this body: all made to measures. Almond-shaped eyes: 80.000 (pesetas), my nose: 200.000... a waste of money. Another beating the following year left it like this. It gives me character, but if I had known, I wouldn’t have touched it. I continue. Tits: two, because I’m no monster. 70.000 each, but I have more than earned that back. Silicone in lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass. A pin costs about 100.000, so you work it out, because I’ve lost count. Jaw reduction: 75.000. Complete laser depilation...because women, like men, also come from apes, 60.000 a session. It depends how fairy you are. Usually, two to four sessions. But, if you’re a flamenco diva, you’ll need more... Well, as I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic, ma’am. And one can’t be stingy with these things... because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.”

The least we can say is there is nothing Manichean in Almodovar’s movies. Almodovar’s movies convey a subversive vision of sex, sexuality and especially gender, which is nothing more than a play people should choose and perform. All of this reveals the instability and the weakness of our dominant patriarchal society in Western culture. By breaking prejudices and dichotomies, Almodovar deconstructs the idea of masculinity, which has always been linked to power in patriarchal societies, particularly in Spain.

DECONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL OF MASCULINITY IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

La Movida, catalyst of deconstruction

Franco’s regime in Spain lasted from 1939 to 1975. Roughly, it was an authoritarian and nationalist regime whose unique leader, Franco, ruled Spanish society personally and with an iron fist for nearly 40 years. Using
propaganda, censorship and repression, he wanted to control Spanish society in the conservative and traditional way. Official institutions controlled the content of new creations. An official school of cinema was meant to supervise young directors. Actually, new creations were less promoted than the praises of the fossilised national symbols such as bullfight (symbol of virility) or flamenco (symbol of grace and femininity). After the collapse of his regime, artists felt that their new liberties allowed them to express whatever they wanted to. This cultural effervescent euphoria was called *La Movida* (which means ‘the move’) and mainly took place in Madrid. Hence, during the first ‘free’ years and with the idea of taking revenge, films, music, shows, literature, and TV programs tried to get rid of all the national symbols and myths formerly extolled by Franco. They all pointed out the endless possibilities in terms of identity for example, which appeared after Franco’s years (Vernon and Morris 1995). Breaking prejudices and deconstructing the ‘normativeness’ that used to be promoted by Franco, Almodovar has followed the path of *La Movida*.

**Almodovar deconstructs the idea of masculinity, which has always been linked to power in patriarchal societies**

In *High Heels*, Almodovar makes fun of the ideal cliché of flamenco. During her first drag queen show, Letal languorously dances with a large picture of flamenco dancers behind her. Even if Letal’s dance differs from Franco’s traditional flamenco dancers, Almodovar spatially gathers them. He may suggest that femininity is not necessarily where we used to see it, so to speak, in ‘traditional women’, embodied by flamenco dancers. Furthermore, in his monologue in *All about my mother*, Agrado also makes fun of their so-called femininity invoking their extreme hairiness (usually linked to virility and masculinity).

*La Movida* results from the post-Franco years. With the freedoms of thought and expression, it became legal and legitimate to deconstruct all the former Franco’s patriarchal institutions, including the Church.

**Ant clericalism: criticism of the Church, a patriarchal institution**

In *The Law of Desire*, as in *La Mala Educacion*, Almodovar demystifies the image of Christianity and of the Spanish Church in general. In both of these movies, priests are pedophiles who abuse young boys, blackmail and finally abandon them. At the beginning of *La Mala Educacion*, Angel enters a Church. Gazing
Father Manolo through his eyes, Angel recognises the priest who used to abuse him years before and repeats three times “because of you”, as father Manolo is reading an extract from the New Testament. In *The Law of Desire*, Tina enters a church with her daughter Ada. Tina behaves in an offhand way, wearing her sunglasses and playing on a red harmonica that looks like a smile. Almodovar suggests through this scene that Church is nothing more than a relic of the old social order.

**Almodovar seems to** blame the Church for five main reasons. First, Christianity has deeply rooted the dichotomy male/female, which he negates. Second, it has always focused on men, and in this way legitimised patriarchal society. Third, it has always claimed its inclusive dimension. But, when Tina enters the Church, she sings and introduces herself to the priest who used to abuse her when she was a young boy. Upset, the priest tells her she has changed a lot and becomes puzzled when she admits she has a daughter. When Tina asks the priest if she can sing again in the choir, he refuses: “Not here, please”. This scene shows how the Church’s inclusive ideal is a lie. Fourth, Christianity hypocritically rules priest’s celibacy. However, they are always presented as abusive pedophiles in Almodovar’s movies: Father Manolo in *La Mala Educacion*, and Father Constantin in *The Law of Desire*. Fifth, the Church does not accept families that do not fit in the model of heterosexual-male/female parents. Each time they are present in Almodovar’s movies, their members are neurotic (Rebecca in *High Heels*, the drug-addicted and transsexual Ignacio and his murderer brother in *La Mala Educacion* are two examples). On the contrary, families whose members are close to each other and express love and happiness are always ‘non-orthodox’ ones. Tina, her homosexual brother Pablo and Ada seem to form a perfect family in *The Law of Desire*. They are affectionate toward each other, and the high complicity between Tina and her daughter is suggested by their identical dresses throughout the movie. On the theme of family, Almodovar declared:

