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**HIGH HEELED SEXUALITIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY AND
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presented by

H. Louise Davis

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**High Heeled Sexualities: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Four
Films by Pedro Almodovar**

By

H. Louise Davis

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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Abstract

High Heeled Sexualities: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Four Films by Pedro Almodovar

By

H. Louise Davis

One film-maker who attempts to portray gay and lesbian lifestyles and activities as “normative”, rather than as example of psycho-sexual deviancies which must be modified and made palatable for the heterosexual majority audience, is Spanish writer and director Pedro Almodovar. Despite his protestations that “his filmic career can be read as a progressive disavowal of homosexuality, whether masculine or feminine” (Smith, 2), Almodovar has created and produced cinema which places the world (or, as some argue, Madrid) in the context of a sexually marginalized *Other*. He abandons the notion of heterosexual or “straight” normativity and presents all that has traditionally been considered to be sexually or socially aberrant and perverse as a simple, if not more desirable, alternative mode of behavior

However, despite his aims, through his choice of form and through the content of his films, Almodovar continues to perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes about women and female sexuality rather than liberating women. His appropriation of a feminine mode of expression and subversion, and his representations of women, are clearly indicative that his assumptions are based upon the traditional phallo-centric view that that which is female and/or feminine is available for male consumption and exploitation.

For my mother who is a constant source of encouragement and support.

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Introduction

As Rob Epstein and Jeff Friedman clearly indicate in their documentary, *The Celluloid Closet*, mainstream cinema has, for decades, failed to produce either images or characters with which the homosexual spectator can identify. Up until the mid-1970s direct and overt representation of homosexual men, women, and lifestyles had been restricted so much by the implementation of censorship laws and rules (which were supposedly based upon the majority of public moral opinion) that any filmmaker, director, or actor who attempted to deal with issues of gayness and/or lesbianism was forced to use subversive or ambiguous means of representation. Therefore, the homosexual or queer character portrayed in Hollywood cinema had to successfully pass and function as heterosexual or be undermined and destroyed by the end of each film.

As a direct result the homosexual spectator of mainstream film was forced to read and interpret in cinema more closely and independently than the heterosexual spectator who could effortlessly relate to the heterosexualized images and scenarios plastered across almost every screen projection of almost every Hollywood movie. The homosexual or queer viewer was, in contrast, made to feel uneasy, alienated, and isolated. In an attempt to find affirmation and alleviate her/his feelings of discomfort she/he had to either deconstruct and decode, or create hidden clues and meanings within the sub-text of each film.

Fortunately, in the last twenty to thirty years, with the loosening of censorship and the emergence of a new non-mainstream/ non-Hollywood cinema (produced

independently) gay and lesbian characters have finally been depicted as protagonists and have been provided with coherent means of expression. As a result homosexual spectators have also been liberated (to a certain extent) in the sense that they can now easily discover characters and events with which they can relate and which tend to affirm and ground homosexuality or queerness as a normal, acceptable, and presentable alternative sexualities.

One film-maker who attempts to portray gay and lesbian lifestyles and activities as “normative”, rather than as example of psycho-sexual deviancies which must be modified and made palatable for the heterosexual majority audience, is Spanish writer and director Pedro Almodovar. Despite his protestations that “his filmic career can be read as a progressive disavowal of homosexuality, whether masculine or feminine” (Smith, 2), Almodovar has created and produced cinema which places the world (or, as some argue, Madrid) in the context of a sexually marginalized *Other*. He abandons the notion of heterosexual or “straight” normativity and presents all that has traditionally been considered to be sexually or socially aberrant and perverse as a simple, if not more desirable, alternative mode of behavior.

Such alternatives are not directly condoned or condemned. Rather, in the true spirit of postmodernism, they “are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the[m]” (Lyotard, “Answering the Question”, 81). Almodovar’s films simply present various life-styles, cultural activities, and sexualities and the audience is expected to view and accept all, despite apparent contradictions.

It is his presentation of the previously “unpresentable” that many of Almodovar’s critics focus upon.¹ They claim that, due to his successful attempts to parody, fragment, and re-define social and sexual mores, Almodovar’s cinema is the epitome of postmodernity. However, although such claims hold some truth one must also recognize that Almodovar’s appropriation of postmodern techniques is problematic. According to Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs postmodern techniques of subversion and expression were originally created and developed by female writers of the twentieth century.² Like many male postmodern writers and film-makers Almodovar blatantly disregards this fact and, thus, corrupts and commandeers elements of the feminine or femaleness for his own ends. This becomes even more evident when one examines Almodovar’s depictions of women in his films.

Whereas Julian Paul Smith praises Almodovar’s ability to create films that function as “vehicle[s] for female identification or projection... [which have] consistently placed women at the center of the frame” (2) feminist critics should be aware of the assumptions behind Almodovar’s intentions and achievements in presenting the feminine:

Women have been able to give themselves up unashamedly to friendship for cultural reasons, because they have been condemned to live out their private lives in secret and that private life has only been revealed to female friends. [...] Now I’m aware that the fact that I like the private life of women may still be a reflection of maschismo. But I hope not, because I’m interested in women and their world, not just

when they go to gossip in the bathroom, but at all times. I believe I'm one of the least machista men in the world, one of the most authentically feminist. (Smith, 9)

Although, as Stuart Hall indicates in "Deviance, Politics, and the Media", women and homosexual men share an affinity with one another as a result of their simultaneous marginalization, their experiences cannot be described as identical. Ultimately, the homosexual man attains more privilege than either the heterosexual or homosexual woman simply because he is a man. Despite his sexuality, it is both impossible and presumptuous for Almodovar to assume that he is able to, or has the right to, reveal the "private life of women". It is true that through his critique of social and political institutions and practices he can create an environment in which all marginalized groups have the potential to oppose the dominant oppressive powers. However, it is naive to assume that this also allows him to define or to speak on behalf of women. Thus, despite his attempts to provide women with a voice he tends to oppress them further.

It is my intention to examine how, whilst claiming that he is producing feminist film, Almodovar continues to perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes about women and female sexuality rather than liberating women, not only through his choice of form, but also through the content of his films. I will demonstrate how Almodovar's appropriation of a feminine mode of expression and subversion is simply an indication of his traditional phallo-centric view that that which is female and/or feminine is available for male consumption and exploitation and why his representations of

female and/or feminine characteristics, behavior, and life style are problematic. In the course of my analysis I also wish to examine whether or not it is either possible or desirable for men, such as Almodovar, to provide a feminist commentary upon the lives of women particularly if such men rely or utilize Freudian/ psychoanalytic imagery, symbolism, and assumptions.

Almodovar's reliance upon psychoanalytic theory becomes considerably noticeable when one considers his implication that the values and practices of the "old" world, in which Francoist belief systems were dominant, should be replaced by new practices and values that are based upon the need, desire, and ability to explore diverse and alternative sexualities and modes of sexual expression. Whereas, under the Franco regime, religion was a determining factor in the lives of both men and women, in Almodovar's world, one's identity is defined through one's sexuality and sexual perversions.

In the cinema of Almodovar religious expression and experience is replaced by sexual expression and experience. Whereas, in the catholic church, the sinner must confess for his/her sins, in Almodovar's film the sexually active protagonists must confess their sexual desires and acts even if each person is content with their sexuality and does not feel the need to classify his/her desires as sins.³ The confession functions more as a self-purging (if not a form of psycho-therapy) than as a justification or repentance. The spectator, and indeed Almodovar himself, is reduced to the function of the therapist. In this role both the director and spectator are distanced by the camera and thus enabled to be able to form value judgments about each character and her/his

lifestyle. These judgments, however, are most problematic in particular with regards to women.

Many of Almodovar's characters are nothing but sexual beings whose lives are controlled by their sexual needs. In addition, whilst accepting themselves for who they are and being presented as normal it is clear, because of their need to confess, that in some ways these characters ruled by their sexuality and desires feel an unconscious sense of guilt and moral deviation. Social values are not so undermined that these characters can completely disavow conventional beliefs. Both men and women relish the prospect of doing something sexually "abnormal".

However, as Louise J. Kaplan indicates in *Female Perversions* these supposedly abnormal perversions tend to reaffirm certain gender and sexual stereotypes. She states:

What makes a perversion a perversion is a mental strategy that uses one or another social stereotype of masculinity and femininity in a way that deceives the onlooker about the unconscious meanings of the behaviors she or he is observing (9).

Kaplan's ideas can certainly be applied to Almodovar's work as all those characters who participate in "perverse" acts reaffirm gender stereotypes, if not through their confessions, through the acts themselves. Nevertheless, what is most striking about Almodovar's cinema is that it is those characters who conform to traditional, outmoded value systems and modes of behavior are often those who are undermined the most. These characters are always willing to point out the deviousness of perverse

acts but, in the process of doing so, it is they who are undermined. They are viewed as being remnants of the old system which is defunct, obsolete and wrong. Ultimately, it is they who are perceived as misguided or even deviant because they are repressed individuals who fear their own sexuality as well as that of others. As Almodovar represents the new as normal those who are part of the old cannot function normally. They are viewed, by the spectator, as most deviant; as narcissistic, hysterical, or suffering from a masculine-complex. It is noticeable that, according to psychoanalysts, only women suffer from these deviant, mental conditions; and what is interesting about Almodovar's representation of those who are trapped within the old conformist world and are unable to define themselves is that they are typically women.

In Almodovar's films women are less capable of abandoning those roles which society has, for hundreds of years, assigned for them. However, according to Almodovar those women who fail to express themselves through their sexuality only have themselves to blame for this failure. Rather than depicting them as women who have had little access to language and who are bound by patriarchal assumptions and constraints in post-Francoist society in the same ways as during Franco's reign Almodovar implies that they have made the choice to remain part of the "old" and that they have rejected sexual freedom, oftentimes, because of their firm religious beliefs.

The women who refuse to abandon the past and define themselves in a new manner are always heterosexual women, many of whom have accepted married life and conformist day to day lifestyles. Only in his early films are there women who have originally accepted these conditions and later rebelled against the tyranny of their

fathers, husbands, and children and the boredom of their lives. In his films the heterosexual woman is not presented as a strong human being; she is feminine and futile unless she can fulfill the sexual desires of a man. However, in a homosexualized world in which homosexual men thrive as protagonists, it is difficult for women to even serve the one sexual or reproductive purpose that they have always been revered for. Once a woman's sexual appeal is spent, or if it is ignored and undervalued, she no longer serves any real purpose. According to Almodovar's, only is she can find a way to gain sexual fulfillment for herself, through a "perversion", can she abandon patriarchy altogether. However, as Kaplan indicates, this is not, in fact, the case.

Almodovar's reliance on Freud and reaffirmation of gender and sexual stereotypes, prevents many of his films from being as radically challenging to the social order as many Almodovar critics claim. Even those characters who do not conform to conventional sexual "norms" do tend to believe in gender distinctions. Their sexualities are non-threatening because they are people who are already excluded by society; drug addicts and film-makers and thus their sexual activity is to be "expected".⁴ The fact that they support gender distinctions insinuates that such distinctions are "natural" as even those people who reject society altogether or stand outside of it believe in such social codes.

Chapter I.

“El Amor de los Ratos”: Representations of Female Sexualities and Relationships.⁵

Lesbianism.

Although Freud makes some distinction between male and female homosexuality, with regards to the causes, he implies that homosexuality manifests itself in the same way for gay men and for lesbians.⁶ Freud's argument that homosexuality or "inversion" occurs when "1) several serious deviations from the normal are found together, and 2) the capacity for efficient survival and functioning seem to be impaired" (242) has been traditionally accepted for most of the twentieth century. Even though Almodovar does, to some extent, attempt to challenge the assumptions behinds such traditionalist lines of thought it is necessary to note that all of the homosexuals characterized in Almodovar's films exhibit serious sexual deviations from socially accepted norms. Female inverts, in particular, tend to display the most "perverse" deviant behavior and, as a result, are unable to function in a "normal" or socially acceptable manner. In contrast, and contrary to Freud's beliefs, male homosexuals lack none of the attributes or abilities necessary to function successfully within both the new world of alternate sexual lifestyles or within the old traditionalist world.

Thus, whereas Freud felt the need to provide psychological explanations for sexual inversion:

the homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology... the homosexual was now a species" (43)

Almodovar views all male homosexuals as normative. Only female inverts or bisexuals are classified as “species other” and as complex yet classifiable mysteries, within Almodovar’s cinema.

The most fundamental problem with Almodovar’s first film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*, is indirectly illuminated by Paul Julian Smith when he discusses Almodovar’s intentions. Smith states that the film:

... begins with the violation of a woman ... continues with the deception of men by women and a series of scenes in which women’s intimacy is centre frame. Female friendship is thus a space from which men are excluded and one to which they aspire (11).

Whereas Smith’s idea holds some validity he, like Almodovar himself, fails to acknowledge that the male spectator is not excluded from female space when that female space is presented on screen for his consumption. As Laura Mulvey clearly indicates, in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, men view woman as object and thus, when woman is placed on screen, and her experiences and behaviors are filtered through a male lens for the male identified spectator, her space is violated, controlled, and determined by men. Thus, men are no longer excluded from female intimacy, rather, they impose themselves upon it.

Almodovar does not view this imposition as a male privilege provided men as a result of the imbalance of power within patriarchal society. In fact, he insinuates that men, such as Luci’s detective husband (Felix Rotaeta), have the right to impose themselves upon women, in particular lesbians. Primarily, Luci’s husband physically

imposes himself upon Pepi (Carmen Maura) in the opening scene of the film. In doing so he not only demonstrates a blatant disregard for female desire (even though she requests that they have anal sex he penetrates her vagina) but he shows how it is possible for a man, as a result of his brute strength and his ability to fulfill the dominant role, to dictate the conditions of his relationship with women and deprive them choice, economically and physically.

Like the detective, the male spectator violates Pepi without questioning his own ability or privilege to do so. He benefits from the undetectable position of voyeur who can enjoy sexual arousal at the expense of another without consequence. Thus, Pepi's violation is two-fold. She is not only penetrated by Luci's husband but by the piercing gaze of the male spectator through the lens of the camera.

