



## ALMODOVARIAN MOTHER FIGURES: EARLY FILMS

*La figura materna en las primeras películas de Almodóvar*

**Brígida M. Pastor**

[b.pastor@flog.uned.es](mailto:b.pastor@flog.uned.es)

*Ministerio de Universidades/UNED - España*

*Swansea University - Reino Unido*

*Recibido: 15-03-2021*

*Aceptado: 14-06-2021*

### **Abstract**

In Pedro Almodóvar's early films, the portrayal of unconventional maternal figures come in varying forms - more than often she (or he) is an unrelated outsider who eventually comes to replace a child's absent or indifferent biological mother. This study aims to show how Almodóvar's families are formed by accident or necessity regardless of gender, sexuality, fertility, age or class, with the "Mother" figure as the uniting force. We will argue that in Almodóvar's films the trauma of hostile urban life is often the catalyst for the breakdown of the family bonds, resulting in the search for an alternative mother substitute, while subsequently a return to one's rural origins is often the key to repairing a damaged relationship between mother and child.

**Keywords:** Pedro Almodóvar; Spanish cinema; gender; mothers; motherhood.

### **Resumen**

En los primeros filmes de Pedro Almodóvar, sus figuras maternas, alejadas del rol tradicional, destacan por su diversidad; la mayoría de las veces, ella (o él) se revela como un personaje extraño que, eventualmente, reemplaza a la madre biológica ausente o indiferente. Las familias en el cine de Almodóvar se forman accidentalmente o por necesidad, sin que importe el género, la sexualidad, la fertilidad, la edad o la clase, siendo la figura de la "Madre" una fuerza unificadora. Este estudio pretende demostrar que en el cine de Almodóvar el trauma de la vida urbana hostil es a menudo el catalizador de la ruptura de los lazos familiares, desembocando en la búsqueda de "una madre" alternativa, mientras que posteriormente el retorno a los orígenes rurales es a menudo el factor clave para reparar una relación dañada entre madre e hijo.

**Palabras clave:** Pedro Almodóvar; cine español; género; madres; rol maternal.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Motherhood is a recurring subject in Pedro Almodóvar's films. The mothers in his movies are passionate and resourceful—often in varying combinations, and to varying extremes. Almodóvar sees himself as a bastion of the emerging way of looking at things developed during the eighties: “I represent the most contemporaneous [of Spain]. My films reflect the changes produced in Spanish society, [...] because they would not have been able to be made before” (Strauss, 2001: 18). Almodóvar's cinema has posed a challenge from its very beginning to accepted societal ideas and therefore also about gender. It can be argued that his cinema is characterised by its attention to a specifically “feminine” discourse and perspective.

An overwhelming amount of Spanish cinema studies have been dedicated to Almodóvar and his significant legacy to the Spanish film industry, especially with his success abroad opening the gates for other Spanish directors such as Julio Medem, Bigas Lunas and Alejandro Amenábar. Scholars such as Paul Julian Smith and Mark Allison have often focused on his groundbreaking portrayals of gender and sexuality but with the exception of Lesley Heins Walker and Marsha Kinder, few have written specifically on Almodóvar's numerous portrayals of mothers in a career that has spanned over thirty years (Smith, 1996; Allinson, 2001; Heins Walker, 1998; Kinder, 2004). From Almodóvar's first feature film, the remarkably amateur yet highly amusing *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del monton* (1980) to his latest release *Volver* (2006), mothers often have significant consequences on both the narrative and character development, even if they remain off-screen throughout the text.

This study will attempt to analyse the construction of motherhood in his early films, using different feminist film theories in order to explore the cultural context that provides the starting point for Almodóvar's mother figures. As an auteur, Almodóvar's work cannot be analysed as isolated elements but rather as “political” and “historical” agents within a complex cultural context. Through textual analysis, it will be explored the way Almodóvar constructs motherhood in his cinema. Almodóvar's portrayals of motherhood are linked to his ascension from his early status as a cult director of camp comedies to his prominence as one of Spain's most significant yet most controversial cultural figures.

There has been a heavy amount of criticism as to whether Almodóvar objectifies women through his exaggerated and heavily stylised female characters, and how his portrayal of women to a large degree relates to his representations of mothers. As a result, I believe it is important to

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<sup>1</sup> This article derives from my research project as a Beatriz Galindo Distinguished Senior Researcher (BEAGAL18/00229). The project aims to have a high societal impact and contribute to a fundamental contemporary and critical field such as the debate on gender in youth literatures in Hispanic societies. My germane research project on gender and sexual politics in Spanish and Latin American fiction around the twenty-first century has been recognized by the United Nations as an innovative and significant contribution for good practice.

document and analyse similar depictions of maternal figures throughout the history of modern cinema. I shall begin by examining various film theories on female representation, with a specific focus on feminist film critique that became so prominent in the late 1970s.

Following on from this, I will examine the link between the treatment of women by the Franco regime and Spanish cinema's portrayal of mothers throughout the period, who were often demonised by directors as a way of obliquely attacking patriarchal society. Even though Almodóvar rejected the obscure allegories that dogged many Spanish films in the years leading up to Franco's death in 1975, the oppressive and dehumanised Mother remains clearly visible in his early work.

The world of Almodóvar's films constitutes a stylised depiction of modernity, but one which is routinely seasoned with a blend of irony, comedy, farce and tragedy, and set against a backdrop of an indelible, if fragmented, sense of tradition and convention. Given Almodóvar's status as an exponent of contemporary social codes of conduct, I shall discuss the transgression of gender-roles. His films pose the possibility of exploring solutions to troubling issues such as women's invisibility, and specially, mothers' invisibility.