“The family are the people around you who hold your hand at night if you’re cold and give you a glass of milk before you go to bed. Pablo and Tina, with Ada, form the ideal family. They’re the ideal father and mother, who have very little to do with what is traditionally understood by father and mother” (Vidal 1988: 188).

The pain they suffer brings them closer to each other. Another funny demystification of Christianity takes place in *High Heels*. Letal, looking like a girl, half-dressed in his costume and face covered in make-up, asks Rebecca, a
married woman, to marry him. This institution becomes a central target, it has always been linked to patriarchy and masculinity in Spain.

Deconstructing masculinity: Almodovar’s tribute to womanhood

The very first scene of *The Law of Desire* is central in Almodovar’s deconstruction of masculinity. Indeed, verbalising penetration between two men, the director points out a deeply rooted taboo and upsets the ideal of the active and virile male:

- “Now, ask me to fuck you. Don’t look at me. I’m not here, but I’m beside you and you want me to fuck you. Come on! Say it.
- But we hadn’t …
- I just want you to say it. Come on! Don’t be scared. It’s only words;
- Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.
- I want you to feel me inside. I only want you to enjoy me. Go on. Go on. Tell me you’re going to come. You can feel me inside.”

Besides, Almodovar deconstructs the ideal of masculinity by omission. Fathers, central symbols of patriarchy are almost never represented. When they are not transsexuals or homosexuals, they are selfish and coward men. Central characters in Almodovar’s movies are always people who voluntarily negate their masculinity. Women have strong personalities and are able to face misfortunes or devastating fate (Manuela in All about my mother finally manages to face her son’s death). They are loving mothers who have complicit relationships with their children and who take care of them, without the help of men. Manuela is so close to her son that before his death, he decides to write a novel about her—All about my mother. Tina is also extremely affectionate with her daughter:

“Don’t leave me. Never forget I am your mother. I love you.”

Womanhood is also praised through their extreme solidarity and generosity, through their ability to give and share. In *High Heels*, Bibi Andersen, the transsexual actor, plays a woman who is a prostitute. To be close to her lesbian love in jail, she nearly kills a policeman. The dance performance she organises there with jailed women well depicts the tight understanding and generosity that link women. The final shot of *All about my mother* gives evidence to this tribute:
To women, to mothers, to women who want to be mothers, to men who want to be women.

A ‘posthumanist’ reconstruction

“Don’t tell me what I have to do in my life, even if it is ridiculous, I have the right to be respected” says Tina, the transsexual in The Law of Desire. Esteban in All about my mother wants to know his father: “Whoever he is, whatever he has done”. Agrado, in the same movie explains the reason why she is called Agrado (‘agreeable’ in English): “My name is Agrado, because during my life, I’ve always tried to make people’s lives agreeable.” Rosa, in All about my mother is absolutely devoted to poor prostitutes and plans to go to Salvador to help the destitute before she realizes she is pregnant.

The director deconstructs prejudices and the hypocrisies of the patriarchal society, since they are likely to prevent individuals from expressing their passions and desires, from getting the identity they want to have, and the tolerance and recognition they need. In the end, Almodovar celebrates respect. He promotes solidarity, love, and free expression of desires. And the characters who usually embody the message are transsexuals.

CONCLUSION: WHY ALMODOVAR?

Almodovar is obviously not the only director who has staged transsexuals. Other movies have given visibility to transsexuality. The adventures of Priscilla, queen of the desert is a light and funny but still humanist movie that focuses on gay and transsexual’s recognition and right for respect. Boys don’t cry deals with the difficulties and violence a teen girl experiences while she becomes a boy.

But contrary to other directors whose vision is basically ‘simple’ and essentialist on sex, gender and sexuality, Almodovar has always refused to postulate any ‘true-self’. As nothing is innate but culturally interiorised, individuals are able to choose the gender they want to perform, the sexuality they wish, the identity they dream of. They should do so following their passions and desires. Almodovar’s deconstruction of patriarchal society through his staging of transsexuality leads us to question the legitimacy of the old system centered on masculinity. It also allows us to have a new look on differences and reconsider our social values in a more humanist way. Thus, as Smith (2000) affirms, there is a real “truth in travesty”.

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