The detective's privilege is, however, more marked than that of the male spectator. Whereas both experience sexual pleasure and a sense of dominance over the female as a result of the rape the detective proves, in addition, that his actions have severe repercussions which affect Pepi's future plans. Because she is raped vaginally Pepi can no longer rely on her plan to make money by selling her virginity. By denying Pepi this choice the detective demonstrates how he has the power to affect the lives, positively or negatively, of all women with whom he interacts. His lack of concern for Pepi's loss is typical of the disregard that men such as the detective, whose beliefs are based within and supported by patriarchal structures, have for women's bodies, choices, and desires.

The detective gains power by denying the desires and needs of another, less

socially accepted being. His treatment of women, as we shall see later, serves to justify and elevate him to a position of presumed superiority. Not only does he believe that it is his right to rape a woman but his success in doing so encourages him to the extent that he commits the same abuses again without compunction.

In denying the female her social and economic desires, as well as her sexual needs, the detective demonstrates how men enjoy more privileges than women because men have the power to make decisions for themselves and to grant and deny the choices of others. In the same way that the detective denies Pepi financial opportunity and sexual satisfaction he denies Luci's life choices. He refuses to allow her economic independence (as his anger at her giving knitting lessons implies) or to gratify her sexually. Thus, Luci (Eva Silva) looks for satisfaction elsewhere, primarily through her relationship with Bom ("Alaska").

Almodovar relies heavily upon traditionally established dichotomies which distinguish between men and women and between the dominant and the subservient. In addition, through his presentations of Luci and her search for fulfillment through lesbianism he reaffirms the dichotomy which separates homosexuality and heterosexuality but, at the same time, relies on the definition of one "type" of sexuality to define the other. The following quote by Straayer not only emphasizes this point but may provide us with some clue as to why Almodovar maintains that he disavows homosexuality in his work:

[...] by adopting the perspective of a protagonist engaged in the coming-out process rather than that of a mature lesbian- that is, by

choosing a “first time” point of view- the coming-out film substantially reinforces a voyeuristic gaze at lesbianism. Content and construction thus collaborate to ensure a relevancy to heterosexuality. [...] Any use of coming out to form identity therefore depends upon the sexual dichotomy of hetero/homo by which heterosexuality and homosexuality each construct itself in opposition to the other (33-4).

Seemingly Almodovar is unable to define homosexuality without relating it to heterosexuality. It is for this reason that he is able to create films which appeal to both homosexual and heterosexual audiences. His work may not be placed in a heterosexual context but the heterosexual spectator can relate and empathize, especially with Luci and her search for a sense of self and sexual fulfillment. However, as homosexual activity is often abandoned and replaced by heterosexual activity it is possible for some to assume that Almodovar places his characters and their lives in a heterosexual context. Both Brad Epps and Paul Julian Smith suggest that Almodovar does not wish to create “gay cinema. Epps states:

Poses, propositions, and promises of gay encounters abound in this film, but nowhere does homosexual pleasure succeed in showing itself. The sex between Fabio and Riza, Sadec and Riza, can only be imagined for it is not to be seen. [...] On screen homosexuality reveals itself as desiring heterosexuality. Riza is thus not really gay, nor are his flirtations and caresses with Fabio and Sadec sufficient signs to the contrary (105).

If one follows Epps' line of argument it stands to reason that, when watching Almodovar's films, the homosexual or bi-sexual spectator must, at times, utilize the same tactics she or he is forced use whilst watching mainstream film and interpret subversive clues and signals in order to relate to those films. However, not all homosexual spectators are excluded from the events depicted on screen and Almodovar's films are no more heterosexual than homosexual. Rather, his films are particularly masculine and appeal mainly to a male identified audience and it is the female homosexual as well as the female heterosexual who is forced to embark upon a subversive and interpretive reading of his work. In both his films and his audiences the desires and needs of women are denied as Almodovar is more successful at disavowing women than he is at disavowing any other group.

Luci searches for alternative modes of sexual stimulation because her husband abuses his male privilege and denies her to the extent that she cannot function as a "proper" wife. However, her lesbian relationship is doomed because it is based upon the premise that women only turn to lesbianism when their heterosexual relationships are flawed and imbalanced. The logical conclusion of such an assumption about female homosexuality would dictate that, if an adequate balance is restored within the original heterosexual relationships and the man performs a dominant role which is supported and necessitated by the passive female role, the "homosexual" woman must surely resume her heterosexual lifestyle. Not surprisingly, Luci does return to her husband and her actions indicate that, not only is this the right course of action to take, but that she has learnt how to understand and appreciate her husband's talents and

superior sexual prowess whilst temporarily separated from him. The relationship between the Luci and Bom has become unfulfilling simply because, although it is based upon the same dominant and submissive dichotomy as Luci's relationship with her husband, a woman is never truly capable of succeeding in the dominant role which is conventionally assigned to and performed by men.

According to Almodovar's presentation of lesbianism, it only natural that Luci desires and return to her husband. In presenting Luci's and Bom's sexual activities as simply an imitation of heterosexual sexual acts Almodovar demonstrates a lack of understanding of lesbian relationships. However, what is most shocking about Almodovar's portrayal of the sexual relationship between Luci and Bom is not the fact that it is a lesbian relationship but that it is a relationship in which sexual desires and fantasies are expressed through sado-masochistic behavior during which Bom always possesses the power of domination but that, as in "straight" sexual encounters which "entail women's subordination" (Jackson, 175), Luci is forced into submission. Only one participant, Bom, is able to perform the role of dominator/dominatrix.

In her article, "Feminism and Sado-Masochism", Pat Califa indicates how such an interpretation of female sado-masochism, as portrayed in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, is false. She states:

The key word to understanding S/M is fantasy. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, an sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual. The participants are enhancing their sexual pleasure, not damaging or imprisoning one another. A sadomasochist is well aware that a role

adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions and that the fantasy is not the sum of her whole being. S/M relationships are usually egalitarian. Very few bottoms want a full-time mistress. (232)

Almodovar's representation of female S/M differs greatly from the definition provided by Califia (a self-professed expert in the art of sado-masochism). Bom is incapable of abandoning the dominant role outside the bedroom and treats Luci as a servant. As a result Luci becomes imprisoned in a non-egalitarian relationship which does not serve to satisfy her sexually. Finally Luci rejects Bom and succumbs to the desires and brutality of her husband once again.

Luci's husband is not only capable of extreme aggression and violence but he possesses a penis which, ultimately, provides him with the power to both define and satisfy Luci's sexual needs if he so chooses. His natural talent for violence and his possession of a tool of penetration result in his victory over Bom and the return of his wife Luci. Unlike with Bom, the violence of the detective is never questioned as it seems that violence and aggression are simply "natural" masculine traits, if not necessities. Contrarily, Bom is presented as a sadist who, because of her gender, is incapable of channeling her violent tendencies or desires for purposeful means. Her attempts to take control and act a dominant role during the sexual act as well as in her everyday role (which is always underpinned by sexual activity) are futile and she must resort to more perverse methods of violence, such as the golden shower, in order to appear powerful and appeal to heterosexual women such as Luci. But, as even these extreme methods fail to lure women away from their men permanently, Almodovar

implies that men inherently possess more power of attraction than women.

The detective's belief in his right to privilege is a typically conservative belief of men immersed in patriarchal, capitalist social values. In the true sense of a Franconian supporter he open mouths his conservative ideology whilst ignoring even the presence of his own wife. In a sense his words and gestures are comical in the scene in which he discusses "how Spain is going to the dogs 'with so much democracy'" (Smith, 11) and it appears that Almodovar, through the use of comedy, is attempting to undermine such conservative bigots. Nevertheless, when one considers that such men are more desirable and acceptable in a society which undervalues strong and decisive women, and that in his films Almodovar also marginalizes women, it seems too difficult to believe that characters such as the detective are really being ridiculed or critiqued.

It is only during Luci's absence, when he is feeling most vulnerable and has little outlet for his sexual aggression and is forced to find sexual satisfaction (stimulate his penis) through looking at pornography that he is viewed as degenerate.⁸ However, despite the unsavory nature of his "reading" materials and of the rape he is about to commit, his actions cannot be condemned by the spectator who, whilst watching the rape scene, also find pleasure in the act of voyeurism.

The detective's use of pornography indicates that he, like many of Almodovar's male characters and spectators, cannot function without possessing a means of sexual expression and release. For Luci's husband this, as well as the fact that his wife has left him for another woman, leads to a sense of inadequacy. Such

inadequacy can only be alleviated if he can prove his dominance over another woman; either through visual or physical violation.

Rather than allowing women such as Luci and Bom to metaphorically castrate him by removing his power and taking control of themselves into their own hands he proves that his masculinity by forcing himself, aggressively, upon Charo. Rape is the only way that he can combat the threat of powerlessness is to use his penis as a weapon and sexually violate, yet again, a woman who is less powerful than himself. Charo is neurotic and frigid and, seemingly, deserves to be overpowered. During the attack she is presented as a physically and mentally weak woman who deep down desires the advances of Luci's husband. She is more concerned with the prospect of being naked than she is with the idea of forced penetration and her feeble protestations during and after the rape cause the spectator to view it as less serious and callous than it is. The effect of the rape is intensified partly because Luci's husband is portrayed as a victim who has no choice but to rape Charo in order to allay the threat of emasculation and partly because the viewers have participated in the rape themselves.

Throughout the film a sense of ominous foreboding is created whenever a knock at the door is heard. First Pepi allows her attacker to enter her room, later Charo enters a room in which she will be attacked, and towards the end of the film Roxi attacks an unsuspecting mailman who innocently enters Bom's house to bring a telegram from the hospitalized Luci. In entering or allowing others to enter through the door Pepi, Charo, and the mailman all put themselves in a compromising position which, Almodovar implies, they appear to deserve because they have laid themselves

open enough to be entered themselves. Following this line of argument it seems that, In some sense, Almodovar is implying that men have the right to both define and view women on screen because women have agreed to be examined through a camera lens. This not only justifies male voyeurism and the objectification of women but insinuates that women are to blame for being sexualized.

The scene between Luci's husband and Charo is, however, the most disturbing of the violation scenes in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* in the sense that the real victim, Charo, is totally unaware of her fate. Immediately she is pushed against the wall, her clothing is removed, and she is violated. As with Pepi, Charo is not only raped by Luci's husband but also by the camera which focuses and concentrates upon the area of penetration just as she is being penetrated. Straayer suggests, whilst referring to Elisabeth in *Peeping Tom*, such a shot enables the spectator to "spy" upon the victim and she also identifies the more sinister effects of pointing the camera at a woman genitalia.

The act of gazing, meant to be traversed rapidly as the subject moves on in his or her trajectory toward the final aim of sexual activity, with sexual satisfaction gained exclusively from this act of gazing. [...]

Gazing takes the place of the touching, indeed becomes an independent process, leading to a twisted form of penetrating the other... (60)

Unfortunately, the rape of Charo only offers Luci's husband temporary satisfaction and it is not until he has succeeded over Bom, by repossessing his wife, can he truly reaffirm his own masculinity.

It is not surprising that the method he chooses to retrieve his wife is one of

violence considering his former methods of gaining power and control from and over Pepi and Charo. Primarily Luci's husband, who is unaware of his wife's masochistic nature, decides to overpower her and abduct her without her consent. In the alleyway he attacks her and , using expletives and physical violence, he forces her into a state of disability which will force her to submit to him. It is at the point at which he realizes that she finds such acts of violence to be erotic that he begins to understand how he can control her and reaffirm his masculinity at the same time.

Luci's husband does not choose to deal with Luci in such a brutal manner simply because she desires to be treated so. His violence serves his own means. Not only does it guarantee that his wife will remain submissive to him but it ultimately always results in sexual intercourse and penetration. In the hospital, however, his sadistic treatment of Luci serves yet another purpose as it also allows him to demonstrate his dominance and power over Pepi and Bom.

When Pepi and Bom first enter the Luci's hospital room they are under the illusion that they can persuade her to return to her alternate lifestyle. The presence of Luci's husband in the room, however, alters their perception of the situation and immediately the viewer is made aware of the fact that he will call the shots. His ability to do so is made apparent when Luci states that "I didn't realize that you were such a bastard" as he twists her arm and inflicts pain upon her in a way that Bom never could. Here Luci's husband's sadistic action does more than simply arouse both him and his wife- it forces Luci to finally confess her sexual desires which leads to the exclusion and exit of Pepi and Bom.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault explains how the act or ritual of confession has gained a central role in contemporary society and how the need to confess has become an integral part of demonstrating and accepting one's sexuality. Even though in *Sexuality* he does not always consider the ways in which gender assumptions and gender inequality alters such power structures in favor of men, and that we have not so much become "a singularly confessing society" but a society in which those who are considered as "other" are forced to confess, his theories about the nature and validity of confession can be applied to Luci. Foucault states:

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs in every day life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses- or it forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat. [...] The most defenseless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers have a similar need of confession. Western man has become a confessing animal (58).

Perhaps, as Foucault claims, “western man” has become a confessing animal but, for Almodovar, “western woman” does not simply have the freedom to “become” anything. She is either coerced into admitting her faults, sins, crimes, and desires in the presence of a man who feels power from her weakness or she is silenced, left voiceless and expressionless by men who wish to avoid hearing a confession that may compromise their position and make them feel weak.

Luci is forced to confess to Pepi and Bom her desire to stay with her husband by her husband. Lying in her hospital bed, her position (like the camera shots and angles) being overshadowed and dominated by the looming figure of her husband who stands with his arm positioned upon her injured shoulder, she confesses that she no longer desires Bom. In doing so she reaffirms her husband’s masculinity. She states that Bom is weak and lacks the ability to control her in the same way as her over-aggressive husband who, rather than silencing her immediately, inflicts physical pain upon her so that she will continue to conflate his ego and undermine Bom’s power. Whilst he intimidates both Pepi and Bom by continuing to stand while they sit, Luci verbally allays his fears of castration by implying that he is a superior to Bom as a lover and as a “man”. Although it is he who conspired to bring the girls to the hospital by sending them the telegram, which was supposedly sent by Luci, he does not wait long until he orders them to leave. Once he is reassured of his position he orders Luci to be silent and forces Pepi and Bom (the “Kid”) to go.

The fact that the scene takes place in a hospital seems to reaffirm him further. The state institution which is still controlled by a government whose laws and values

have always been, and will always be, structured by a patriarchal system gives him the power that he would perhaps not have if he were situated elsewhere. He is forced to abduct her from the club, and is unable to reaffirm himself there, because the nightclub is a safe space for women. It, unlike the hospital, is a place controlled by women, full of women, and situated in Bom's hometown. However, the hospital room, which is overshadowed by a conservative symbol of christian mythology, the crucifix which Luci's husband carefully places above the bed before Pepi and Bom enter, is not a safe female space and thus his power is restored.

