Pedro Almodóvar and Gender

Diana Camila Cruz Soto

Texas A&M International University

Professor Erin Nieto-Salinas

November 21, 2017

Pedro Almodóvar and Gender

Pedro Almodóvar is a Spanish Oscar award-winning film director and screenwriter. Almodóvar is also one of the top European movie directors of the century and he is known for his unapologetic use of controversial topics on his films such as sex, aids, drugs and mostly his interpretations of gender. His works never fail to showcase the more under-represented side of sexual orientations or identities such as the LGBTQ+ community and the female sexuality, most times in a way that can be considered taboo. This essay will analyze four movies that perfectly explain the way Almodóvar conveys those topics: *Women on the Verge of a Mental Breakdown*, *All About my Mother*, and *Bad Education*.

One of Almodóvar’s first critically acclaimed movies was *Women on the Verge of a Mental Breakdown* (1988) perfectly showcases his beliefs and world views. This movie follows the hectic life of Pepa, right in the moment when her boyfriend Iván abandons her and her friend Candela asking for help hiding from the police. This is the movie that helped establish Almodóvar as a “women’s director”. He thinks that "women are more spectacular as dramatic subjects, they have a greater range of registers, etc.". (Allinson, M., 2001, p.72). This movie deals in a very interesting and unique comedic way with many taboo topics such as depression, drug use and the main one, gender. When Iván leaves Pepa she starts self-medicating (sleeping pills). Instead of making this a very serious thing, Almodóvar chooses to make her drug problem part of the comedy. Other characters end up taking some of the pills and the pills become sort of like their own character. This movie throws away the stereotype that mentally unstable women need a man to tell them what to do. According to Finney (1994) *Women on the Verge of a Mental Breakdown* is, if the ending correctly sums up Almodóvar’s messages on gender, a story about emancipation from patriarchy. Almodóvar is a feminist, he challenges the norm with his work and fights to expose the way our society works and views gender. In the end of the movie, Pepa finally understands how he doesn’t need Ivan, she is an independent woman. This is followed by a red curtain, then there’s a message in the screen that reads “To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider ... To all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to all men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother.” Although he is a man, and that’s why many people are confused by the nature of his work he seems to understand what it’s like to be a woman and he is

*All About my Mother* (1999) is a movie that follows the life of a mother after the tragic death of his son. This story isn’t only about that, it’s a story that helps define what’s being a woman from every angle, and it also blurs the line between genders while it challenges the stereotype of a submissive soft woman. This film almost completely ditches male characters, there are only four of them in this film and they are all just not as important as their female counterparts. In this movie, the topics dealt with aren’t only men and women, but it goes far into the exploration of transsexual/transgender people with the character of Agrado. According to Piganiol (2009) Almodóvar wants to make transsexuals visible by giving them a stage to shine on, but he also wants to reconcile them with the public space (p.80). Agrado is a character that, although a transsexual woman and a prostitute, to Almodóvar she is no different than a woman. She is portrayed by a biological woman, with exaggerated feminine traits but she shows how the director feels towards transsexual women. Agrado is also part of the comedic relief of this movie, she provokes the audience to laugh and applaud with her famous monologue:

“I’m very authentic. Look at this body: all made to measures. Almond-shaped

eyes: 80.000 (pesetas), my nose: 200.000… a waste of money. Another beating the

following year left it like this. It gives me character, but if I had known, I wouldn’t

have touched it. I continue. Tits: two, because I’m no monster. 70.000 each, but I have

more than earned that back. Silicone in lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass. A pin costs

about 100.000, so you work it out, because I’ve lost count. Jaw reduction: 75.000.

Complete laser depilation…because women, like men, also come from apes, 60.000

a session. It depends how fairy you are. Usually, two to four sessions. But, if you’re a

flamenco diva, you’ll need more… Well, as I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic,

ma’am. And one can’t be stingy with these things… because you are more authentic

the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.”