David F. Noble in his book *A World Without Women* traces the rise of science and society in Western Culture. "If we go back to the creation of the professional societies in the nineteenth century or of the academies in the seventeenth, we find at their inception both already bore the stamp of a world without women. A world without women did not simply emerge, it was constructed" (Noble, 1992: 3, 43). Corroborating this point of view and expanding it to include the idea that silence equals powerlessness, Sara Ruddick urged women to make the maternal audible, "Most mothers are women, and most women live in societies in which they are relatively powerless with respect to men.

Some women acknowledge the effort of making maternal thinking audible" (Ruddick, 1994: 114). She introduced the concept of mothering itself as a form of labor and thought, able to be performed by men as well as women, that needed to be examined and articulated. This need is eloquently conveyed in Almodóvar portrayals of mothers, giving voice to the experience of motherhood and making it visible. In a gradual way, motherhood as a subject of representation evolves from the private sphere to the sphere of a scientific, public and, of course, openly political discourse; in the introduction to *Inventing Maternity*, Greenfield y Barash point out that "ideas about female fertility, the maternal body, and the mother's role in producing children and society were themselves produced in different ways for various reasons. Maternity was, in this sense, continuously invented and reinvented" (Greenfield y Barash, 1999: 1).

Unquestionably, Almodovarian mothers are reinvented as women who want "to name the nameless so that it can be thought...as mothers who struggle towards responsible thinking, they will transform the thought they are beginning to articulate and the knowledge they are determined to share" (Ruddick, 1994: 40).

## **2. Almodóvar's Influential Mother and its Different Guises**

A few days after the death of Almodóvar's mother in September 1999, Pedro Almodóvar wrote his childhood memories of his mother, Francisca Caballero. In their isolated hometown Calzada de Calatrava, Francisca would regularly insert fabricated stories into the letters she read out to her illiterate but attentive neighbours. Almodóvar recalled chastising his mother once afterwards, only to be reminded how Francisca's tales had made the neighbours happy, even if what she had said was blatantly untrue:

“Ella tenía razón. Mi madre llenaba los huecos de las cartas, les leía a las vecinas lo que ellas querían oír, a veces cosas que el autor probablemente había olvidado y que firmaría gustoso. Estas improvisaciones entrañaban una lección para mí. Establecían la diferencia entre ficción y realidad, y cómo la realidad necesitaba de la ficción para ser más completa, más agradable, más vivible” (Strauss, 2001: 178).

This important awareness of the universal desire for reinvention and casual glamorisation, even in the mundane settings of everyday life, would later become a recognizable theme throughout Almodóvar's work. However, it would become more significant for being taught by his influential mother, a figure that appears frequently in various guises throughout his sixteen feature films. Yet in Almodóvar's world, the mother is not necessarily always a source of knowledge or comfort; she can also be cruel, resentful and damaging to her vulnerable and impressionable children. Particularly in his early films, made less than a decade after the death of Franco, the mother is a hostile authority figure who has been abandoned by her husband and so struggles to control her wayward children in the face of the ongoing cultural changes in Spain.

Certain critics have viewed the demonised mothers of early Almodóvar works as redirected hostility to the absent father figure (Kinder: 1987). The decades of social and political repression under Franco's rule meant that the antiquated patriarchal beliefs and social roles were perfect for outspoken individuals like Almodóvar to reconfigure however they saw fit. Despite this irreverent attitude that has made him so famous and controversial worldwide, an underlying message throughout Almodóvar's entire work is the constant need for understanding and support, especially with regards to family matters, just as his mother taught him before. As a result, a “Mother” in Almodóvar's view need not be related; frequently she (or he) is an unrelated outsider who eventually comes to take the place of negligent or absent biological parents. Almodóvar's characters frequently form new family units by accident or necessity, regardless of their gender, class, sexuality, fertility or age with the Mother figure at its core. This search for replacement mothers often comes as a consequence of the breakdown of long distance relationships, such as when a character has left their pastoral origins for the urban sprawl of Madrid in search of prosperity or acceptance. Almodóvar repeatedly positions a character's return to one's rural roots

as a therapeutic conclusion to a character's emotional problems, which are aggravated by city life, and more importantly, a necessary step to repairing the frayed bonds between a child and the mother.

### 3. The Classic Melodrama Film and the Maternal Figure

The director himself has cited the films of famous melodrama directors such as Douglas Sirk, George Cukor and Nicholas Ray as early influences (Strauss, 2006: 116). Feminist critic Christine Gledhill notes how feminist film theory began to take an interest in the genre in the early 70s for its focus on female relationships within the dominant Hollywood system. It became apparent through closer analysis that melodrama films of the 40s and 50s offered a “subversion of the ideological complicity of dominant narrative cinema...which has aesthetic if not analytic power to penetrate the repressed and contradictory desires and determinations constructing femininity and masculinity in patriarchal society” (Gledhill, 1986: 45). While famous melodrama films such as *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) and *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) were a subversive influence on the young Almodóvar, they were not advertised or viewed as progressive films on their release. Today they are considered important texts by feminist film critics for their emphasis on domestic struggles that working class families endured, especially with regards to fraught mother-child relationships.

Cinematic genres such as Westerns and Gangster epics were strongly associated with male audiences and patriarchal discourse, where women played little part in the battle for control in a vast, public landscape. Feminist film critic E. Ann Kaplan remarks female audiences were instead associated with emotional and cathartic narratives that dealt with the private and domestic sphere, which focused on the “pleasures and pain of women within the intimate, personal...familial sphere that they have so long inhabited and known so well” (Kaplan, 1992: 26). Consequently, melodrama directors such as Douglas Sirk had to subtly refer to growing female resentment to repressive cultural American attitudes to sex and class, through symbolic use of framing and colours. These become recognisable codes thanks to an omniscient narrative, which allows an observant spectator to fully understand the female characters' real but sadly inexpressible feelings (Allinson, 2000: 125). Mark Cousins claims *All That Heaven Allows* as “one of the most quoted examples of subversive mainstream filmmaking” (Cousins, 2004: 231) and notes Sirk's heavy influence on directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes, along with Almodóvar. However, as a typical Almodóvar film features such a mix of genres, from melodrama to screwball comedy, from musical to murder mystery, certain academics have declared that his films are distinct enough to be labelled as a genre of its own accord. Allinson suggests Almodóvar's post-modern use of pastiche and ironic self-reference to avoid labelling

his own work as a specific type is in fact “born out of an acute awareness of genre” (Allinson, 2001: 122).