Luci's hospital confession can be described as the first in a long line of confessions that take place in a safe male space in Almodovar's films. In *High Heels* Becky (Marisa Paredes), upon her death bed, confesses to a murder she did not commit in order protect her daughter, Rebeca (Victoria Abril), from the law. Both Becky's confession and her death provide Rebeca with freedom; freedom from incarceration and freedom from the inadequate feelings imposed upon her by her mother. Becky has proved to be more successful than Rebeca for all of Rebeca's life. She robs Rebeca of her childhood, of her love, and finally of her husband. The only way Becky can purge the guilt she feels for ruining the life of her child and driving Rebeca to commit murder, is by proving her love through her final act of confession.

In the same way that a parishioner confesses all the sins of his or her life to a catholic priest Becky tells Judge Dominguez (Miguel Bose) of her failings. However, as her abandonment, jealousy, and coveting of Rebeca's husband are not crimes according to the law, she cannot explain her actual actions. Therefore, as she has

indirectly caused Rebeca to kill, she takes responsibility for that final act. In doing so she implies that a mother is always responsible for the failings of her child.

Despite her intentions, Becky's false confession is a sin and hinders a criminal investigation. However, although her words result in her being considered a sinner and a criminal, she has no choice but to protect her child. As a mother she is oppressed by both religion and society and is, therefore, doomed to an existence filled with blame and guilt both during this life and the next. Patriarchal structures of law and religion, neither of which recognize a husband's emotional abuse as a sin or a crime, control women and impose a false sense of guilt upon them, to such an extent, that they can never escape patriarchal constraints even after death.

In the same way Pepi and Bom cannot escape their inherent flaws because they are women. They are subjected to a confession which dis-empowers them, proves their lack of choice, and again justifies and maintains the ideas of Freud. Pepi and Bom must be overpowered by the detective because they are female (born with original sin) and partly because the sexual activities they participate in and their attitudes towards sexuality are perverse "sins" according to all patriarchal institutions; the law, the church, and society.

Throughout his work Almodovar presents alternative sexualities but none of which are as explicit and controversial as those initiated by Bom. Whereas the "perversions" of heterosexual men, such as voyeurism or violation, are not presented as that unusual (especially considering that the male spectator is performing such activities as, whilst simply watching the film, he is being a voyeur who imposes and

violates female space) in comparison to the “water-sports” which arouse Bom and Luci.

Luci’s return to her husband and her confession is problematic because it undermines lesbian or female bonds and relationships but most importantly the act of returning emphasizes Luci’s weakness as a heterosexual woman. She chooses to spend the rest of her life with a man who abuses her physically, not because she desires it, but because he feels the need to punish her for making decisions by herself. If her leaving him was an act of strength and resistance, her return to him is an act of ultimate subservience. She demonstrates the need to put her husband’s concerns before her own in the same way that Becky, before her confession, puts men before her own child. Luci’s husband’s hate and anger are, again, never questioned, nor is her willingness to submit.

As in traditionalist patriarchal societies, in particular those heavily influenced by the catholic church, their acceptance of the roles of dominant husband versus subservient wife is not only accepted but expected. As the priest in *Law of Desire* indicates, there is no room for deviants in the church. When Tina asks to sing in the church of her boyhood he asks her to leave. He cannot accept her because she is now a woman. She is viewed as deviant in her female form whereas, as a homosexual boy who accepted and cherished the sexual advances of a paedophiliac, he/she was not. As a man, who is privileged in the catholic church, he has the ability to deny her religious needs upon the basis that he no longer has a sexual need or desire for her.

Without religion to guide the heterosexual woman she is lost. She is left to

search for new meanings and new outlets of expression other than prayer and confession. However, in Almodovar's cinema, sexuality is the only replacement for religion. As the fate of Pepi, Luci, and Bom illustrates, Almodovar's women are unable to deal with sexual freedoms or find meaning through alternate sexual encounters and, therefore, they are doomed to lives of emptiness or as disciples to a false, male dominated, hierarchal form of christianity.

Female Heterosexuality.

Since the beginnings of what we now term “civilized society” men have believed that any acknowledgment of female sexuality or desire posed a threat to society and the patriarchal social order. Women’s sexuality was viewed as so mysterious and untamed that men felt the need to silence expressions of female sexuality and enforce moral codes and laws which inhibited women’s social movement and prohibited women from either realizing or acting out their desires. Male dominated institutions (such as the law, religion, and all other elements of the superstructure) developed social constructions which encouraged women to behave in a constrained and submissive manner. Men and women were exposed to and forced to accept a false consciousness which advocated that female desire was to be repressed for the good of society.

Almodovar not only supports the continuance of this false consciousness through his negative portrayals of strong, sexually aware women but demonstrates a tendency to perpetuate the contradictory notion that women have no right or ability to choose their social or sexual place in society but that every female is responsible and accountable for their actions.

This contradiction becomes most apparent when one examines Almodovar’s presentations of heterosexual women. Rather than concluding that women often marry because they feel that they have no other choice (particularly in Almodovar’s world in which all lesbian relationships are doomed to failure) Almodovar blames heterosexual or married women for making the misguided decision to marry.

In *Labyrinth of Passion* Sexi (Cecilia Roth) decides to spend the rest of her life faithful to Riza (Imanol Arias) because her relationship with him enables her to escape the horrific, psychologically scarring events of her past and “cures” her nymphomania. In Sexi’s case marriage is viewed as a means to create both a secure life and a stable psyche. Almodovar claims that the film, and Sexi’s and Riza’s ultimate escape into heterosexual bliss, is a critique of Freudian analyses of sexual normativity.

In his article “Sense and Sensibility, or Latent Heterosexuality and *Labyrinth of Passion*” James Mandrell attempts to explain the reason why the two main characters in the film, Sexilia (Cecilia Roth) and Riza (Imanol Arias), find an outlet for their passions and the fulfillment of the desires through their stereo- typically “normative” heterosexual relationship. Mandrell states:

The fact that most of the characters, that is, the straight characters, end up happy in *Labyrinth of Passion*, despite or even because of the convoluted nature of desire, leads one to suspect that Almodovar is offering a pointed if humorous critique of Freudian theories of psychosexual developments (46).

It is clear, to some extent, that Mandrell is correct to assume that Almodovar is trying to discount certain Freudian notions. However, Almodovar fails to do so and, rather than challenging Freud he affirms Freud’s disavowal of the feminine. Mandrell not only refuses to acknowledge this but supports Almodovar’s limited analysis of Freud when he “suggests” that “[...] Almodovar’s sexuality- or gender- ought to be virtually irrelevant when it comes to the making ... of a film” (43).

If we ignore Almodovar's gender and the privilege afforded to him because of his gender we run the risk of failing to recognize the bias and assumptions upon which his films are based. Freud suggests, throughout his writing, that men have both the ability and the right to define heterosexuality, homosexuality, and femininity. Women, on the other hand, do not have the mental capacity or the power to create such definitions. By making Almodovar's gender irrelevant his critics support this notion.

Whereas within *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* Almodovar inadvertently uses Freudian assumptions to examine lesbianism and sado-masochism as specifically female perversions, in *Labyrinth of Passion* he deliberately plays upon Freudian notions of femininity to explain how, through the characterization of Sexilia's nymphomania as a specifically feminine disorder. By the end of the film, however, Sexilia, with the help of her psychoanalyst, has overcome her phobia of the sun, psychoanalyzed her past, and found satisfaction in a monogamous relationship with Riza. The chain of the events leading up to Sexilia's discovery of her "true" monogamous nature (if only she can find the right man!) are comical because they are predictable for any spectator who has a knowledge of Freud. It is this comical aspect of Almodovar's case study of Sexilia's nymphomania that prevents many critics from identifying the problematic and inadequate nature of Almodovar's critique of Freud.

The opening scene of the film is shot amongst the crowded market stalls in El Rastro, Madrid's largest flea market. Amidst the commotion, the hustle and bustle of buying and selling, the two central figures of Sexi and Riza become most noticeable. Their presence is striking because, whereas other shoppers are looking for material

bargains, Sexi and Riza are looking for commodities of a different kind.

Both characters are in search of men with whom they can share a sexual encounter. As a result, they focus their attention upon the most sexual aspects of the men who pass them by. Almodovar emphasizes both Sexi's and Riza's intentions by also focusing the camera upon the crotches and buttocks of male shoppers and marketeers. Whereas mainstream audiences are, as Laura Mulvey points out, used to viewing the female body in such an objectified, disembodied, sexual manner this focus upon the male body is somewhat disturbing. However, even though the spectator is forced to consider this particular scene, the film's opening, from either a female or a male homosexual perspective Almodovar does not continue to make mainstream, conservative spectators uneasy throughout the rest of the film. As Barbara Morris implies in "Almodovar's Laws of Subjectivity and Desire", Almodovar cannot avoid making his characters erotically appealing to the males in his audience even if his characters are, themselves, male. When discussing *The Law of Desire* Morris states:

Almodovar configures the male body in *Desire* as one of the primary loci of scopophilic desire, and its specular display is always in visual relation to the gaze of another desiring male (89).

By the end of *Labyrinth of Passion* the perversions of both main characters appear to have been "cured". Both Sexi and Riza stop searching for sexual fulfillment in brief encounters with random men, they no longer objectify the male body, and they settle into a comfortable, heterosexual relationship with one another. Almodovar claims that by ending the film in this manner he completes his critique of Freud's

theories about the curable nature of sexual perversions.⁷ However, in contrast to Almodovar's own assertion, I would argue that, although the fate of Sexi and Riza may encourage mainstream audiences to question the stereotypical nature of Freud's theories about homosexuality, the neatly tied ending does not challenge psychoanalytic assumptions about female perversions or detail a more feminine perspective upon sexuality. Male homosexuality is not presented as abnormal nor is it necessary that all male homosexuals be cured of their "perversion" (Sadec, played by Antonio Banderas, is still gay at the end of the film), but Sexilia's "perversion" must be averted.

In forcing all women to convert to more acceptable modes of sexual behavior whilst allowing certain male characters to continue exhibiting and participating within the perverse Almodovar once again recreates a binary which separates male and female behaviors, attitudes, and potentials to succeed. Not only does he imply that there is an inherent difference between the types of perverse desires and activities that men and women take part in but that it is more acceptable for men to continue to behave in a "perverse" manner.

Like Almodovar, Louise J. Kaplan identifies a difference between male and female perversions. However, unlike Almodovar, Kaplan attempts to create a framework which analyses how this difference arises. She claims that male and female perversions are the product of constructed gender stereotypes and are not an innate biological or mental condition that separates the two sexes. Kaplan states:

A perversion is a psychological strategy, [...] The overall strategy

operates in the same way for males and females. What makes all the difference between male and female perversions is the social gender stereotype that is brought into the foreground of the enactment (10).

As a result of this conclusion Kaplan defines certain perversions, such as “fetishism, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual masochism, sexual sadism, pedophilia, zoophilia, [and] necrophilia” (12), as specific to men. Kaplan’s assumptions are, however, based within the notion that gender is fixed and that neither the male nor the female is able to move beyond or alter socially constructed gender stereotypes.

Almodovar, too, is unable to reject the fixed nature of gender binaries and thus, like Kaplan, he insinuates that certain “perversions” are particular to men and others are particular to women.

The reason why Almodovar does not feel the need to undermine all men who participate in alternate sexual activity is, I would argue, because he judges the “types” of female perversions depicted more harshly than those of men. It is noticeable that Almodovar’s list of male perversions differs somewhat to Kaplan’s in the sense that none of Almodovar’s men suffer from the desire to be sexually masochistic.

Masochism is, in Almodovar’s cinema, a sign of weakness and of the need to be dominated. Men, in Almodovar’s world, rarely feel the need to be dominated, rather, that role is left for women to perform because, stereotypically, they have always performed that role.

This is made most evident through the relationship between Sexi and Riza. Riza’s perversion, which he able to purge himself of through a confession at the end

of the film, is considered to be less threatening simply because “in every normal male and female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex” (Freud, 243-4). By looking to Freud Almodovar is able to find a biological or scientific explanation of Riza’s homosexuality as:

These long familiar facts of anatomy lead us to suppose that an originally physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one ... (244).

However, as Freud claims, “we are ignorant of what characterizes a female brain” (244) and, therefore, the activities or desires created within the female brain are considered to be mysterious. Hence, Sexi’s perversion, her nymphomania, cannot be readily explained unless one is provided with a complete and detailed account of the childhood trauma and the psychological trauma that led to her desire to have sex with numerous men at one time. True, Almodovar does provide a basic rationale for Riza’s homosexuality, however, as Riza is not the only character who represents male homosexuality in *Labyrinth*, his experiences are not considered to be the only experiences that lead to homosexuality in men. Riza’s case is viewed as an isolated case in which his relationship with his step-mother has forced him to find alternate sexual outlets of expression. In contrast, Sexi is the only female character who performs sexually perverse acts in *Labyrinth* and therefore her experiences and psychological case study stands to represent all female “perverts”.

Sexi is the only women in either *Pepi*, *Luci*, *Bom* or *Labyrinth* who is depicted as powerful enough to fulfill her own obsessive needs. However, unlike Luci, who is

overpowered by her sexual partners, in particular men, Sexi finds power and fulfillment in her polymorphous sexual activities. Thus, when she is finally reconciled with Riza, as the scene between them in the taxi cab demonstrates, she is not allowed to confess because her confession would not serve as an affirmation of his manhood but as a affirmation of her sexual drive and her ability to express herself sexually.

In the back of the taxi Sexi and Riza are enclosed in a small space in which the sounds of the outside world are excluded. This space immediately becomes a masculine space when Riza begins to confess his past and, as a result, rids himself of the guilt he feels for being gay and for sleeping with the countess. His limited heterosexual experiences lead him to feel inadequate in comparison to Sexi who has had countless heterosexual partners despite the fact that, once he has established a relationship with Sexi, it is she who cannot perform sexually for fear of making their relationship “the same as all the rest”. She attempts to conform to the normative heterosexual pressures of a relationship, but, not being content with this or being able to acknowledge and accept his own fear of inadequacy, Riza feels the need to prove his authority, power, and masculinity by silencing Sexi.

