

THE FILMS OF PEDRO ALMODÓVAR: *“It Costs a Lot To Be Authentic, Ma’am”*

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ABSTRACT

Frequently labeled a gay director that loves women, Pedro Almodóvar also loves real women that act, as well as men that act as women. Arguably the most famous and provocative export of modern Spanish cinema, his work is marked by his vibrant styling of mise-en-scène, emotive choices in music and, most markedly, his complex plots woven with characters that break all norms of gender and sexuality. This paper explores Almodóvar’s ability to bring marginalized groups to the forefront of his films in a way that communicates something natural and authentic, though these words seldom surface in reviews and criticisms of the auteur. Additionally this paper will examine his newest film *The Skin I Live In* (2011) within the context of his past work. For Almodóvar of the past and present, all the world is a stage, and all the women, gays, transsexuals, and transvestites merely players.

THE FILMS OF PEDRO ALMODÓVAR: “It Costs a Lot To Be Authentic, Ma’am”

Frequently labeled a gay director that loves women, Pedro Almodóvar also loves real women that act, as well as men that act as women. Arguably the most famous and provocative export of modern Spanish cinema since Luis Buñuel, his work is marked by his vibrant styling of mise-en-scène, emotive choices in music and, most markedly, his complex plots woven with characters that break all norms of gender and sexuality. “Voraciously ‘catholic’ in his interests, he brings together material from religious schools, fashion shows, gay bars, women’s magazines, bullfights, television, theater, boleros, and a vast etcetera.”¹ For his gender-bending and genre-defying cinema, Almodóvar is an anomaly both at home and abroad. In a career spanning 18 feature-length films and nearly 35 years, all of his films have been profitable, despite their occasional controversy.

In a country where machismo and Roman Catholicism are traditionally the predilections, Almodóvar has grown into a mainstream attraction. How does the Oscar-winning *auteur* navigate the cinematic realms between Spain and Hollywood? How has he maintained his worldwide popularity over the span of four decades? This paper will investigate the long and varied career of Spanish writer/director Pedro Almodóvar, examining his persistent interest in gender relations, homosexuality and transsexuality and the way he presents these subjects stylistically in his films. Additionally, it will explore the changing reception of Almodóvar’s films in his homeland and overseas, with special attention paid to his most recent film *The Skin I Live In*.

¹ Epps, Kakoudaki, 4.

BACKGROUND AND BEGINNINGS: THE INGENIOUS GENTLEMAN FROM LA MANCHA

Like Don Quijote before him, Pedro Almodóvar was raised in the quiet, rural region south of Madrid known as La Mancha, in the small town of Calzada de Calatrava. In the first half of his career, the press releases disseminated with his films summarized his relationship with his insular upbringing: “He felt like an astronaut at the court of King Arthur.”² In separate interviews with Frédéric Strauss, a film critic for French television and film journal *Télérama*, and Marcia Pally, a professor at New York University, Almodóvar acknowledges that he read a lot growing up, as well as watched many movies, but he had nobody with whom to share his intrigue. He was vaguely aware that there were other like-minded individuals out there, but he had no way of connecting with them until he moved first to Cáceres and finally to the Spanish capital in 1967 at the age of 17.

Like the parochial influence of La Mancha before it, Madrid at this moment was, to an extent, cloistered. Marvin D’Lugo, a professor at Clark University, has said that it was common at that time to distinguish Spain from the rest of Europe, because the oppressive regime of dictator Francisco Franco drove a wedge between the country and the continent. Francoist Spain was the last authoritarian dictatorship in Western Europe, lasting until the despot’s death in 1975. In the shadow of this oppressive tyrant, Almodóvar picked up a Super-8 camera and taught himself how to use it, since Franco had closed down Madrid’s film school.³ Already making a name for himself in the Spanish subculture by dressing in drag and singing on stage with friend Fabio McNamara, performance was a big part of Almodóvar’s life before he even touched a camera.

² Almodóvar, Strauss XII.

³ Farouky, 2012.

After the death of Franco, the new government decreed a *destape* (literally an “uncovering”) that created newfound freedom for Spaniards in terms of media and more. Sexuality in particular was “in one constitutional act liberated from political and social control.”⁴ Under Franco, homosexuality was illegal and systematically repressed under the *ley sobre peligrosidad y rehabilitación social* (Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law). The *destape* led to a countercultural movement known as *la movida madrileña* (literally “the Madrid scene”), celebrating the newfound freedom of expression without fear of repression. “This sense of euphoric freedom – a rejection of the repressive ways of the past – runs through Almodóvar’s films.”⁵

Although similar in appearance and style to the punk movement in England, the *movida* was more of a party than a protest. Professor at Cambridge University and contributing for the British film journal *Sight & Sound*, Paul Julian Smith notes:

“The *movida* was the product of a period of economic and cultural expansion and was not born out of a British-style reaction against mass unemployment and national decline. Almodóvar himself notes that the amiable anarchy of the time was the result not of resistance to authority, but (on the contrary) of a celebration of *desgobierno* or lawlessness.”⁶

Almodóvar quickly positioned himself as a key figure in that movement with the Super-8 shorts he produced from 1974-1978, and in 1980 after eighteen months of shooting plagued with technical and financial problems, he finished his first feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls like Mom* (alternatively translated as *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls on the Heap*).

This first film is a farcical inversion of gender and sexuality, championing *la movida* at every twist of the plot. “Like Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood in Britain in

⁴ Farouky, 2012.

⁵ Hays, 18.

⁶ Smith, *Desire*, 30.

the previous decade, [Almodóvar] was in a position to exploit a subculture which (like the punk which was its greatest influence) interacted with the media, music, and fashion industries.”⁷ One of Almodóvar’s greatest strengths as a filmmaker is his ability to expropriate popular culture (from multiple cultures) and combine it with folkloric Spanish traditions and typical Hollywood conventions.⁸ Halfway between parody and homage, this camp sensibility is one of the hallmarks of his style.