The sacrifice of a mother is a recurrent theme throughout melodrama genre, where a maternal figure struggles to provide for her children and so often gives up her close relationship with her child for their future benefit, as seen in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), the latter which would heavily influence Almodóvar’s *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* and *Volver*. On the other hand, Kaplan noted with the increasing use of Freudian analysis and the female threat towards male employment after World War Two, the fear of a sadistic, oppressive mother became increasingly common in melodramas such as *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), where a child struggles to break free from the clutches of an overbearing parent (Kaplan, 1992: 110). After defeating liberal Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Franco’s regime forced the Spanish film industry to submit to its strict censorship rules and so vanquished any form of dissent that could criticise the atrocities of the war or his government. During the Franco era, most of Spanish films produced were little more than propaganda for the regime and placed a heavy emphasis on positive images of national icons and institutions, such as flamenco dancing and bullfighting, large and contented families, alongside the compassionate nature of the Catholic Church.

In order to prevent unwelcome influences from abroad affecting Spanish audiences’ values, acceptable foreign films were dubbed and then altered to suit the highly moralistic regime (Kinder, 1992: 33). Just like their onscreen counterparts, women under Franco were expected and encouraged to be chaste, obedient to their husbands and remain at home. The state deemed women socially important in raising their children to be loyal servants of Spain but at the same time various laws and reforms were enforced to keep them firmly within the private family sphere, away from the work place and universities, with the full blessing of the Church.

Aurora Morcillo documents how both the Spanish government and Catholic doctrine emphasised this dogma of separation, where “social and gender relations blended into the family, and women – as mothers – represented an essential element in the reconstruction of the fatherland” (Morcillo, 1999: 51). Subsequently, the Mother in Spanish society and its national cinema became equated with authority and repression; she was viewed as a loyal Francoist collaborator and responsible for carrying out the State and the Church’s desires for obedient future generations. Marsha Kinder, who has written extensively on the Oedipal hostility towards mothers that occurs repeatedly in the work of Spanish directors such as Carlos Saura, Victor Erice and Almodóvar, claims narrative conflicts with family authority figures in Spanish cinema were a subversive movement for “cultural change...and were used to speak about political issues and historical events that were repressed from representation during the Francoist era” (Kinder, 1993: 197).

In 1987, still early into his career as a director, Kinder discussed with Almodóvar the recurrent use of matricide in Spanish cinema to refer to patriarchal struggles and the possible

origin of this maternal conflict. Almodóvar replied that this was a consequence of Spanish fathers being frequently absent, where consequently “the mother represents the law, the police... When you kill the mother you kill the law, you kill precisely everything you hate, all of those burdens that hang over you” (Kinder, 2005: 56)

Almodóvar rejected the oblique method of allegorical representation used by Saura and Erice in their fight for freedom of cinematic expression against Francoist policies, which subsequently made them unfashionable and irrelevant in the change over to democracy and capitalism. (Stone, 2002: 71). Despite his rejection of their codes, the murder of abusive and controlling mothers features heavily in his work. These wicked mothers exemplify Almodóvar’s growing indifference to the outdated Spanish values aggravated by the Franco era but also his growing faith and admiration for the modern, alternative family.

#### **4. Almodóvar’s Early portrayals of Motherhood: Rural and Urban Mothers**

Early appearances of mothers in Almodóvar’s films are often portrayed as abusive and resentful, none more so than in his forth film, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984). Notable for its depth and poignancy compared to his previous output, the film features Gloria, a downtrodden housewife and mother who struggles to make ends meet for her abusive husband, a stubborn mother-in-law and her two rebellious sons. This film underlines the social commentary on working class families that migrated from rural villages to Madrid in search of better lives. In later films such as *La ley del deseo* (1986) and *Tacones lejanos* (1992) the Mother figure becomes subverted by gender and sexuality, with substitute mothers often played by transsexuals, in the place of the now absent, biological original. Particularly in *Tacones lejanos*, the rupture between a mother and daughter comes as a consequence of distance, both physical and emotional.

Two years after the critical mauling for his ill-conceived *Kika* (1993), the far less sensational *La flor de mi secreto* (1995) has been viewed in retrospect as a conscious change of focus to more introspective and conventional narratives. As Peter Matthews remarked on its UK release, “it’s as if Almodóvar is finally answering those critics who have accused him of frivolousness by coming up with something deliberately finer-grained and more mature” (Matthews, 1996: 40). Marissa Paredes stars as the romantic novelist Leo who, despite all her financial success under her literary pseudonym Amanda Grís, is unable to save her doomed relationship with her military husband. Subsequently, Leo is incapable of preventing her emotional traumas negatively influencing her usually cheerful prose, much to her publishers’ dismay. Her husband’s inevitable departure pushes Leo to attempt suicide, only to be resurrected by the familiar voice of her mother on the answer machine. Along with her easily irritated mother and her new friend, the feminine and supportive Ángel, Leo returns to her family village—a

maternal natural world—to recover from the stress of her life in Madrid. Leo returns to the city reenergised and determined to move on. I have chosen this particular film for closer analysis as it compares and contrasts various representations of mothers throughout, all of which bear resemblance to earlier and future films by Almodóvar, but more importantly establishes the importance of revisiting one’s rural (maternal) roots. Despite its barren appearance and distance from the liberated Madrid, a return home need not necessarily signify a failure. In fact, Almodóvar portrays the present and past as deeply interlinked and so for his characters, a journey back home is capable of restoring their confidence to move forward.