Not only is Sexi not allowed to confess to Riza, but her voice, if she were to use it, would be excluded from the outside world. She cannot be heard through the metal or over the sound of the moving vehicle in which she is trapped. She cannot express herself in such a safe masculine space and thus she is silenced for the first time but not for the last time. Riza’s need to silence Sexi, to avoid hearing stories about her past that will affirm his inadequacy, emphasizes both his desire to be heard

and to maintain the appearance of his masculine strength. Like Luci's husband, he gains a sense of power and dominance by oppressing women. One can only assume that, even after they escape to Teheran and he becomes King, he will still feel the need to dominate others and, therefore, the road of life to be traveled by Sexi will be the same as the road she travels, metaphorically, in the cab; both journeys result in her subordination.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* Friedrich Engels discusses why, in contemporary society as in ancient societies, it is necessary for women to become and remain monogamous in order for the patriarchal structures and institutions to provide and preserve the power and privilege offered to men. Engels states:

Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual- a man- and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and no other. For this purpose, the monogamy of the woman was required, not that of the man, so this monogamy of the woman did not in any way interfere with open or concealed polygamy on the part of the man (106).

According to Engel's argument, a woman who insists upon participating in polygamous relationships is not considered to be "alternative" in a patriarchal, capitalist society but a threat to that society. Therefore, it is no surprise that Sexi's sexual behavior must be curtailed as, if she were allowed to continue in her originally "perverse" manner, she would threaten Almodovar's perception of the world as well

as the assumptions of his male- identified audiences.

Sexi is a threat, not simply because she does not conform to the stereotypical role assigned to women in order to benefit men economically, socially, and psychologically, but because she behaves like a man in all aspects of her life. Rather than "... attach[ing] to men and women by over-identifying with them [which] can result in the depletion of [her] own separate self and activity" (Shapard, 163) her detached, typically masculine attitudes towards sex, relationships, and commitment enable her to satisfy herself before others. Whereas Wendy Harcourt, in "Feminism, Body, and Self", implies that women such as Sexi should be viewed in a positive light because they prove that "gender is a social construct and that women would benefit if men feared them less and if culture regarded women as more than mothers or sexual partners" (73) Almodovar, in converting Sexi, insinuates that her lack of emotional attachment or maternal feelings is unnatural.

The conversation between Sexi and Riza is reminiscent of the conversation between Queti's mother and her lover which also takes place in the back of a taxi. Queti's mother, like Sexi, is forced into a position that she does not desire but, due to the overbearing will of her lover, she is forced to acquiesce with his wishes to such an extent that she changes her own. This does not happen when Queti (Marta Fernandez Muro) and Sexi, two women, converse in a taxi. The women share a conversational exchange and, because the space is a safe feminine space protected by the insular nature of the car, both can express their desires, needs, and dreams.

The experiences of Luci, Sexi, and Queti's mother lead one to surmise that

women are only allowed or forced to confess their pasts if it suits the need and inflates the egos of the men to whom they confess. Men have the choice to confess or not to confess. Riza makes the decision to voice his sexual “sins” because, in doing so, he can be absolved without remorse or penance as Sexi has little power to deny him. Sexi, who can no longer use poly-amorous sex as an outlet for expression, and who is not allowed to talk about the process of expression she has developed through sex, is placed in the same position as all other monogamous, heterosexual women. She is powerless.

By presenting Sexi thus, Almodovar negates his own attempts to critique Freud. As well as reaffirming Freud’s notion that homosexuality or “inversion” can be cured he also indicates that monogamous, heterosexual relationships serve to put women in their subordinate place. The fact that Almodovar fails to examine the psychoanalytic reasoning for *all* male perversions but clearly provides a psychoanalytic explanation for female perversion also proves that he is less concerned with creating a “rich account of masculinity” than describing the mysteries of, and solving the problems posed by, the female mind.

As Almodovar continues to base his analysis of sexuality within a Freudian framework and reaffirm gender stereotypes one can only assume that he, like Freud, is content with the assumption that all psychological traumas caused in childhood are the fault of the mother as, despite his so-called attempt to undermine Freud, Almodovar fails to examine the ways in which Freudian theorists implicate the mother when discussing a child’s perversion.

Riza demonstrates few homosexual tendencies until after his horrific sexual experience with the countess upon the beach in Teheran. During this encounter he becomes aware of the countess' lack of the phallus (her lack of power as well as of male genitals). As a response to the shock of his realization he turns away from his pursuit of females, in particular the young Sexi, and turns his attentions towards members of the same sex. In presenting Riza's adoption of homosexuality thus, Almodovar, in the guise of critiquing Freud, uses the same model as Freud to explain Riza's inversion. Similarly, as the beach scene again demonstrates, Almodovar employs Freud's theory of the female Oedipal complex in order to explain Sexi's nymphomania. As Susana (Ofelia Angelica) explains, Sexi's fear of the sun is psychological. It reminds her of a traumatic experience in her childhood; the threat posed by other, phallic-less women and the loss of her father's love. As she cannot acknowledge this she must turn to other, more devious means of attaining love, acceptance, and a father figure as a love object. Thus, in an attempts to compensate for her father's lack of interest in her, she searches for both love and fulfillment in the many numerous sexual encounters she shares with random men.

However, whilst obviously parodying Freud's most well known theories, and thus making them appear to be as extreme as the clothing and behavior of Sexi, Riza, and their friends, Almodovar does not consider the implications about gender that lie behind his representation of male inversion and the oedipal complex. Seemingly, Almodovar is content with the notion that male perversions occur as a result of the male being exposed to a form of female perversion. Riza's stepmother's actions, and

her lack of the phallus, “force” Riza to become homosexual. However, female perversions are not the fault of any male act. True, Sexi’s father does ignore her and cause her to yearn for male attention but one can assume that it is ultimately Riza’s rejection of Sexi, which has been caused by the countess, that makes her fear the sun and turn into a nymphomaniac. Thus, as with male perversion, female perversion results from being the victim of another female’s need to behave in a perverse manner. If Almodovar were truly attempting to ridicule Freud surely he would attempt to turn this assumption around and critique the idea that the mother figure is always to blame for the psychologically abnormal behavior of children.

In contrast to his depictions of women Almodovar does not indicate that men, be they straight, gay, transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, or rapists, must alter their behavior or suppress their desires for any reason other than their own choosing. However, whilst men possess the privilege of choice they are not presented as accountable for the consequences of their choices.

Dr. de la Peña (Fernando Vivanco) serves as an example of a man who is not responsible for his actions. In contrast, however, the two traditionally normative heterosexual women who are portrayed, Susana, and the Countess Toraya (Helga Line). in the film, are to be blamed for their behavior and attributes even though they have little ability to change either.

Sexi’s father, Dr. de la Peña, who we can assume to be heterosexual due to his prior marriage and his later attraction towards a woman whom he believes to be his daughter, devotes his life to experimental science because he believe that sex is a

disgusting, futile, and unnecessary activity. His work becomes an obsession. He finds fulfilment in science because, his focus upon the reproductive and sexual abnormalities of women, enables him to deny his own sexual frigidity .

Dr. de la Peña's focus bears an affinity with that of Almodovar. His work stands as a metaphor for the sterility, frigidity, and "unnaturalness" of heterosexual society. The artificial insemination techniques he develops are themselves "unnatural"; the test tube baby he creates is a monster, his artificially inseminated budgies won't sing (until given an aphrodisiac), and the idea of giving a mentally unstable woman, such as Countess, a child in order to taunt her ex-husband seems inhumane.

It is only when Dr. de la Peña is made aware of his desire for his daughter that he is able to abandon his scientific obsession. However, his sexuality still appears to be unnatural as, in performing the sexual act with Queti (who he believes is Sexi), he believes that he is committing incest. Nevertheless, because he does so in a drug induced state, his actions and intentions can be excused. In the same way that Queti must give the budgies an aphrodisiac to make them perform their song she must give Dr. de la Peña Benzamino to make him perform sexually. This is significant, again, in the sense that, by indicating that men can only perform acts which are traditionally viewed as perverse in a drug induced state, Almodovar implies that, men who are obsessive about their sexuality or a specific sexual object, are not as prone to act upon sexually psychotic desires in the same way as women.

Of course, in *The Law of Desire*, Antonio's character (Antonio Banderas) can

be read as somewhat psychotic, however, his desire for Pablo is not presented as as absurd as, for example, Susana's desire for Sexi's father. The reason for this being that Susana is a comic character who serves as a catalyst for the events that occur between Sexi and Riza as well as Queti and Dr. de la Peña. Antonio, on the other hand, is depicted as a confused young man who is caught up by the glamour and suggestive writings and films of Pablo Quintero. The spectator can identify with Antonio, as with many of Almodovar's gay male characters, because his desire appears to be filled with deep felt anguish which forces him to perform obsessive acts, such as murder and kidnaping, that express his confusion and sexual need. In contrast, the audience cannot identify with Susana who is not only ridiculed throughout the film but presents herself as desperate, not for self- fulfillment through sexual union, but simply for sex.

There are two specific scenes in *Labyrinth of Passion* which highlight Susana's desperation. The first occurs mid-way through the film when she admits to Sexi that she wishes to sleep with Dr. de la Peña. This admission prompts Susana to telephone Dr. de la Peña and tell him of her desire. It is her body language during this scene which is most significant. As she raises her foot upon the chair and begins wave and finger her hair whilst speaking in a deep sexual voice of her desire to meet Dr. de la Peña she appears to be participating in a mating ritual. However, she fails to appear "sexy" in the same way as either Sexi (whose image is interspersed with Susana's throughout this scene) or any of the male transvestites depicted by Almodovar who, despite their male gender, are more capable of behaving in a traditionally feminine

manner. Susana's weight and her unattractive clothing and style make her attempt to be sexual laughable.

This is again emphasized in the scene between Susana and Dr. de la Peña in the café. Susana uses all her powers of persuasion and psychoanalytic knowledge in an attempt to persuade Dr. de la Peña to participate in a sexual act with her. Despite his obvious disgust at her appearance and her sexual aggressiveness, she refuses to acknowledge Dr. de la Peña's protestations, and it is not until he exits hastily that she gets his message.

Although neither of these scenes are pivotal to the plot of *Labyrinth of Passion* they are an important indication of the way Almodovar thinks about women, femininity, and beauty. Almodovar's female characters fail in many aspects of their lives: they rarely achieve sexual satisfaction even if they participate in alternative sexual acts, they are often dominated by men, and if they maintain their individuality and independence they are presented as masculine-complex man haters who threaten, and have the potential to destroy, those very patriarchal structures that Almodovar attempts to uphold. However, despite this, women do have some purpose, albeit limited, as they can either perform a maternal or sisterly role, as Tina and Antonio's mother (Helga Line) do in *The Law of Desire*, or be available for use as a sexual objects, as are Queti and the countess in *Labyrinth of Passion*. In this sense Almodovar's women fit into the traditional roles that, as Wendy Harcourt explains, were set aside for them in the nineteenth century. Harcourt states:

The meanings that woman signified in nineteenth century discourse

were woman as mother; woman as moral; woman as passive; woman as [...] woman as social body; woman as “the sex”; and woman as reproductive economy (78).

Susana does not even fit into any of these roles simply because her appearance dictates that she remain to be an “old maid”. As she is, according to Almodovar and probably most of his audiences, sexually unappealing (fat, desperate, aggressive, and thus ridiculous) she cannot be viewed as a “real” woman and, thus, she is unable to act as a woman supposedly should or find satisfaction in being a woman. The fact that she is ostracized by Almodovar indicates that Almodovar believes that there are standards and codes of feminine beauty and female behavior, to which *all* women should aspire to achieve and maintain, if they wish to be considered as “women”. Those, such as Susana, who are unable to reach the high goals of “womanhood” and femininity set by Almodovar, become futile, gender-less, sexless creatures who cannot perform the roles of women but who are not allowed to function as men.

Often such women are representatives of the “old” world which Almodovar attempts to deconstruct throughout the course of his films and, although Susana does not represent the old in the same way as the countess, for example, her belief in Freud and Lacan implies that she is caught within an outdated value system (which Almodovar is also, ironically, caught up in to the extent that he is unconscious of its influence upon him). However, her appearance and aggressive nature do not enable her to function in the misogynistic world of Freud and Lacan any more than they enable her to sexually satisfy Dr. de la Peña in Almodovar’s sexually orientated world

and, thus, at the end of the film she must suffer the same fate as all those women who do not “fit in”. She is left dissatisfied and alone to deteriorate in the “old” world whose values and expectations she embraces but cannot live up to.

The countess, too, suffers the same fate as Susana. Despite the fact that she is able to attain some sexual satisfaction from her brief encounter with Riza, her aggressive nature leads to her demise. She is unable to gain either the respect or the sperm of her ex-husband which results in her inability to pro-create. She has already failed to perform a motherly role with Riza and, ultimately, is left with no second chance despite her new-found fertility.

It appears, however, that the countess has more opportunity than Susana to fulfill herself and others not only because she is more sexually appealing but because she is more able to channel her sexually aggressive nature, which is traditionally viewed as a masculine trait, in a productive manner. During her search for Riza the countess dons the clothes of a man and travels into areas of the city known for their largely gay population. It is at this point that she has the potential to embrace an alternative sexuality which may provide her with an outlet for her frustrations and a sexual purpose. Nevertheless, unlike the male to female transvestites depicted in Almodovar’s films, she cannot completely alter her gender or gender outlook. She is trapped within her female body in the same way that her ideologies are trapped within the “old” world. As her rejection of her opportunity to participate in alternate socio-sexual activities (by indulging herself in alternate sexual activities whilst cruising the “gay” underworld of Madrid) demonstrates her motives or intentions do not change

and, thus, she cannot succeed in her aims and her aggressive desires ultimately destroy her in the same way that Susana's aggressive nature destroys her. Even though for the countess, as for many female transvestites, "transvestism [...] means a taste of male privilege" and allows her to enter a male dominated environment (the gay male area of Madrid) she differs from those female transvestites who "commonly resist relinquishing" their new found privilege (Straayer, 49). Rather, she gives herself to Riza only to be rejected immediately after the sexual encounter in which she has been reduced to the inferior role of "woman as sexual object". Thus, once her sexual usefulness has gone she is discarded.

Chapter 2.