All that truly matters is Agrado’s authenticity, which proves to make her one of the most likeable characters in *All About my Mother*. Almodóvar is very open towards presenting transsexuality in his movies, and he likes to challenge the perception of other people towards his characters. Piganiol (2009) found that “He stages extremely sensual transsexuals who manage to arouse desire more than any female character. Desire, which is likely to be Almodóvar’s motto, is depicted as the driving force in human behaviors, and not as guilt, but a source of fulfillment.” (p.84) In this movie Almodóvar showed how aware he was of the way that gay artists like himself tend to romanticize women’s suffering; instead of showing it how it is, raw and real. This movie is the perfect balance between gay culture and femininity. Like Betancourt (2016) explained it’s a “gay male identification with women frees him to do his best work.” This all being depicted in the very last scene, where there’s a text that reads “women, mothers, women who want to be mothers, (and) men who want to be women”.

Another movie that features an intricate view on gender is the explicitly autobiographical film *Bad Education* (2004). This movie follows the story of two childhood lovers, Ignacio and Enrique. They were separated after their time in Catholic school. It’s a very complex story filled with flashbacks, religion, sexuality, and of course, gender. The two lovers meet again when Ignacio is looking for an acting job coincidentally at Enrique’s film directing company. They catch up after years of not seeing each other and Ignacio begins exposing his secrets of sexual abuse from their old school principal Father Manolo and the tragic effects that it’s had in his life. That’s when Enrique decides to write a script based on his life and cast him as, himself. But Ignacio doesn’t want that role, he wants to play the role of Zahara, the transsexual lead. This makes Enrique confused, because he seems to have changed since they were kids, so he decides to go visit his home town. That’s when he visit’s Ignacio’s mother only to find out that Ignacio passed away four years prior and that the guy he’s been talking to was Ignacio’s younger brother Juan. According to Betancourt (2016)

“This impressive twist in the narrative is crucial to La Mala Educación as it presents the

spectator with a plenitude of crises of identities and lies, eloquently portrayed by

Pedro Almodóvar through his clever use of flashbacks, brought to the spectator’s eye

through the script of “La Visita” which penetrates the narrative at frequent intervals;

and the lack of rigid structure which allows for his vivid imagination and creativity to

be examined throughout.” (p.53)

This movie features a love making scene between Juan and Enrique and their erotic urges are expressed in a very virile way, instead of behaving in a more feminine way. Which is what would usually be expected from Almodóvar given that he feminizes most aspects of the life of a transsexual person. Almodóvar also seems to blame the church for the way it’s legitimized this society as a patriarchal one, and this theme is clearly seen in this movie with the recurring religious themes. Mostly because of the way the Church doesn’t seem to accept families unless they fit the traditional model of a heterosexual man and woman family.

It’s clear that playing with gender and being completely blatant about it is one of running themes in all Almodóvar’s movies. He’s clearly not politically correct and likes to challenge the norms regarding gender, sexuality and other taboo topics. That is what makes him such a unique writer, producer and filmmaker. “Part of every woman is a mother/actress/saint/sinner” is the tagline for the English trailer for *All About my Mother*. Which really is a perfect way to describe the complex characters in his movies. But he doesn’t only focus on heterosexual characters; contrary to other film directors he gives a spotlight to more under-represented groups of people. He’s given them an outlet to express themselves and be seen, and be heard. According to Piganiol (2009) “Almodóvar’s deconstruction of patriarchal society through his staging of

transsexuality leads us to question the legitimacy of the old system centered on masculinity.” (p. 93). His work challenges the social norm; the engrained ideals of society such as the patriarchal values and influences that are so dominant in this society. Pedro Almodóvar is not only a genius behind the camera, making all his films look aesthetically pleasing but he’s the king of 21st century Spanish cinema.

References

Allinson, M. (2001). A Spanish labyrinth: the films of Pedro Almodóvar. London: I.B. Tauris.

Almodóvar, Pedro, 1988, Women on the Verge of a Mental Breakdown

------ .1999, All About My Mother

------ .2004, Bad Education

Betancourt, M. (2016, December 29). Understanding the Women of Pedro Almodóvar’s Movies. Retrieved November 14, 2017, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/understanding-the-women-of-pedro-almodovars-movies/510926/>

Finney, G. (1994). Look who’s laughing: gender and comedy. Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach.

Piganiol, Marie. 2009. “Transgenderism and Transsexuality in Almodóvar’s Movies.”

Amsterdam Social Science, Vol. 1(2): p. 79-95.

Wardrop, G. (2011). Redefining gender in twenty-first century Spanish cinema: the films of Pedro Almodóvar (Unpublished master's thesis).