From opening scenes of *La flor de mi secreto*, Almodóvar presents another mother in the midst of an emotional turmoil; her teenage son has been pronounced brain dead by doctors after a motorcycle accident. At first refusing to acknowledge the fact he cannot be saved (“I don’t mind if he ends up a bit dim, just as long as he’s alive.”) the delirious mother becomes increasingly hostile to the doctors and her own family. Like so many mothers before her in Almodóvar’s cinema, the woman’s husband is dead and the mother-in-law a constant thorn in her side – the grieving parent blames her in retrospect for encouraging the boy to buy a motorcycle. The mother bitterly remarks how she told her son that if he something happened to him because of the bike, it would be the end for her. Similar to *Tacones Lejanos*, the well being of a mother continues to be linked to the reckless actions of her offspring. Despite acknowledging to the doctors that her son was a pacifist, the mother’s racist remarks about rich Arabs who buy organs on the black market exemplifies how Almodóvar’s parents can love their children but may not share their more progressive views; Leo’s own mother scolds her for having a maid with a *gitano* background, implying she cannot be trusted to not steal valuables around the house.

However, upon the reveal of a camera filming the mother and the two exasperated doctors, does the spectator realise the entire conversation has been a training exercise staged for the benefit of an audience of doctors. This scene would later be transplanted into other scripts and developed further by Almodóvar in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* and *Hable con ella* (2002). The mother here is played by a nurse called Manuela (Kiti Manver) exactly as in *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) while the plot of *Hable con ella* revolves around a character learning to let go of a lover in a permanent vegetative state. A mother’s outpouring of emotions again takes centre stage in front of an audience, but this time around the seminar discussion more significantly alludes to the Leo’s own problems and her refusal to accept the harsh realities of her life.

Marsha Kinder notes how the allegorical effect of the seminar on brain death and denial influences our silent introduction to the comatose Leo, as she lies asleep on her bed in a room “dominated by framed portraits of her absentee husband” (Kinder, 2004: 33). Surrounding Leo’s bed are numerous books by female authors famous for their writing on the female condition, such as Virginia Woolf who was well known for her private battles against depression. The wind blows open Leo’s bedroom window and flicks pages over, stopping on an underscored passage that reads “defenceless in the face of approaching madness” (Kinder, 2004: 33). As a result, Leo is



introduced as a woman in suffering without the need for dialogue and as someone who is powerless against external forces, such as fate and even nature itself. Her fragile state is highlighted in her inability to remove a pair of tight fitting boots given by her absent husband Paco (Imanol Arias).

After failing to remove her boots, Leo turns up unannounced at the organ transplant seminar in search of Betty (Carmen Elías), her best friend. Betty and Leo's relationship is framed in comparison to that of a concerned parent and their sullen child - such as when Betty sits the soaked Leo onto a chair and finally pulls the boots off or when she instructs Leo how to behave around Paco. In the hope it will distract from her marital issues, Betty recommends Leo to Ángel, who eventually becomes another alternative mother figure to Leo over the course of the film. He encourages her to write an article that criticises Amanda Grís' latest anthology after Leo declares to hate her work, even though Ángel himself is a devoted fan. Meanwhile Paco has little interest in his wife's life or her journalistic achievements with *El País*. He takes no notice of her efforts to look more attractive when he returns and is disappointed in her culinary efforts and as a result, Paco can come across as a judgemental father who looks down at Leo's infantile and pointless attempts to please him.

D'Lugo states that Paco views Leo's reactions to their crumbling relationship as "mere theatrics, a false sensibility pulled from her novels that has immobilized her own life." Even when Leo dries him off like a child, it is clear Paco remains in control. Ángel is positioned as a positive force even when Leo is too obsessed with Paco's return to notice of his possible romantic interests in her. Leo could be compared to Huma Rojo in *Todo...* as she depends on the kindness of others to help solve her numerous everyday dilemmas, and like Huma it will take a humiliating rejection from a lover to give Leo the strength to become more independent.

More a carer than a cleaner, Blanca (Manuela Vargas) is another individual who feels responsible for to look after Leo and is a daily witness to her growing depression over Paco. However, Blanca's sense of responsibility to her employer causes considerable tension between her and her flamenco-dancing son, Antonio (Joaquín Cortés). Desperate to organise a dance recital that will highlight the skills of their flamenco troupe, Antonio struggles to convince his mother to leave the troubled Leo behind and perform in public again. But Blanca is suspicious of her son's methods of obtaining funding; she suspects he may have slept with a male producer for finance, although he denies it. Just as Miguel tells his mother Gloria, who is also a housecleaner, in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer eso?* on how he can use his body as he sees fit, Antonio's sexuality is possibly interchangeable when his good looks can be a bargaining tool for economic gain. Antonio is proven to be untrustworthy just as his mother feared; he steals jewellery from Leo, along with a story that she deemed inadequate.

By selling the manuscript, Antonio raises the funds for the show and persuades his mother to perform once more. However, their tension is still tangible in the symbolic dance they perform together on stage and their performance is possibly one of Almodóvar's best uses of music to

date. Their passionate dance vividly underscores the incestuous overtone between mothers and sons that appear so frequently throughout his films, as critics have noted (Kinder, 1997: 13). Yet Tonio L. Alarcón criticises the inclusion of Joaquín Cortés, a man famous for his flamenco dancing but unfortunately not for his acting, and this theatrical scene as nothing more than an excuse to give “una importancia cultural *artificial* a la película... de autojustificarse como artista (Alarcón, 2006: 52). However to dismiss these characters as an excuse to authenticate the auteur status of Almodóvar misses the director’s intention. Antonio’s tempestuous relationship with his mother serves as a contrast to the close bond Leo restores with her own and more importantly, a comment on the maligned status of the gypsy community in modern Spain. After the recital, Antonio arrives at Leo’s flat to confess about the theft and tries to repay his debt with sex, but Leo refuses and forgives him in the process. The implication in this scene is that Antonio offers himself to Leo to appease his scandalised mother.