“Eso Se Llama Reciprocidad”: Representations of Male Sexualities and Relationships.⁸

Transvestism and Disguise

The countess Toraya may, at first, appear to be a transvestite when she dons the clothing of a man. However, Louise J. Kaplan argues, transvestism is specifically a male perversion. Kaplan describes male transvestism as a form of fetishism which is inherently linked to male sexual desire whereas female “transvestism” is more related to issues of power, not sexual arousal, and thus it must be described, simply, as cross-dressing. Kaplan claims that:

Transvestism is now defined as heterosexual cross-dressing in which clothing is used fetishistically for sexual arousal. For example, unless her cross-dressing is driven and imperative and required for sexual arousal and performance, a woman who dresses in men’s clothing would not be considered a transvestite. [...] Very few females cross-dress as a means of sexual arousal. The typical transvestite is a heterosexual male who wears female clothing to achieve an arousal

(23)

As I have outlined, Almodovar, like Kaplan tends to make a similar distinction between the types of “perversions” or alternate sexual activities performed by men and women and he indeed implies that whereas men are transvestites, women are cross-dress. However, to some extent Almodovar’s representation of male to female transvestism differs from Kaplan’s theory in the sense that characters such as Fanny MacNamara or “Roxi” (played by Fabio) are homosexual transvestites who do not enact their “scenarios with only one or two sexual partners” (23).

Nevertheless, the fact that Almodovar presents female “cross-dressers” as less capable of imitating the behavior and appearance of men than male “transvestites” are of imitating that of women indicates that, according to Almodovar, female cross-dressers have different motivations for their transvestite-like behavior. Although the countess uses her disguise to enter the male gay scene of Madrid she does not become sexually aroused by either her appearance, her deceit of men, or by the other transvestites she sees. Rather, her sexual arousal comes later, at the point at which she has sexual intercourse with Riza. Her aim is to find a man who will arouse her sexually as, despite her male persona, she is unable to this by herself.

Chris Straayer offers some explanation as to why women are unable to achieve arousal simply by cross-dressing and why, in contrast, men find cross-dressing titillating and stimulating when she states that often:

[...] the female costume delivers sexual anatomy whereas male costume abandons it. Sex is “present” in both the masquerade of femininity and the female body, but doubly absent for the male (79).

Thus, in addition to the fact that she uses her transvestite disguise to gain the power she desires, and not sexual fulfillment, her attempt to appear as a man cannot succeed because both her gender and sexuality are always visible. As a result of this visibility she will never attain the power that women, according to Almodovar, do not deserve. Therefore the countess initiates a relationship with Riza and attempts to have the emperor’s child in order to gain the power associated with the possession of the phallus.

At first Toraya turns to Riza. He, being a boy who has the potential to become a great and powerful leader, has the phallus. If she can control Riza she can take the phallus as her own. When this attempt fails she disguises herself as man under the guise of trying to find Riza again. As the maid's reaction to the countess' garb indicates, the clothes of a man have the potential to make the countess feel empowered. Nevertheless, she fails to recognize this and, as such power is only superficially external, her cross-dressing becomes a futile endeavor. She lacks the male privilege of utilizing alternate sexual activities to find a sense of self and succeed in one's aims..

Ultimately, the countess buys her fertility in a final attempt to gain the phallus through her child which, according to Freud, stands as a phallic symbol that can be controlled by the mother. Freud describes such behavior in women as being the result of a masculinity complex which is caused by the female's early identification with her father, rather than her mother, and results in the desire for the same power that is enjoyed by the male head of the family.

Kaplan, following Freudian lines of argument defines females with a masculinity complex as:

[...]women [who] decide to take vengeance on the world and their own bodies and minds by repudiating everything about them that is soft, tender, nurturing, and merciful and instead fit themselves into a caricature of masculinity, becoming harsh, cruel, rapacious, tyrannical- even if it means being cruel to their own body (185).

Despite the flawed reasoning and the stereotypical assumptions behind Kaplan's statement Toraya does appear to behave in the manner described above. She does not function in a motherly way for Riza, she is cruel to Sexi, she is demanding and harsh with her spies in Teheran, and devious in her attempts to gain the Emperor's sperm. However, it is not for these reasons that she fails in her quest to gain the power of the phallus. Her failure is the result of both her inability, as a woman, to ever possess and maintain the phallus and the indefinable nature of masculinity and maleness.

Toraya fails partially because the men to whom she is related are forced to deny her in order in order to maintain their own power and allay the fear of castration posed by powerful women. It seems that Almodovar, like Freud himself, feels the need to present powerful women as "deviant" in order to maintain the illusion that he, too, can remain in control of his life. However, even though men have the power Almodovar does not wish his viewers to believe that men abuse such power and, thus, Almodovar forces the audience to believe that, in fact, the countess actually denies herself. By rejecting her male persona and dress and desiring to remain female, the Countess denies herself the one, small opportunity to transgress gender boundaries and enjoy the privilege of being viewed as a man.

Throughout his work, particularly in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Matador* as well as in *Labyrinth*, Almodovar undermines women who have a masculinity complex so as to set his male-identified viewers at ease whilst at the same time attempting to trick his female identified audience into believing that they too are being represented. It is for this reason that he also presents the male to

female transvestites who, whilst appearing to break down traditionalist assumptions about gender and sexuality, actually reinforce them whilst setting the audience at ease.

If one accepts Straayer's idea that men cannot be identified by their clothing one must also acknowledge that, in Almodovar's world, women have little chance of gaining power. By implying that clothing and anatomy define femininity and femaleness Straayer has not only insinuated that external, visual characteristics define femininity but that being "feminine" is a masquerade. By indicating that femininity becomes a fixed and constructed set of codes which can be easily identified and recreated because they are so concrete she explains why and how both women and male to female transvestites agree to act in accordance with a set of established rules about the nature of femininity (even though, as Almodovar demonstrates in *Labyrinth*, women are not always as capable of "acting" in a feminine manner than men are). Thus, any man who attempts to affect a female persona or identify as female, can, according to Straayer, adopt such characteristics in order to be recognized as female.

Woman is as man determines her to be and is always objectified as "species other". Man, in contrast, can be whoever he chooses to be. In contrast, masculinity, which is not confined or restricted by a set of codes relating to either clothing or the body, is indefinable, variable, and intransigent. Almodovar's representation of masculinity and maleness is typically postmodern in the sense that it is fragmented and plural. Men have the ability to choose what masculine attributes they wish to exhibit and they are able to compromise and combine elements of masculinity and femininity in order to define self because they have the social status and power of the

phallus. It is this plurality that women (female to male transvestites) are incapable of harnessing when attempting to portray maleness because, as they are unable to escape their own anatomies, they can never escape the confinement of their own femaleness. As they also lack the phallus they cannot alter themselves depending upon their own desire or present themselves as other.

However, the male to female transvestites in Almodovar's cinema can be described as the epitome of maleness despite their decision to appear and identify as female because, whilst defining femininity and reaffirming socially constructed stereotypes of women, they also enjoy the privileges afforded to men because of their possession of the phallus. They do not feel the need to validate themselves in the same way as Luci's husband, by physically controlling the actions and beliefs of one particular woman, because their dress, characteristics, and affectations enable them to control women as a group. Therefore, the male to female transvestite has even more power than the average, heterosexual man because his appearance and actions, which define femininity, create the standards of femininity to which *all* women should aspire. He influences women's ideas of what a woman should be.

Rather than creating "a rich account of masculinity as it defines itself in relation to women [which provides] several potential openings toward more plural conceptions of gender and sexuality" (Chodorow, 31), Almodovar allows his male characters to experiment with their masculinity and develop its multi-faceted aspects without re-evaluating his traditionalist views of femininity or defining masculinity at all (never mind in the same limited way as he defines femininity).⁹ Thus, it is not

surprising that the male to female transvestites depicted in Almodovar's films concentrate on particularly stereotypical aspects of the female body and character whilst attempting to imitate femininity but, at the same, time maintain the plural masculinities.

The fact that femininity and femaleness is definable and, therefore, "presentable, whereas masculinity and maleness is "unpresentable", not only enables men to mimic female attributes but enables the male to female transvestite to fix and limit it further. Straayer, when specifically referring to temporary transvestites film, examines the underlying assumptions behind transvestism (and to some extent transsexuality) and the problematic effects of presenting male to female transvestite characters on film when she states:

[...] temporary transvestite films use gender-coded clothing and disguise to carry/elicit generic gender-crossing gestures, behaviors and attitudes. In addition, although they ostensibly challenge gender constructions in that generic system, they rely on biology and sexual difference to realign gender and sex according to convention, and therefore limit their challenge severely (70).

However, whilst supposedly "achieving" perfection in his "portrayal" of femininity the male to female transvestite create a type of femininity which is, ultimately unattainable for women. He implies, through his very existence, that the perfect woman possesses the power of the phallus and has no anatomical lack. But, as women can never possess such power or a penis, they can never fit into the category of

feminine even though such a category is designed for them. Therefore, as Straayer identifies, even though he proves that femininity is a construction or masquerade he supports its very existence by embracing it.

Almodovar's portrayals of male to female transvestites, such as Roxi (Fabio), not only limit femininity but seem to epitomize his traditionalist views (which correspond to those of Freud) of women as hysterical, oversexed, ridiculous "creatures" who only are lacking in self control.¹⁰ As demonstrated in the scene in *Luci, Pepi, Bom*, in which Almodovar directs Fabio's erotic, masochistic sexual fantasies, the male to female transvestite captures and solidifies all that it means to be a woman.

Both Fabio's clothing and posture is reminiscent of the stereotypes of costume and pose associated with women. He lies on the floor, dressed in a short, pink and black fur coat and panties with his bloody chest bare and his legs spread wide apart. As Almodovar himself (playing the role of director) stands over him shouting commanding him to "enjoy it, enjoy it more" Fabio succumbs to the will of his sadistic killer's drill. The drill (meant to function, so obviously, as a phallic symbol) is presented as an erotic instrument which can produce pain and pleasure for its willing victim. As commanded Fabio sensuously screams "I deserve it. [...] I'm so bad. [...] I'm bad. I'm wicked. I deserve it. Destroy me".

In one simple scene Fabio, like Luci, acts as all women should. He demonstrates how female desire is violent and yet submissive and conveys the notion that the male sexual act is not only pleasurable but so powerful that it can destroy

women. The drill has the potential to kill him in the same way that male power and privilege, provided by the phallus, has the potential to metaphorically kill women's sense of self and their desire. If the sadistic killer so chooses Fabio may be saved and, as a result, be capable of meeting with another "sweetie" in a café to eat "greasy foods". However, it is possible that the killer may decide to inhibit Fabio's actions and deny him the opportunity to enjoy an encounter with another lover in the same way that Luci's husband denies her the choice to find sexual satisfaction with anyone other than himself.

Nevertheless, Fabio's situation differs from that of Luci because, ultimately Fabio is only acting. He is not really forced to submit to the will of a phallically empowered man because the scene is not real. If the scene were real, however, Fabio, would have both the choice and opportunity to alter the situation because he has the power of the phallus. Because, despite his act, he possesses male sexual organs he would be able to use the privilege they afford him to leave the scene of the crime if he so chooses. If he decided to stay he would still be able to limit the effects and power of the other male and force him (the killer) to compromise himself and accept the fact that Fabio may have another lover.

The existence of another lover in Fabio's "unreal" life is also an indication of the assumptions Almodovar has about women. As he insinuates through his depiction of Sexi, Almodovar implies that women feel the need to engage in sexual activity with more than one partner. However, as Sexi's fate demonstrates, such a desire in a woman must be curtailed.

Male to Female Transsexuality.

Through the character of Tina in *The Law of Desire* Almodovar insinuates that, whereas it is acceptable for the male to female transvestite to act as, and perform the function of, a woman, it is not acceptable for him to become a biological woman because, at the point at which he becomes a fully, biologically female, he relinquishes the power of the phallus and is demoted to the position of all women.

Renata Salecl attempts to explain why male to female transsexuals make the decision to become female. She states that:

Such a desperate attempt to identify with women arises in the transsexual's demand for a sex change. [...] A transsexual man tries to be more feminine than a woman, which is why he tries to embody all women (197).

Here Salecl correctly implies that whilst anatomically the male transsexual possess male organs he has the ability to "demand" a sex change. Thus, she indicates, again, that men are presented with the choice to make such decisions about their gender identification and their bodies. However, contradictory to Salecl's claims that the male to female transsexual attempts to be "more" feminine than women, Almodovar implies that a male to female transsexuals are simply women who can never truly achieve femininity because, in relinquishes male organs and male power, he/she also relinquishes her ability to be feminine.

Almodovar implies that, unlike the male to female transvestite who has the appropriate organs which enable him (her), the male to female transsexual, in

allowing his male sexual organs to be disfigured or removed, he proves that he has succumbed to the lure of castration which all “real” or “normal” men fear and avoid at all costs. He becomes a victim who, in identifying so strongly with women, has allowed women to act upon their threat to overpower him by removing his masculinity. At the point where he acquires female genitalia he becomes female and, as “she”, stands as an example to all men that the power of the phallus can be severed or removed easily. “She” foregoes the right to behave in a masculine fashion if “she” so chooses and, thus, “she” must be marginalized and oppressed in order to allay the threat she poses as both a representation of the castrated male and as a woman. In addition to relinquishing her ability and right to embody femininity, “she” loses her ability to define femininity because she no longer possesses a penis or the power of the phallus. She becomes part of the group “species woman” because she is now representative of the female lack. Thus is the fate of Tina; the one transsexual represented in all of Almodovar’s cinema.¹¹

As the confession scene clearly demonstrates, the consequence of Tina’s decision to become a biological woman results in her demotion to the position of “woman”. In Almodovar’s world she would have enjoyed more social privilege and maintained a superior position in society as a homosexual male than she does as a heterosexual female. This illustrates, once again, that even though Almodovar has attempted to release male homosexuals from their marginalized position, he does not view women as worthy to be liberated from their silenced and oppressive position.

The loss of her male privilege, and the resulting social and sexual oppression

she faces as a woman, lead Tina to repress her desire for male love objects and turn attention to the more attainable goal of other women. She attempts a lesbian relationship with Ada's mother in the hope that she will be viewed and treated as an equal by her social equal. However, in the same way as Luci, Tina is mistreated by her lover. Ada's mother (Bibi Anderson) refuses to acknowledge her lower status as a female and, consequently, abandons both Tina and Ada in search for a more fulfilling relationship with a man.

Tina's turn towards lesbianism and her abandoned state place her in an even more vulnerable and marginalized position. The fact that she is a female identified man in a woman's body who cannot successfully maintain a relationship with man nor woman implies that she is a failure whose only means of success lies in the hands of her brother Pablo (Eusebio Poncela).

Tina depends on Pablo for both economic and emotional support. It is he who she turns to in an emotional crisis and it he who she relies upon to give her work. It is he who she visits after hearing the devastating news that Ada's mother, her lover, is not returning to Madrid. It is also Pablo that provides financial aid to both Tina and Ada by giving Tina the role in his stage play. In the play she performs the role of an abandoned lover who, much like herself, is disconnected from the world. On the stage, as a character, she has an opportunity to voice the very feelings that in real life she has no outlet for and, as her discussion on the telephone in the play demonstrate, she can control her lover. With Ada's mother, her real life lover, she has no opportunity to express her emotions. Almodovar emphasizes this most clearly by juxtaposing scenes

from the play with Tina's real life lover's surprise arrival. Whereas the vision of Ada's mother forces Tina to "overact, according to Pablo, it is obvious that she is simply portraying that which she truly feels. However, off stage, she is incapable of exhibiting such emotion for any productive means.

Pablo has provided Tina with a voice, yet, at the same time, this voice is false and directed. He has put the words into her mouth and he commands her in the same way that "Pedro" commands Fabio in the pornographic scene in *Labyrinth*. In addition, she must ultimately sacrifice a part of her "self" in return for the pretense of freedom that Pablo provides for her.

It is after a display of selfishness that he informs Tina that Pablo intends to base his next work upon her life story. In the bathroom of the restaurant, where he has retreated to snort cocaine and she has followed claiming "you know I'm a junkie too" he tells her. Primarily she objects to his assumptions and implies that, even though he has already created a situation in which she is forced to express her emotion for the consumption of a theater audience, her history and her sense of self are all that she has left. However, after time she agrees to become the subject matter for his new film and revels in the idea of playing the lead herself.

It is not until after Tina accepts Pablo's desire to re-write her history, again, in more detail, for public consumption, that she decides to tell him the truth about the past. In filling in the gaps she leaves herself even more vulnerable. As she confesses to Pablo, yet again in a hospital ward, she provides him with information about motivations for her actions which could potentially be used to enhance the fictional

character that he is writing about. As Laura P., Tina becomes a fictional character that cannot be traced in the real world. Her “life” and “self” takes on a new form as she and her history becomes a myth used to confuse the police and add intrigue to the plot and now she provides her brother, a writer, with new ways to remove her of her identity. At no point does Pablo acknowledge that perhaps Tina’s confession is for he, alone, to hear and one can assume that, if it had not been for Juan’s death, he would continue to use the information he has about his sister as material. It is only because he blames himself and his typewriter for Juan’s demise (he has used the typewriter as a tool to force Juan to act as he desires him to and the love letters which he has written cause Antonio’s jealousy) that he decides to write no more.

Tina confesses to Pablo because she has no one else who will listen to her. She has attempted to find solace through religion and to some extent she has not abandoned her faith in the traditional institution of the catholic church. However, when she is rejected by the paedophiliac catholic priest who abused her as a boy and took away her innocence, she can no longer place as much hope in her religious beliefs. She cannot attempt to find fulfilment through alternate sexual relationship because, as her relationship with Ada’s mother proves, as does the relationship between Luci and Bom, the performance of lesbian sexual acts is not a viable method of self satisfaction.

Tina’s confession revives her strength and enables her to pursue a normal heterosexual relationship with a man. However, like all other female relationships, this one is also doomed to fail. Tina, who is not and can never be a real woman

because she does not succeed in fitting in to the restrictive category of femininity that she has always strived to fit in to, cannot find fulfilment through her relationship with a man because women never do.

Male Homosexuality.

Pablo continues to succeed in a traditional, patriarchal world, despite his homosexuality, because he has not relinquished his male genitalia. His relationships appear to be more egalitarian and he is not controlled by the restrictive dichotomies of dominance and submission which curtail all lesbian relationships depicted in Almodovar's films.

That is not to say that, in *The Law of Desire*, certain characters do not appear to behave in a predominantly passive manner whilst others appear to perform a more dominant role. However, the male characters in this film differs from those female characters in Almodovar's first two films in the sense that those male characters who are submissive choose to be so and can, at any point in the film, alter their position. They are not controlled by the status or the social construction of expectations about their gender roles. Despite the extreme and obsessive behavior of both Pablo and Antonio (Antonio Banderas) the male homosexual is viewed as flawed but not as ridiculous or comic. The love that Pablo and Antonio feel and inspire is presented sympathetically. Both men are controlled by emotions and a law of desire that is beyond their control.

In his relationship with Juan (Miguel Molina) Pablo attempts to take control. His age, fame, and notoriety have provided him with a sense of superiority and a need to dominate others. However, despite his desire to force Juan to behave in the way he desires and to love him as he loves Juan, he is able to accept that his relationship is one of equality and that he has no right to dominate or control the actions or emotions

of his partner.¹²

After the premiere of his film Pablo leaves Juan and returns to his own apartment. Even though he is disturbed by Juan's decision to participate in a heterosexual encounter with a random woman he does not feel the need to restrict Juan's movements in the same way as Bom restricts Luci's. Juan refuses to relinquish his own power and Pablo refuses to ask him to. Nevertheless, despite the liberal appearance of the relationship and Pablo's willingness to allow Juan to participate in heterosexual relations Pablo is incapable of severing the bonds of love and desire that tie him to Juan. Thus, when Juan leaves, Pablo does not become hysterical. Rather, his narcissism takes him over and inspires him to attempt to gain control over the relationship by writing a love letter from Juan to himself which he requires Juan to sign.

Although Pablo's lack of control is similar to the very lack that destroys the relationship between Bom and Luci, Pablo is aware of a solution which will recreate the bond between he and Juan. He knows that, as Renata Salecl claims, "there is no love outside speech: nonspeaking beings do not love" (190), and thus is prompted to create the only form of verbal communication between him and Juan that is possible. The effect of the letter and its ability to inspire love is not only proven when Juan makes the decision to oblige his lover by signing and returning the note, thus demonstrating to the spectator that he is truly in love with Pablo, but also through the way in which Almodovar presents a voice over of both Pablo and Juan reading the letter out loud. The communication between them, which at first appears to be passive

and non-spoken, is put into words. As a result, the viewer is led to believe that, if it were not for Antonio's fatal intervention, Pablo and Juan would eventually realize their love for one another and live happily ever after.

The letter details activities similar to those shared by Pablo and Juan when they were together. Pablo is aware that, by evoking the same memories in Juan's mind that he has in his own, he can establish a mental link or connection with his lover which can be enjoyed despite the distance separating the two. When Juan signs the letter and returns it, an act which Pablo's typewriter is unable to do, he demonstrates his willingness to participate in this creation of a mental or psychic love which raises both men onto a higher plane above carnal pleasure and desire.¹³

Juan's signature is a symbols of the higher love shared between the men. Unlike the relationships of Luci and Bom, Tina and Ada's mother, the relationship of Pablo and Juan is based upon compromise, equality, and love. When Juan dies this mental connection is severed and, rather than moving forward and looking for another comparable relationship as we can assume Bom does (perhaps with Pepi), Pablo feels that he cannot continue his life as it was. He abandons the typewriter which, despite its powers as a tool to create fiction, cannot create the illusion of Juan's signed name and cannot bring Juan back to life. The typewriter is a symbol of Pablo's lack of power of the universe and an indication, that despite their higher love, certain mortal rules apply to all men and women.

It is significant that at the point at which Pablo's lack of power- his ability to play God and control the laws of desire only in a limited and fictional sense whilst

writing for the big screen- is most clearly illustrated when Tina asks him to hear her confession. Only when he is in a vulnerable, amnesiac state, when he is doubtful of his own sense of self, is she able to ask him to listen to her social and sexual “sins”. At all other times in the film Pablo is so incessantly consumed by his own needs and desires that he cannot tolerate those of others. Ironically, it is Antonio, the man who killed his lover, that restores Pablo to his original state of mind and reminds him that blind faith and acceptance of oneself and one’s lover is necessary if one is to establish a mental connection with one’s lover and that there is nothing wrong in self absorption if one is a man.

Tina, unlike her brother, can never enjoy the love that he brother experiences because she does not have the means nor the desire to deny others. She feels responsible for Ada and, thus, assumes a motherly role for the child. She also feels the need to observe the religious rituals that she was exposed to as a child and which have brought her many memories, in particular concerning her sexual relationship with a priest. In contrast, Pablo has only himself to think of if he so chooses. In the final scene between him and Antonio he risks losing nothing because, as a man, he is not responsible for his actions (surely, if necessary, Almodovar could think of some way to blame Pablo’s mother for his behavior!). His life is worthless if he does not fulfill his own desires.

It is, however, this vain and narcissistic aspect of his personality that cause him to reject Antonio primarily. At first Antonio chooses to act as a submissive lover who will provide Pablo with everything he has always wanted. After rehearsing Pablo’s

televised interview by heart, and learning what Pablo most desires in a lover, Antonio makes his move. However, despite his submissive behavior Antonio does not intend to remain passive. He desires to possess Pablo and makes a conscious decision whether to use means of submission or means of domination and power in order to attain his aim.

Whereas, at first, Pablo rejects Antonio he later acquiesces to Antonio's wishes, and agrees to be taken hostage at the risk of his life.¹⁴ It appears that during the scene prior to Antonio's suicide in Tina's apartment Pablo has desired to dominate his lovers. However, as the final love scene indicates he ultimately desires that Antonio take control. It is through a balance of both dominance and submission in which each partner is able to show elements of both and make conscious decisions to take the burden of being either the top or the bottom (to put it in sado-masochistic terms) that creates a bond of true and fulfilling love. When performing the submissive feminine role each man demonstrates a lack but, as Salecl identifies, "the enchantment of love is how the subject deals, on the one hand, with his or her lack, and on the other hand, with the lack in the loved one". Pablo and Antonio understand and acknowledge that they are both lacking (in their abilities to live up to the expectations of their lovers not of the phallus) and it is this acknowledgment which enables them to compensate for their failings and enjoy the more positive aspects of one

In consummating their love for one another Pablo and Antonio demonstrate that men, despite their supposedly "perverse" desires, are capable of achieving a love which homosexual women can only dream of. This leads one to question why, in

Almodovar's films, men are the only human beings who can achieve love. Men alone have the knowledge and understanding that enables them to balance the dominant and submissive aspects of their personalities. In addition, men, because they do not suffer from any social lack of power or sexual lack of the penis, are able to abandon social constraints and define themselves solely through their sexuality.

Almodovar's representations of male homosexuality, which are more frequent than his representations of lesbianism, are slightly more palatable for heterosexual and homosexual spectators alike, not simply because men can achieve true love or that their "perversion" is less perverse than that of lesbian women (such as Luci and Bom) but because the only people who attempt to undermine male homosexuality are heterosexual women who are themselves ridiculed. As I have discussed, heterosexual women are viewed as the lowest members of the "species woman" and, as a result, the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of such women are presented as inadequate and irrelevant.

The position of women as inferior critic is made most evident in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* during the scene in which the "old queen" Corazo, having been aroused by the "general erections" next door, participates in heterosexual sex with his bearded wife. Corazo's homosexual desires are made apparent when his wife questions, in a high pitched tone of voice, his depressive state. Whilst she speaks the spectator becomes more and more aware of her husband's true sexuality even though she refuses to admit her suspicions of his gayness. She states:

There's nothing worse than your silence. Don't you realize it drives me

crazy. I start thinking awful things about you. For example- like about you're drinking. I know you're nice smart, and sensitive- people like you a lot. But I noticed you started drinking when your friend Oscar came out of the closet and got himself a boyfriend. That's what he wanted to do. You claim you're so liberal so how can you condemn gays? People can do what they want with their bodies. But he was your best friend and you couldn't forgive him. As if you were jealous- to get even- you married me and started drinking. Brave revenge! [...] I know I'm possessive and jealous but what can I do? [...] We haven't slept together for forty days and forty nights- I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof.

The Bearded Woman is unaware of her husband's motivations even though they are relatively obvious. Her allusion to Tennessee Williams evokes the image of Brick, a homosexual man in denial, and Maggie, his wife who is aware of his homosexuality but tries to combat it by attempting to arouse him sexually, and thus the Bearded Woman implies that, on some level, she is aware of her husband's infidelity and sexuality. However, on a more conscious level she refuses to accept that perhaps he is homosexual and thus she allows herself to be deluded into thinking that he is homophobic.

Her reference to the bible indicates that she, like many heterosexual women, also buys into the institution of religion. She accepts that she must fast but, at the same time, she wishes to perform the duties of a proper wife. Through her character Almodovar indicates that women should be content with sacrificing their own desires

for their husbands, for waiting until their men are ready to perform the sexual act, and for “serving” him as an obedient wife. However, at the same time, he does not imply that the husband who never performs his duties is at fault. Rather, despite the fact that it is her husband that is devious and untrustworthy, it is the Bearded Woman that is ridiculed and undermined for her hysterical behavior and demanding screeches.

In making the woman, rather than the man, appear to be the comic fool in this scene Almodovar clearly displayed his ever so prominent sexual/gender politics. She shaves in order to remove all the “unnatural” aspects of the masculine which she exhibits and to make herself more attractive to her husband but, as we know, her actions only serve to make her more unattractive to a man who appreciates a more masculine appearance in his lovers. Whilst she thinks she has aroused him by “fixing herself up” we are aware that it is the view he sees through his binoculars that has given him an erection.

The scene serves to contradict Julian Paul Smith’s view that it is women who deceive and men who are deceived in *Pepi*. As the Corazo does not wish to admit his gayness and he chooses a marriage which not only serves perfectly to disguise his homosexuality but provides him with enough wealth to enable him to continue his homosexual activities in secret and a bearded wife who serves as a substitute for the men he really desires.

Pepi, Luci, and Bom do not possess the privilege of disguising their true sexualities nor of satisfying themselves sexually by fooling a member of the opposite sex. One can only surmise that this is the case because, as women, they do not have

the power nor the superior knowledge, skill, or attributes to fool any man. In contrast, Corazo deceives his wife with ease. She is unaware of his voyeuristic intentions and, whilst he views the “General Erections” and Luci being forced to perform fellatio upon the winner through his binoculars, and thus she willingly, if not desperately, participates in intercourse with him.