Another mother who struggles to control her sticky fingered son is Alicia, the publisher of Leo’s romantic novels. By chance, Leo encounters her son in the street when he begs for money, in turn she offers him cash to remove her tight fitting boots but he fails to do so. Although Alicia has a presumably well paying job as publisher, unlike the poor housekeeper Blanca, both their sons resort to theft to fund their lifestyles. After making disparaging comments about Leo’s latest manuscript. ‘La Cámara Frigorífica’, which incidentally bears an uncanny resemblance to the future plot of *Volver*. Alicia argues that novels are meant to be a form of escape and not a reflection of modern dysfunctional families. She blames abundance of ‘reality’ in the press and television for adversely affecting her son’s behaviour; she appears to suggest that modern culture is to blame for the rupture between her and her drug addicted son, not her parenting. Almodóvar himself has criticised the power of the media to corrupt individuals throughout his films, such as *Kika* (1993) and *Volver* (2006).

The power of mass media to incite fears for child welfare is nothing new; in the late 80s, growing panic over drug abuse and AIDS were seen as a threat to the nuclear family and more specifically, used by right-wing groups to attack sexual liberation and a woman’s right to abortion (Kaplan, 1992: 212). Alicia’s sentiments on growing public concern over antisocial behaviour are echoed by Leo’s reactionary mother, Jacinta (Chus Lampreave). However, her fears of modern society come as a result of her unease and unhappiness in fast paced Madrid.

While Leo’s affluence allows her some form of independence, her sister Rosa (Rossy de Palma) has to support Jacinta, along with two teenage children and an unemployed husband. The two women live together in a claustrophobic flat off a motorway, not unlike Gloria’s in *Qué he hecho yo para merecer eso?* Consequently the lack of space intensifies the tension between Rosa and her hypochondriac mother, causing them to constantly argue over the smallest things. Compared to her family Leo is calm and reasonable, a change from her own behaviour with Paco who she is incapable of realising is the cause of her depression. She can see how being trapped inside all day aggravates her mother’s erratic behaviour. Subsequently Jacinta’s use of “flea face”

recalls lines from Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, when María Josefa insults her unhelpful granddaughters who refuse to unlock her bedroom door. Like the trapped grandmother, Jacinta nostalgically longs for past that no longer exists.

Almodóvar acknowledges the obvious class difference between the prosperous Leo and her family, as seen by her donation of clothes and cash, and states that Rosa's bickering with her mother is "typical of certain Spanish families. Mother and daughter adore each other. When they part, it is a disaster, they weep. But the second they're reunited all they do is say terrible things to each other and argue all the time (Strauss, 2006: 155). Yet the irony of Rosa and her mother accusing each other of driving one another crazy, especially as madness runs in their family, is that they are completely oblivious to the fact that Leo is on the verge of a breakdown herself over her marital troubles and her disputes with her publishers. This is visible when Leo brings her relatives the latest release by Amanda Gris. Neither of the two women seems to acknowledge the fact that the book is written by Leo, implying that she keeps both her professional and unstable private life at a distance from her dysfunctional family. Only when Leo attempts suicide after Paco admits he no longer loves her, does she come to rediscover the love for she has for her mother and more importantly, the influence of her childhood roots.

Lucy Fisher notes that most film analysis of the representations of mothers is dedicated to the image rather than the acoustic (Fisher, 1996: 27) and she makes specific reference to Kaja Silverman's seminal work, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988). Silverman argued the maternal voice is an unborn child's first exposure to a "voiceover" where it becomes an engulfing and powerful entity, which is capable of nourishing and soothing a child (Silverman, 1988: 81). There are many instances of the emotional effect that maternal voices have on characters throughout Almodóvar's films and more often or not, it occurs by telephone. In *Átame* (1989) Marisa's tearful call to her mother reconnects her to the conventional life that she abandoned for pornography and drugs, while in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988) the entire plot revolves around Pepa's frantic attempts to tell her lover Ivan that she is pregnant through numerous answering machine messages. In *La Flor de mi secreto* (1995) the telephone is used in many scenes, many of which underpin the isolated nature of Leo's world. Leo makes many calls to the elusive Paco in Brussels and the only time he does phone her, it is a call meant for Betty, his mistress. Consequently when Paco leaves Leo for good, she ignores Betty's guilt ridden pleas to answer the phone and tries to overdose on sleeping pills.

Thankfully the voice of Leo's mother leaving a melancholy message on her answering machine is powerful enough to revive Leo from the brink of death. After having one fight too many with Rosa over her husband's drinking, Jacinta calls to inform her daughter of her imminent return to her countryside home, completely unaware of what is happening to Leo. D'Lugo notes that Jacinta's goodbye phone call coincides with Paco's departure, itself a challenge to the patriarchal institution of marriage, which demonstrates how "that the old tension of rural versus urban Spain, tradition versus modernity, again threatens the unity of the family" (D'Lugo 2006:

90) After learning that Paco has been having an affair with Betty for the past few years, the traumatised Leo follows her mother home to escape from Madrid.

Leo is overwhelmed by her return to the village and collapses, perhaps as a realisation that she has failed to handle the problems she has in Madrid. However the return is not portrayed as a negative decision, as it finally allows Leo to be open with her mother. Leo admits that her marriage with Paco is over, a topic she avoided discussing in detail earlier on and that she believes she is going mad. In turn her mother reveals she has had great difficulty raising Leo and for that reason, she believes it is best for both of them to be around women for support, away from Madrid. Jacinta's craving to leave the city and return to her home is a familiar conclusion for Almodóvar's characters. Toni and his grandmother return to their village after the death of his father in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* while Nina returns home to have a baby after leaving Huma in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Unfortunately in *Átame*, Ricky arrives in his hometown only to find it deserted. For critics such as Mark Allison this returning is "a futile attempt to regain an idealized rural past" (Allinson, 2001: 113).