Unlike his wife who desires physical contact and penetration, The Corazo is content with the more passive act of “watching” men and, in comparison to the “extreme perversions” acted out by the lesbians characters in this film, his “perversion” appears to be harmless . Perhaps this is because, as Kaplan indicates, voyeurism is a typically masculine perversion and throughout Almodovar’s work the actions of men are portrayed as more plausible and less harmful than those of women.¹⁵

The sex scene between husband and wife appears to be, superficially at least, amusing and as no one is aware of The “old queen”’s voyeuristic intentions, except those of us who share in the enjoyment of voyeuristic gazing and do not become a victim of it, the significance of violating the space of another individual is presented as a harmless act. However, as I have discussed, the voyeuristic gaze, as it affects Pepi and Charo to name a few, is not as passive and un-intruding.

In presenting male homosexual perversions, such as voyeurism, as “harmless” in contrast to the more destructive perversions favored by lesbians Almodovar insinuates that male homosexuality is, due to its passive nature, less threatening to the social/straight order than female homosexuality. Whereas the former group does not

allow its victims to be aware of its activity, the latter group makes its actions conscious to everyone and thus threaten the male sense of pride and ultimate power.

In contrast to Corazo, who is able to “pass” as heterosexual but is really homosexual, Pepi and Bom are unable to succeed in either Almodovar’s homosexualized world or heterosexual society. Towards the end of the film they return to Bom’s house in order to perform a task of cooking which, traditionally, has been viewed as most feminine. The fact that they retreat to perform a typically feminine role is significant as it implies that they have no other option but to accept their powerless, feminine state. Whereas, prior to Luci’s betrayal, they had the potential to dominate other women, the re-emergence and power of Luci’s husband denies them their potential power. If lesbianism is based upon a relationship between dominance and submission, but Pepi and Bom no longer have the ability to dominate, then what choices are they left with? Practically as few as Tina and the Bearded Lady, neither of whom can survive without a man despite their dislike of the way they are treated by men.

Male Heterosexuality.

Within the three films discussed thus far Almodovar makes plain the idea that a woman without a man is no real woman at all. Women have no opportunity to replace either men or male structures and institutions with a female alternative. In contrast to his representations of female heterosexuality and homosexuality, however, Almodovar's depictions of male sexuality in general tends to imply that men, unlike women, are able to maintain alternate sexualities and lifestyles without becoming victims to normative heterosexual codes of behavior. Whereas all female characters must either refuse to acknowledge their sexual needs or accept that the fulfillment of such needs depends entirely upon the actions of a man the male characters have no need to repress their desires. Whether or not men choose to abide by the conservative rules of heterosexuality or to experiment with other more "deviant" sexual acts their behavior and actions are unquestioned.

All men, despite their sexuality or behavior, end up in relationships in which they are happy. They do not suffer from the pains of unrequited love, they are not subject to social persecution because of their object choice, they do not struggle to attain sexual satisfaction, and they are not viewed as "deviants" who must be controlled or "cured". Men survive in Almodovar's world because it is a world designed purely for men. As a result, as their behavior is construed and presented as "normal", male attributes and actions are not analyzed in the same way as those of women.

One issue which must be considered when attempting to answer the question

of why Almodovar fails to criticize the behavior of men is the issue of class. As a result of the elevated position enjoyed by men because of their social privileges and rights, men have always been able to gain access to monetary wealth more easily than women. The jobs they can attain, the salaries they receive, and the social status they gain as a result of their work often serves to preserve the pro-male balance of power and elevate their class status. The higher the class status of his male characters the more concessions Almodovar seems to make for their behavior.

For example, Pablo, a wealthy man who gains fame because of the success of his films and plays, is a member of an artistic community in which there are very few rules imposed. Drug use and poly-amorous activities are somewhat expected of a man in his position. Thus, he lives a life free of social restraint, more so than the common man, and it is not until he is suspected of committing a crime that cannot be ignored that he becomes subject to the laws of the country. At no other point in the film is he condemned for his illegal activities or his “perversions”. Whereas the policemen in *The Law of Desire* comment upon Tina’s sexuality and gender choice, one criticizing her for being perverse and the other viewing her as a sexual object, neither men comment on the fact that their main suspect for the murder of Juan happens to be a gay man. At no point does Pablo suffer prejudice for his object choices nor does he have to defend or explain his position, unlike Tina, who must physically defend herself against the youngest police man.

Almodovar presents Pablo’s life as being easier than that of Tina and he also makes concessions for Pablo in the sense that Pablo is not undermined or critiqued for

being hysterical (with regards to his love for Juan) or poly-amorous. This is because, as a man, Pablo has the right to behave as he chooses. If his behavior happens to challenge traditional gender roles, as he acts like a woman, he is simply presented as being eccentric. His gender and his class provide him with excuses for his actions, especially when such actions contradicts Almodovar's own assumptions and insinuations about gender dichotomies.

Like Pablo, Riza is also not governed by certain social rules because he is a member of the upper classes. Riza, a royal figure, is placed in the same media limelight as Pablo the director and, similarly, he becomes a successful figure in the gay community. Riza's creative abilities- his ability to sing- results in his fame. He become the lead singer to a popular band in the not-so underground community of Madrid. Despite such recognition Riza decides to give up his celebrity status in order to maintain his relationship with Sexi and avoid the ever looming threat of violence posed by the Teheranian terrorists. This act is not, however, a sacrifice for Riza because his return to heterosexuality and his relationship with Sexi enable him to return to Teheran and assume the even more elevated and popular position of King. His disavowal of homosexuality is overlooked because a) the film is a critique of Freud, and b) the benefits of Riza's conversion outweigh the disadvantages.

Sexi is the one who must makes the sacrifice for Riza. She must leave her homeland and family and assume the position of a faithful, submissive wife. She is exempt from the benefits of being a member of the upper classes and the freedom that wealth and fame can provide because, as a woman, she is constrained by the men to

whom she is related. Sexi compromises her position because she has to. Riza and Pablo compromise their positions (the former by agreeing to Antonio's demands and the latter through his return to heterosexuality) because, as economically wealthy men, they are subject to nothing and no one. They are not even constrained by economics or by the law and, therefore, they can continue to live in any way they choose. They can achieve all that they desire no matter what they do.

Almodovar can justify the fact that Pablo and Riza compromise in life, not only by insinuating that they do so out of choice, but by implying that different social codes apply to different social classes. Riza abandons his old lifestyle and is presented as "cured" in the same way as Luci and Sexi but the implication of his return to heterosexuality is not viewed as a failure in the same way that Luci's return to her husband or Sexi's return to monogamy. The women are presented as being restored to normality whilst, at the same time, they are criticized for failing to find an outlet of expression through their alternate sexual activities even though they have little choice but to abandon such alternate sexualities. In contrast, Riza's sudden "change" in sexuality and method of sexual expression is viewed as no less or no more "normal" than his previous method. If his heterosexuality appears to be regressive out it can be explained by the fact that "normative" rules do not apply.

Almodovar's assumption that upper class men can enjoy even more freedoms than women because of their status as well as their gender indicates that Almodovar does not feel the need to analyze class structures any more than gender binaries. His work truly differs from that of the post-Franconian artists because it does not criticize

traditional social structures in any way. Thus, it is not surprising that, when Almodovar focuses upon male heterosexuality he does not undermine it. All gender and class structures are predicated upon the assumptions and criteria of a normative, male, heterosexual ideology. In an attempt to uphold many aspects of that ideology, in particular with reference to women, and go against the highly politicized and critical works of many of his contemporaries, Almodovar literally upholds the institution of heterosexuality.

Although gay men are the only human being who can achieve the highest form of love and, as a result, have the potential to create a utopian society if only it were not for the potential infection caused by the existence of meddling women, Almodovar insinuates that straight men can still serve a purpose and achieve self satisfaction.

Even though he does not condemn men for being heterosexual Almodovar does imply that straight men are bound by certain constraints which do not apply to homosexual men. Unless celibate, the heterosexual man must develop relationships with women. In doing so he denies himself the opportunity to create a higher spiritual bond with his lover who, because of the inferiority of her gender, will never be able to fully understand or mentally connect with him. In addition, the heterosexual couple's relationship will always be based upon traditional gender binaries within which the woman will serve the submissive role and the man will serve the dominant role. The maintenance of this dichotomy limits freedom of choice or compromise within a relationship and thus the man is practically forced into the aggressive role which, in a homosexual relationship, he would not have to play unless he chose to do so.

However, despite these disadvantages a heterosexual man still maintain control over another and, even though he must be responsible for his wife or lover, he is validated by her inferiority and continuously obvious lack of the phallus.

Alternatively, if he so chooses, he can abandon heterosexuality and search for a more egalitarian relationship with another man. Either way the heterosexual man has options. This is made evident in *Labyrinth* with the character of the detective, whom I have already discussed, and in *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* with the Bearded Lady's husband. However, the power which a heterosexual man possesses is illustrated most successfully in Almodovar's ninth film *High Heels*.

The character of Eduardo (Miguel Bose) not only demonstrates the power that heterosexual men have over women but epitomizes the plural nature of masculinity. Throughout the course of the film Eduardo plays the role of three other characters; the drag-queen Femme Lethal, the policeman Hugo, and Judge Dominguez. Whilst disguised in each of his various personas he comes into contact with Rebeca who is fooled into believing that all three men exist separately.

Primarily she meets Femme Lethal, the drag-queen to whom she is attracted because of his similarity to the mother that abandoned her. Almodovar implies that most nights Rebeca enters the world of transvestites and homosexuals to catch a glimpse of her "mother figure" lip-synching the tunes of her childhood. As a result Lethal and Rebeca develop a relationship which turns sexual upon the night when Rebeca's real mother enters the scene.

Lethal claims that he wants to be more than a mother to Rebeca and, as her

own mother is present in another room, it becomes acceptable for her to abandon the illusion of Lethal as a maternal figure and alter the status of their relationship.

Primarily, however, Rebeca is resistant to Lethal's sexual advances. As he attempts to engage her in the sexual act she struggles and screams "stop it". However, her attempts at resistance become futile at the point at which she raises herself on the beam but cannot descend to escape because she is wearing "high heels". Lethal takes advantage of this predicament (of the weakness that result in her acceptance of her female costume and her desire to appear "feminine") and physically imposes his head between her legs. In the same way that he violates her Almodovar directs the camera to violate her. The lens focuses upon her bare buttocks and intrudes upon her body and sexual organs in the same way that it invades Pepi's and Charo's bodies. Like the other female victims portrayed in Almodovar's cinema, Rebeca is raped twice, once by Lethal and once by the camera.

However, in fitting with Freud's notion that all women are sexually repressed and actually desire to be violated, Rebeca finally acquiesces to Lethal and, after telling him that she has "fasted for four months" and coming to the point of orgasm she allows him to penetrate her with his penis. The act results in her becoming pregnant and, due to her maternal instincts, prevents her from denying Eduardo later access to her despite his deception.

As Hugo and as Judge Dominguez, Eduardo wields a different power over Rebeca which, although it is non-sexual, is as inhibiting and violating as the rape. As the scenes between Rebeca and the Judge in his office demonstrate, he is always in

control. He has the institution of the law to support him and force her, as well as her mother and Isabel (Miriam Díaz Aroca), to confess upon demand. His interrogation of all three women together is mild in comparison to the interrogation that Rebeca receives when she is alone with him after her arrest. Whilst she is seated in a chair he seats himself upon the desk. A position which enable him to loom over her and intimidate her whilst he shouts his accusations. She is powerless to deny such accusations because, as a result of the mobility allowed him due to the plurality of masculinity and his various masculine disguises, he has gained information and knowledge about her of which she is unaware. When she claims that she has been totally faithful to her husband he contradicts her by pointing to the incident at the Villarosa- an incident that she does not suspect him to have the knowledge of.

Despite his sexual and lawful power of Rebeca it is Eduardo's ability to influence her, when playing the role of himself, that epitomizes of the heterosexual male's power of women. Because he is the father of her child Rebeca feels obliged to be with him on the evening when she discovers his multiple personas rather than with her mother. Despite her disgust at his deception she cannot deny that he has sired her baby and that, as a result, he will continue to have a hold over her in the similar way to Lethal, Hugo, and the Judge. She knows he can satisfy her sexually and she knows that he has information that could destroy her. However, it is he who claims that Rebeca has the privilege of knowledge. In stating that "with what you know you could wreck my life" he gives the impression that she possesses power and downplays the fact that, as the man, he is, in fact, in control. This provides Rebeca with a false sense of

security and enables her to believe that if she marries Eduardo it is she, not he, who has made that choice.

Rebeca's ultimate acceptance of Eduardo validates both him as a male and as a father and alleviates him of any guilt he may feel for his deception. Almodovar insinuates that she can love all the plural aspects of his personality, the parts of Lethal, Hugo, and Dominguez which are inherently part of him. However, one must question if this is indeed the case. Rebeca has little choice but to accept Eduardo and forgive him for his deceit because, if she does not, he may choose to expose her as a murderer. She must choose marriage rather than jail because she must think about her child. Thus, ultimately, the plot is resolved, the loose ends are tied, the heterosexual couple move on to enjoy a fulfilling relationship and the joys of a family, and Rebeca's maternal instincts force her to believe that this is the "dream" life that she desires. Lethal is rewarded for his prior actions (all of which were well intended) and Rebeca's actions are repressed. The film ends with her being silenced and submissive as all women should be, according to Almodovar.

Conclusion.

Almodovar's representations of the Madrid's sub-culture, the Movida, and its alternative lifestyles have entertained audiences on numerous continents. They have provided many, who are bound by social constraints and the duties of a routine lifestyle, with a mode of escapism and an alternative way to view and live life. Critics argue that the appeal of Almodovar's work is the result of his ability to appear radical and yet apolitical. His representations of both sexual and social "perversions", (which, according to Kaplan, are of most interest to those of us who are, ourselves, perverse) have been described as original and challenging simply because of the fragmented manner in which they are presented.¹⁷ He pushes boundaries, questions heterosexual normativity, and identifies both the pleasure and pain of rebellious sexual behavior.

As Kathleen Vernon argues, Almodovar's generation, caught up in "[...] a somewhat frenzied search for appropriate modes of expression"(5), attempted to distance themselves from their past and find a sense of self which neither Franco nor the anti-Francoist movement could provide for them. Thus, as others had done in the United States and the rest of Europe, Almodovar's generation discovered the freedoms offered by the postmodern movement. They were no longer bound by absolutes. They became part of a new, youth sub-culture which, itself, developed a new form of consciousness that enabled them to abandon all social expectations which had previously constrained their movements, ideas, and desires. They were free to experiment with new forms of expression and alternate lifestyles.

Out of Almodovar's own experimentation comes a new type of Spanish film

which both “constitute[s] a chronicle of the Movida as well as an almost utopian rendering of Madrid as *locus amoenus*, a space of infinite possibilities” (Vernon, 9) and illustrates the division between reality and art whilst at the same time indicating that the line dividing reality and imagination is blurred. In a Brechtian manner, Almodovar constantly evokes images that remind the spectator of the fictionality of his work. The image of the typewriter, which serves the specific purpose of demonstrating the creation of an illusion in both *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* and *The Law of Desire* (in *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* Toni types whilst discussing the party with Bom and we are led to assume that he is “creating” the script for the theatrical event, the “general erections”, which are to occur later (in *The Law of Desire* Pablo types both letters to Juan and scripts which create the illusion that love and life are as he desires them to be), also symbolizes the creative process that Almodovar embarks upon in an attempt to write his scripts. Its presence on screen constantly forces the viewer to acknowledge that Almodovar’s scripts, like Pablo’s writings, are only a reflection of the author’s perception of reality. They are not reality in themselves as they are limited by the author’s own limitations; his repressions, his obsessions, and his confessions.

Almodovar’s use of the typewriter image can be described as typically postmodern as it demonstrates that he is conscious of the limitations of artistic representations and of all modes of expression. Despite the pluralities of his texts, the alternatives and the endless possibilities, he realizes that, at a certain point, both language and image become insufficient means of communication and that he can

never communicate any absolute truth.

Like the images of the typewriter, the images of the camera serve to demonstrate the ways in which the filmic medium is lacking. Again, the presence of film cameras, photographic cameras, and photographs, are all indicative of Almodovar's consciousness. However, rather than being symbolic of the creative process they are representative of the reflective process and a reminder of the limitations of the specific medium which is being used to present a version of reality.

The camera can only encompass fragments of the whole. Much like the human eye, the camera is limited to viewing objects as three dimensional. Despite the versatility of the wide angle lens and of filming techniques such as panning and zooming, the camera lens cannot record all the images that surround it. It is limited to a certain angle, perspective, range, and gaze. Thus, there are always images that it obscures, omits, and ignores. Similarly, Almodovar's choice of focus and subject matter is restricted by his own personal perspective and gaze. He cannot write about or record what he does not see. He is incapable of stepping outside himself or his environment and producing an objective representation of his experiences.

Thus, the very object that has been used to symbolize the power of the phallus and its ability to penetrate everything within its path, is ultimately presented as lacking in itself. As the presence of the director during Roxi's pornographic shoot in *Pepi, Luci, and Bom*, the television studio in *High Heels*, and in the opening scene of *The Law of Desire* demonstrates, the camera is simply a tool which, like the actors, must be ordered to perform, modified, edited, and restrained in order to create the desired

image. Its limitations are made obvious as Rebeca's photographs of her husband's life minus the image of her husband detail. The camera cannot lie, it cannot produce images that do not exist, and it does not possess magical or mystical properties. Like a mirror, the camera lens can only "reflect" reality.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as the photograph of Sadec in drag demonstrates, the camera still has the power to disguise each image and fool the spectator. The images recorded and projected do not appear to be rehearsed but new and real. Therefore, they confuse the spectator's sense of reality and fiction.

Throughout his work Almodovar attempts to play with and confuse his audiences as, whilst forcing them to be conscious that they are viewing and experiencing and artistic creation, he blurs the line between reality and fiction within his fiction. The opening scene of *The Law of Desire*, again, serves as a good example which illustrates this point. When the film opens the spectator is unaware that the scene which unfolds is not actually part of the plot or of the film's content but a filmed scene within the film. The man being ordered to masturbate on the bed does not reappear throughout the course of the film nor are we made aware of the real purpose of filming his actions. The spectators are left to assume that the scene, which is possibly taken from one of Pablo's films, simply serves to set the tone for the rest of the film. As a result they will expect that the themes of voyeurism and sexually "perversity" presented in this first scene will be continued throughout *The Law of Desire*.

Ultimately, however, when such expectations are thwarted and the spectators realize that the film does not portray the male sexual act as pornographic but as a

means to attain love and fulfill desire they are forced to re-evaluate their assumptions. This process of re-evaluation, which primarily occurs when the audience realizes that the first scene is a fiction within a fiction and later when the plot and theme of the film takes an unexpected twist, serves to alienate the spectators further.

The need to distance oneself from the text and think about one's assumptions creates a new form of consciousness. This distance, however, has already been created in a sense by the camera itself. As well as recording images the camera creates a barrier between the spectator and images. This barrier enables the audience to perform voyeuristic tasks without feeling perverse but it also removes the audience from the action to such an extent that the viewing of the film can never produce as much pleasure or pain as reality can.

Despite this, however, as part of the social superstructure, film does have the potential to affect and influence society and culture in the same way that society and culture affect and influence film. The assumptions of every film-maker have a profound affect upon the making of every film. If such assumptions reaffirm the marginalization or oppression of certain people or groups then the direct result of such film will promote the continuance of such marginalization or oppression. In this respect film does have the power to cause "real" pleasure and pain because its message affects reality. The medium of film, in itself, possesses the possibility to influence either the change or the maintenance of social institutions, ideologies, and structures.

The image of femininity, the third and final image that I wish to discuss, is

prevalent and recurrent throughout Almodovar's work and symbolizes, to some extent, Almodovar's motivations. On one hand, the desire to explore the female mind and body can be described as the inspiration that led Almodovar to begin the creative and the reflective processes of writing film-making. On the other hand, however, it seems that both the processes symbolized by the image of the typewriter and of the camera tend to produce a perception of femininity which, whilst appearing to be fresh and new, shares many similarities with traditional and stereotypical images of women.

Thus, despite his desire to present females and femininity from a feminist perspective, Almodovar's work has been criticized by feminist scholars because it is "a reflection of machismo". Because his assumptions about and depictions of women tend to be based upon the theories and writings of Freud, Nancy Chodorow's conclusions about Freud can also be extended and applied to Almodovar. Chodorow states that:

... Hegemonic within his portrayed diversity is an account of mature female desire and heterosexuality that renders them [women] inhibited at best; at worst female desire and sexuality are seen entirely through male eyes (, 5)

The women presented in Almodovar's work are always inhibited either by their sexual object choice or their inability to admit or achieve sexual satisfaction and fulfilment. Like Freud, Almodovar reaffirms the notion that there is an inherent difference between men and women and, as a result, creates a theoretically "scientific" framework which supports traditional gender binaries and posits the notion that women are:

[...] interchangeable and fixed entities, members of the species

“woman”, every member of which is predestined to “want” the same thing at the bottom and to want it consistently enough to justify being classified as one (Schafer, 10).

Almodovar’s “species woman” takes numerous forms: the sexually perverse lesbian or bi-sexual, the neurotic, and the non-woman, all of whom are subjected to the dominant will and power of men who constantly prove their male superiority. The notion of male superiority is based within traditionalist assumptions about the nature of the body; the difference or so-called “lack” of the female body diminishes women’s worth and “woman” becomes the lowest standard by which all men are measured.

As male characters are not identified as sexual beings, because their clothing is not indicative or a reminder of the male physical anatomy, they can be viewed as human beings rather than sexual entities. Hence, since Freud posited the notion that “men are more lucid, [and] rational ... than women” (Schafer, 9), men have been placed upon a more sophisticated moral high ground than women which has allowed them the power and perspective, because they are not defined or inhibited by their sexuality or gender, to define themselves. In turn they also are allowed the privilege to define and control others.

Even the homosexual man, who is marginalized by his sexual object choice and participation in alternate sexual acts, is allowed the privilege of interpreting, abusing, and inhibiting women. This is made most apparent when one considers how lesbians are more bound by those socio-sexual constraints than homosexual men and

the fact that, among homosexuals, a gender hierarchy has been established. As in Almodovar's cinema, lesbianism is defined as it is viewed by men. It is either eroticized for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer or constructed as "perverse" by more conservative male audiences. In contrast, as constructions of both sexuality and the perverse have historically been born out of patriarchal systems and ideologies, male sexualities, all be they alternate, do not always come under such scrutiny because they are always valued and judged by men who wish to continue to promote male moral and physical superiority.

Almodovar affirms such notions of male superiority, not only through his depictions of male and female homosexuality, but whilst presenting more traditional, heterosexual relationships and lifestyles. Throughout his work the male heterosexual has the power to control the behavior and the destiny of all his female counterparts. They become part of him, they are provided for by him, they are satisfied (supposedly) by him, and they are judged and interpreted by and in comparison to him. Whereas the female is defined in comparison and contrast to the more superior male, the male character in Almodovar's film is never defined at all. As with heterosexuality in mainstream film, the male characters in Almodovar's work are considered as the normative element by which all others are judged. Thus, rather than creating "a rich account of masculinity as it defines itself in relation to women [which provides] several potential openings toward more plural conceptions of gender and sexuality" (31)", as Chodorow does whilst attempting to rethink Freud, Almodovar (despite his occasional and obvious attempts to disavow and condemn Freud) simply reifies

traditionalist Freudian assumptions about the deviant nature of the female character and the female body.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Almodovar's depictions of the male to female transvestite are problematic in the sense that, because "she is a man", male to female transvestites are more successful in their portrayals of femininity than women are themselves. As men dictate what femininity is, in order to force women to be as they desires her to be, men also have more knowledge and understanding of how to behave in a feminine manner. When talking more specifically about temporary transvestite film Straayer illustrates the underlying assumptions behind transvestism (and to some extent transsexuality) and the problematic nature of presenting transvestite characters on film most eloquently when she states:

[...] temporary transvestite films used gender-coded clothing and disguise to carry/elicit generic gender-crossing gestures, behaviors and attitudes. In addition, although they ostensibly challenge gender constructions in that generic system, they rely on biology and sexual difference to realign gender and sex according to convention, and therefore limit their challenge severely (70).

One could almost assume that here Straayer is explicitly referring to Almodovar who, in attempting to challenge gender and sexual dichotomies and stereotypes, limits his own challenge because he cannot escape from Freudian assumptions and the male objectified/objectifying gaze.

His cameo appearances as a transvestite in both *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* and other

Girls on the Heap and *Labyrinth of Passion* imply that physically, as well as filmically, Almodovar is prone to assume that he has the right to define femininity, the feminine, the female, and the female body as well as the ability to be, or at least identify as, a woman.

Throughout his work Almodovar carefully disguises his misogynist tendencies and creates an illusion of female power which, like his films, is unreal. Whilst he appears to provide women with a voice and representation he interprets, inhibits, and limits their movement and expression. Almodovar's postmodern, pluralistic, non-absolutist world is for men only. It is a homosexual male utopia in which gay men succeed and prosper and all women are inferior and perverse. Contrary to this notion, however, I would argue that it is Almodovar himself, and not the women he re/presents, that is perverse. After all, it is Almodovar who, in claiming to be a feminist and in employing postmodern techniques of alienation and subversion, uses the most "perverse strategy ... to divert attention away from the underlying or latent motives, fantasies, wishes, and desires" (Kaplan, 10).¹⁹

Notes

1. For a more detailed examination upon presenting the “un-representable” see Lyotard’s article “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”
2. See *Breaking the Sequence*, edited by Friedman and Fuchs.
3. As I refuse to validate the authority of the christian religion I have made the decision to not capitalize the word “catholic” and the word “christianity”.
4. As the result of the distinction that Freud makes between male and female homosexuality women traditionally have been viewed as separate to men. In addition, those who base their assumptions upon psychoanalytic theories often define women by comparing them to men. As a result women, who are lacking in varying respects, are marginalized as a group and considered to be a of a different “species”.
5. “Rat Love”.
6. See Freud’s “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.”
7. Ibid.
8. “That’s called reciprocity”.
9. See Chodorow’s *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond*.
10. For a more extensive account of hysteria in women see Freud’s “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.”
11. The notion that there are certain groups, such as performers and artists, are excluded from society and a whole and are, therefore, “expected” to be eccentric, if not perverse, is explored further in Almodovar’s *The Patty Diphusa Stories and Other Writings*
12. Pablo does attempt to dominate the emotions and decisions of his sister.
13. I am referring to the definition of love as spiritual and sexual connection and unification that is prevalent in Modernist literature, particularly in D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.
14. For men life is not worth living unless desire can be expressed and love achieved. Thus, Pablo acquiesces to Antonio’s commands.

15. Following Kaplan's line of argument, flawed as it may be, it is possible to assume that male perversions are less harmful than female perversions because male stereotypes are less oppressive and limiting than female stereotypes. If one agrees that perversions result from the need to embrace gender stereotyping, then, this is a logical conclusion

16. For more information regarding the fragmented nature of Almodovar's films see Epps' "Figuring Hysteria: Disorder and Desire in Three Films of Pedro Almodovar" and Smith's *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodovar*.

17. Nevertheless, Almodovar does deal with transsexualism a second time in *Patty Diphusa*.

18. Particularly in his later films Almodovar replaces the image of the camera with images of mirrors. Both are, however, interchangeable. Not only do they both symbolize or "reflect" Almodovar's own reflective processes but, on a more basic level, the properties and functions of camera and of the mirror are based upon the same principles of reflective light rays. Jacques Lacan implies in "The Mirror Stage", this reflection is always fragmented and can never be viewed as a whole. He identifies the function of the mirror in a child's early stage of development. Although Almodovar's work does not focus upon infant development he does indicate that all adults are products of their childhood experiences. Lacan claims that "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification* ... namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image ...the function of the mirror-stage [is] a particular case of the function imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality" (4).

Here he emphasizes that, because the mirror appear to reflect but in fact distorts reality, it is not always possible for the human being (or any other "organism") to distinguish between the image they see in the mirror and their actual image. This is partly due to the fact that humans are only capable of seeing themselves, physically and psychologically, as fragments of a whole. These fragmentations become our reality.

19. See Kaplan's *Female Perversions*

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