But in the context of *La Flor de mi secreto*, Javier Escudero refutes the notion that the longing for a simpler life is a longing for Francoism. He states this search expresses "el deseo de la mujer de buscar una nueva trascendencia que le permita superar así la indeterminación postmoderna, las expectativas de progreso y de mejora de las condiciones de vida incumplidas en el mundo urbano" (Escudero, 2000: 142). I would go on to argue that although following her mother home gives Leo the strength to face Madrid once more, it is more significant for bringing her and her mother back together again. Incidentally Jacinta appears a lot calmer and approachable now that she has returned, while Rosa, who is free from her mother's moodswings, is noticeably happier when Leo meets her later on. The film concludes with Leo back in Madrid and accepting the fact that Paco will never return to her, something that only she realised by returning to the arms of her mother.

*La flor de mi secreto* is a film that often goes unnoticed in the canon of Almodóvar. This is presumably because of its deliberately more restrained narrative and less exaggerated performances, aspects that are not associated with Almodóvar's more famously flamboyant and melodramatic works. However, it is an important film not only because it first demonstrated Almodóvar's new sense of maturity and growing respect for mother figures. The film owes a great deal to the influence to Almodóvar's rural upbringing and his own mother, as he admits the film was born out of wanting to explore his elderly mother's solitude in living without her children and her provincial background (Almodóvar, 2008). *La flor de mi secreto*'s nurturing mother figures would be developed further in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Volver*. In Emma Wilson's words: "All About My Mother—a hushed tribute to a mother not yet lost—that mother love is seen at its most intense, its most treasured. The film has the candor and loveliness of Roth's performance, the real feeling of the women around her. It is full-blown, tender, feminine, magical, sublime" (Wilson, 2020).

Familiar themes and faces reappear in *Volver* and the title itself translates into English roughly as ‘to return’. Mothers and rural environments feature heavily; Carmen Maura stars as a ghost, who returns to repair fractured bonds with her daughters who fled the rural home for the obscurity of urban Madrid. However, for some critics, the film seems to be nothing more than a recycled work that borrows recognisable characters and subplots from Almodóvar’s other films. Tonio L. Alarcón criticised *Volver*’s uneven narrative and for trying to make obvious amends for the cool public reception to *La mala educación* (2004), which dealt with exclusively masculine characters for a change (Alarcón, 2006: 58).

As a result, the men in *Volver* remain relegated to the sidelines again and mothers are invincible forces that can overcome any plight, which ultimately degrades men and places unrealistic expectations on women. Peter Matthews’ scathing review of *Volver* in *Sight and Sound* echoes this uncertain sentiment towards his female characters, declaring that “when women say Almodóvar understands them more intimately than other male artist, they mean he flatters their self esteem... he fantasises a matrilineal utopia where women tirelessly cooperate in relieving misfortune and no resentment is sufficiently deep that it can’t be settled by a neighbourly hug” (Matthews, 1996). Yet many auteur directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir and François Truffaut were praised for their strong creative vision and the continuous development of their personal interests throughout their films.

With this in mind, it would be unfair to criticise a director as successful and as talented as Almodóvar for relying on his well-known subjects of sexuality, gender and female solidarity, as he clearly is fascinated with women and the roles they play daily. While he does occasionally glamorise woman excessively, I do not believe that he is sexist, as he clearly aligns himself on the side of women who always have the upper hand over men in the end. Hopefully Almodóvar can balance out his sympathetic portrayals of women and motherhood, with a less cynical approach to fathers and masculinity, as seen in the complex but slightly muddled, *La mala educación*.

In Almodóvar’s sexually liberated Spain of the 1980s, incest is viewed as an instinctive and traumatic consequence of the aftermath of the Franco regime and the breakdown of social taboos. Impressionable youngsters in *Laberinto de pasiones* and more dramatically in *La ley del deseo* lust after father figures. Transsexual Tina (Carmen Maura) elopes with her father as a young boy to get a sex change to maintain his fading interests and later on, while her brother Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) displays similar predatory aspects to his father in his attraction to young men (Kinder, 1992: 253). However, in his typical characteristic and flippant manner, Almodóvar switches the incestuous Oedipal sexual desire for the mother from the son to the daughter in his ninth release, *Tacones Lejanos*. Here director’s incestuous subversion of a mother-daughter relationship, as well as highlighting how Almodóvar begins to gradually develop his portrayal of mother figures. Unlike his previous representations where mothers were sexually frustrated and oppressed, Almodóvar’s growing appreciation for maternal figures becomes more apparent

through a child's devotion to their mother, whose domineering personality can be negated through a surrogate maternal performance.

The film begins with the glamorously dressed Rebecca (Victoria Abril), who anxiously waits at the airport to meet her pop star mother Becky (Marissa Paredes) after fifteen years of minimal contact. While counting the minutes down to Becky's arrival, Rebecca reminisces of her brief childhood spent with her mother. On holiday together in the Caribbean, Becky buys herself and her young daughter identical earrings from a local stall, only for Rebecca to lose an earring in the crowd and get separated from her parents in the process. After being found by her irritated stepfather, he jokingly offers to trade her in for two thousand coconuts with some local men, which causes the young Rebecca to run away in distress. The flashback ends with Becky's cries echoing as she calls after her, slowly fading back to the melancholy Rebecca in the present day. Thus Rebecca's relationship with her mother is immediately associated with sadness and disappointment; the off-screen echoes imply that Rebecca cannot get the trauma out of her head and the earrings that she now wears to surprise her mother, demonstrates how she comes to fetish her mother with both her memories and jewellery.

Deborah Shaw argues that the scene also positions the young Rebecca as a commodity to be exchanged by patriarchal forces, and Becky's amusement at her husband's cruel joke "prefigures her own abandonment of Rebecca, as she exchanges motherhood for fame and fortune" (Shaw, 2000: 57). Initially, Becky appears to be another Almodóvarian bad mother, as she leaves her child behind in Spain to pursue her singing career in Mexico, with the implication being she cannot perform under the rule of a sexist husband and a patriarchal state; as Mark Allinson notes, it was illegal for a woman to work without the permission of her husband during the Franco regime (Allinson, 2000: 64). Yet she is completely unaware of how the young Rebecca engineered the death of her sexist husband to liberate Becky, in a futile attempt to finally become closer with her mother.

Consequently, Rebecca has become obsessed with Becky, spending the past fifteen years impersonating and competing with her mother despite the distance and lack of contact. In Becky's absence, Rebecca marries one of her ex-lovers, because of his specific connection to her mother, she becomes close friends with a transvestite who impersonates Becky's popular songs from the past and wears expensive designer clothes similar to her mother's wardrobe. It is quite obvious that Rebecca's life has become an incestuous and tragic homage to her mother, modelling her life on her mother's iconic image in an attempt to have some form of a motherly presence around her. Yet even upon Becky's return to Madrid, it is clear there will be obstacles to Rebecca obtaining a happy reconciliation with her mother. Firstly, Rebecca must compete with Becky's fame and narcissism; Becky is openly disappointed at the lack of press to publicise her return to Spain, along with a sycophantic personal assistant who tries to take notes during a private conversation between them. In what should be a joyous reunion between a mother and child, Becky is more fascinated with the posters of Letal (Miguel Bosé) that pastiches an old photograph of her

performing. Secondly, with Rebecca's marriage failing, she realises that the attraction between her husband Manuel (Feodor Atkine) and Becky has not diminished over the years and so he becomes a sexual threat that must be eliminated to become closer to her mother.

Kinder argues that Rebecca's murder of Manuel represents how Almodóvar no longer projects his frustration towards the Franco regime via the twisted and resentful mother as before, but now symbolises how the director uses "melodrama's full arsenal of emotional excess in order to eroticise and empower...those traditionally marginalised under patriarchy" (Kinder. 1993: 35). Therefore it is conceivable that Letal, a transvestite who specialises in imitating the image of her mother, allows Rebecca to finally achieve her unspoken desire for Becky by sleeping with him and so move on in the process.

When Rebecca introduces Letal to Manuel, the differences in attitudes between the two men is significant; both are hostile to one another, emphasising the clash of the new liberal Spain versus the sexist and repressive patriarchal past. Almodóvar frames the two men as such - he zooms in on the gun Manuel carries with him, just above his groin which positions the gun as a violent phallic symbol, while the spectator witnesses his ambivalence towards the transvestite through a close up of Letal's underwear as he sits down. Letal states he can be either a man or a woman but for Manuel, a rival for Rebecca's affections, he is a man. As a result of his approachable feminine side, Letal forms a close friendship with Rebecca and eventually seduces her, knowing too well she is lonely and is experiencing problems with her husband. One could argue that Letal takes advantage of Rebecca's need for Becky, incestuous or not, when he dresses in her mother's image and has sex with her. Later on he abuses his position as a judge, his daytime persona, to allow Rebecca to get away with the murder of her husband after he discovers she is pregnant with his child. As Paul Julian Smith wryly remarks his performance as Judge Domínguez, is a "travesty of justice," while Lucy Fisher bemoans the fact Rebecca is portrayed as incapable of solving her problems without the help of man in the masquerade of woman (Smith, 2000: 133). She is critical of a universe where "men (like Domínguez) make the best Mums...a role vacated by Becky through her parental ineptitude...all that she manages is to reproduce her neuroses in her daughter and to visit her maternal sins upon her child" (Fisher, 1996: 173).

Despite these reservations, Shaw believes that Letal is not a threat to Rebecca's relationship with her mother and argues he acts as a mediator between the two, through his fondness for a woman's right to solve her problems in private, which is only made possible through his ability to "move in and out of masculine spaces, unlike Manuel...who is barred from these spaces." (Shaw, 2000: 59). Therefore, like transsexual Tina's maternal instincts in *La ley del deseo*, Almodóvar emphasises how gender is a social construct and so should not be a barrier to becoming a surrogate figure. A loving parent is more important, rather than whether they are biologically related or not.

It is important to note that Rebecca's initial encounters with Letal, and later the Judge, occur in the proximity of stages and dressing rooms. These theatrical environments transform

into emotional, confessional spaces—Letal declares his intentions of being more than a mother to Rebecca in his dressing room, Rebecca confesses on live TV that she killed her husband or Becky dramatically collapses in front of a theatre audience after her daughter's arrest for murder. Almodóvar uses theatrical spaces in many of his films, most notably in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* where La Agrado (Antonia San Juan) discusses the importance of achieving her dreams despite admitting using artificial means to do so. Subsequently, Acevedo-Muñoz points out that in an Almodóvar's film, "theatre is reality while reality is made of superficiality and appearances, whether it is about emotions or gender roles" (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2007: 88).

As Becky snaps to Domínguez that she all she knows in life is how to perform, that is how to emotionally and physically fake it as a singer, woman or mother, despite her flaws. These sentiments are echoed earlier on, when Rebecca admits to her mother that she became friends with Letal as a consequence of Becky's absence; whenever she longed for her mother, she would see Letal perform her mother's songs. While this comment emphasises Rebecca's loneliness and desperation for a mother figure in her life, it highlights how Letal's performance is capable of replacing the void left by Becky's departure for Mexico. Eduardo (Letal's real name) assumes the role of many other personalities, in order to resolve other conflicts, and his behaviour is therefore linked to Rebecca and Becky's on and offstage performances. Eduardo has a similar tempestuous relationship with his own frustrating mother, who obsesses over catching AIDS and famous celebrities, and so keeps his life as a transvestite a secret from her. Gwynne Edwards argues that characters' reliance on everyday performances means that they become so caught up in acting for the benefit of others that their assumed roles adversely complicate their relationships with family members (Edwards, 1995: 209) Unfortunately for Becky and Rebecca, they both realise too late that their obsession for performing has prevented each other from voicing their true feelings for another off-stage.

Becky gives her final performance for a captivated audience, only to collapse onstage from a heart attack, a highly melodramatic moment that demonstrates how she has lived her life for the benefit of cameras and strangers, but also reinforces how Rebecca's reckless behaviour towards the father figures in her life is a legacy of her poor upbringing. Therefore it can be inferred that Becky is finally punished for her negligence and sexual relations, a common trait in cinematic portrayals of bad mothers whose downfall is deemed necessary to restore balance of patriarchal society. Kaplan notes that motherhood and sexuality are often separate discourses in mainstream Hollywood films as female sexuality becomes linked to deviant behaviour, a sad reminder of the fact that "patriarchy has difficulty in combining the two" (Kaplan, 1983: 77). Gravely ill, Becky takes responsibility for Manuel's murder in the hope that Rebecca can finally resolve her problems with men without resorting to murder and so move on with her life.

Becky sacrifices herself in the eyes of the Church and more significantly, damages her precious legacy, as she will be associated with murdering her daughter's husband. She returns to her family home to die in her parents' bed, as Rebecca recounts another childhood memory that



details her separation anxiety once more. As a child, Rebecca was unable to sleep until she heard the reassuring sound of Becky's high heels approaching as she came to check on her daughter. Yet Rebecca fails to notice that her mother has passed away as she gazed out of the window, observing the heels of a passer-by. It is a final heartache for Rebecca, who once again misses out on her last chance to tell her mother how much she loved her. Almodóvar remarks that this ending is so tragic as "time ran out on them. Rebecca therefore has to finish speaking to a dead woman. It also means her mother remains a fugitive. She is always leaving her" (Strauss, 2006: 105).

Despite that in previous Almodóvar narratives, the mother figure is presented as a tyrannical dictator who stifles her children's freedom, Becky's sacrifice and Rebecca's pregnancy can be viewed as a positive outcome, as we assume Rebecca will not repeat the same mistakes as her mother. D'Lugo notes how Rebecca cradles her mother's corpse in the foetal position with a picture of her grandparents in the background, therefore framing four generations of a Spanish family together, suggesting a final reconciliation in the maternal home (D'Lugo, 2006: 78). Like Pepa pursuing the elusive Ivan to tell him about her pregnancy in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Rebecca has experienced many traumatic events to reach her mother but now realises the errors of her ways as a consequence of becoming pregnant. Thus she accepts Eduardo/Letal's invitation to form a family unit with him, a common conclusion in Almodóvar's universe. Previously he has shown unconventional families made up of marginalised members of society as a viable alternative to the oppressive biological unit in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer eso?* and *La ley del deseo*. The joy of discovering substitute family members and becoming a mother to various individuals is never more apparent than in Almodóvar's most successful and critically lauded masterpiece, *Todo sobre mi madre*.

## 6. Conclusion

Almodovar's work finally provides us with the answer to the need to rethink the experience of motherhood from a dimension focused on the recognition of difference. Apparently, his autobiographical input, the testimony or the life story seem to be, in the discursive, the most viable options and in which there is a real interaction between theory and practice. The mother is lost as an object of discourse and her experience is given the visibility and corporeality necessary for her social identity to take shape and make it clear that, as Glenn, Chang y Forcey pointed out: "Mothering is constructed through men's and women's actions within specific historical circumstances. Thus agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological construct" (1994: 3).

Almodóvar introduces a new notion of mothering which has given visibility to unconventional motherhood: single mothers, mature mothers, marginal mothers, lesbian mothers

that address the need to review the concept of homosexual family, the presence of the reversal of roles between mothers and daughters and so many other alternative portrayals of motherhood.

Over the course of Almodóvar's filmmaking career the role of the mother is central to the narrative, even if she is irresponsible, apathetic or absent entirely. In each of his films, mothers have a strong connection to their children and often influence their behaviour. Motherhood is shown as a choice unrelated to gender or sexuality but Almodóvar reminds the audience that whoever becomes a mother should love and protect the children, or suffer the consequences. Drug abuse, vanity, consumerism and withholding hurtful secrets are portrayed as detrimental to mother-child relations.

His early films began with a healthy disrespect to authority figures, none more so than his irreverent portrayals of impotent fathers and demonic mothers, all of which emphasised how Spanish society was eager to ignore the traumas of the past and enjoy the excitement of the liberated, hedonistic present. However, with his growing acceptance by Spanish and international critics, Almodóvar dropped the titillation and shock tactics that no longer had any relevance in a country that was becoming disillusioned with political revolution. One could argue that Almodóvar has become less outspoken and relevant for contemporary audiences but to do so would ignore his many triumphs in his later masterpieces such as *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002) or *Los Abrazos Rotos* (2009). Furthermore, one could see the abundance of mothers in his later films as a result of his constant awareness of the need for love and support, along with the fragility of family life itself, which was sadly strengthened by the death of his beloved mother, Francisca Caballero in 1999.

Undoubtedly, Almodóvar's reverence to the joys of motherhood all stemmed from the fascination and inspiration he took from his own mother as a young boy. Her harmless white lies to her gullible neighbours would not only bring joy to those around her, but unknowingly to subsequent generations of movie audiences for many years to come. As Emma Wilson notes: "Almodóvar in his films is in love with actresses, with all who are or want to be women, and to be mothers" (Wilson, 2020) There is no doubt Almodóvar's fascination with motherhood will continue so as long as he continues to make films.

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