Camp is a subcultural cinematic mode that came about during the 1960s under names like Andy Warhol and George and Mike Kuchar and was also popularized later by John Waters. “Camp is both an appreciation of Hollywood style and artifice and at the same time a critique of it. Camp reception is always a ‘double reading’ in which the same form and content of Hollywood film are both passionately embraced and simultaneously mocked.”⁹ Camp is an important social and political sensibility, because it highlights the issues of gender and sexuality and creates an arena for the negotiation of these culturally constructed labels and categories.¹⁰

Camp has the negative connotation of being frivolous and tacky, considered a genre for gays by mainstream audiences. Despite his use of camp references, Almodóvar has gone out of his way to disavow the suggestion that he is a gay filmmaker, rather than a filmmaker who just happens to be gay. He constantly defends his work as being about topics that interest him so as not to be pigeonholed into labels, niches, and genres. For disavowing his sexuality in this way, he has garnered criticism from both the homophobic right, who would enforce silence, and the moralistic left, who insist on more open

⁷ Smith, *Desire*, 18.

⁸ D’Lugo, 5.

⁹ Benshoff and Griffin, 324.

¹⁰ Benshoff and Griffin, 324.

politicization and advocacy.¹¹ He also claims that he has never set out to shock or scandalize, though it's a byproduct of focusing on "lives that have interested him and continue to interest him despite a more conservative political climate in both the United States and Europe."¹² In this way, Almodóvar absorbs many aspects of camp and then imitates and innovates, making the cinematic style his own.

His progression of films after *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) and *Dark Habits* (1983) marked a transition from an orgy of camp towards a softer, and yet still satirical, melodrama. Beginning with *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), Almodóvar also began to cultivate a more refined cinematic technique, which greatly improved his standing with domestic critics that held his work to the standard of other Spanish cineastes at the time, film-school-educated directors with strictly high-culture, historical sensibilities. *Matador* (1986) and *Law of Desire* (1987) would lead to his breakthrough as an artist of international renown in the form of the Oscar-nominated *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). This film represented the "culmination of an extraordinary migration for the director from the margins of a marginalized cinema to the gates of Hollywood, all within a period of eight years."¹³

From 1990-1993 Almodóvar produced three lesser-known films in his career, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, *High Heels*, and *Kika*. Audiences and critics alike, Spanish or otherwise, considered them lesser than his former works for a variety of reasons, diegetic and thematic complaints being among the most common. It was not until *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) that the Spaniard's films found their rhythm again, followed by *Live*

¹¹ Smith, *Desire*, 90.

¹² Gorov, 2004.

¹³ D'Lugo, 67.

Flesh (1997), and ending with the Oscar-winning *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Talk to Her* (2002), Best Foreign Language Film and Best Screenplay respectively.

One of his most successful and well-received films, *All About My Mother* is all about performance, specifically “the acting ability of certain people who aren’t actors,” as Almodóvar describes in the press book for the film.¹⁴ He loosely refers to his characters here as people, whereas the international arena prefers to label them gays, transsexuals, and drag queens, whose characterizations are closely tied to performance.¹⁵ These characters are the hallmark of any film labeled “un film de Almodóvar”, as the mononymous Spaniard is now known. Although the obvious association with the word performance is theatre and stage acting, Almodóvar constantly reinforces and affirms the nature of performance in every day life. In this sense, the Spaniard would heartily agree with Shakespeare, that all the world is indeed a stage, and with Ru Paul who once said, “You’re born naked and the rest is drag.”¹⁶

The beauty of marginalized genders and sexualities in any film by Almodóvar is that the Spaniard literally puts them center stage, such as with Agrado’s famous monologue in *All About My Mother*, and humanizes them. Almodóvar makes transsexual fathers and lesbian nuns feel natural, and he forces the audience to identify with them as people, rather than the flat stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood narrative films. As a Spanish director, Almodóvar manages to appeal to multicultural audiences and get them to relate to characters completely different from themselves, at least for the duration of the film.

In the last ten years Pedro Almodóvar has added four more feature films to his oeuvre, *Bad Education* (2004), *Volver* (2006), *Broken Embraces* (2009), and *The Skin I*

¹⁴ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 212.

¹⁵ Ballesteros, 71.

¹⁶ Ballesteros, 88.

Live In (2011). These movies continue to show us the depth of their director, who, “faithful to his obsessions, and not to the image they give of him, has never ceased to wrong-foot both his critics and his admirers.”¹⁷ Despite origins in camp and melodrama, his work continues to resist categorization into any one genre. These films do, however, show us the darker side of El Deseo, the production company run by Pedro and his younger brother Agustín, and fall more in line with the cinematic conventions of thrillers or horror flicks than melodrama or camp.

The films of the Spanish *auteur* are marked by a clear progression over time, from the underground camp comedy of *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls like Mom* to the unsettling horror-world of *The Skin I Live In*. Regardless of the tone and treatment of the story, “in Almodóvar’s cinema, identity, in its incessant performances, is still unstable and provisional...it is shot through pleasure as well as pain, liberation as well as constraint, playfulness as well as trouble.”¹⁸ His works alternatively inspire praise or polemics, but they are nonetheless important because they open up a dialogue about topics and identities usually considered taboo.

GENRE AND CINEMATIC STYLE: “THE ALMODRAMA”

During discussions of Almodóvar, the word *auteur*, French for “author”, gets thrown around. The notion of a director as an *auteur* with a distinct aesthetic approach seldom applies to mainstream films, and it applies to films that follow the Hollywood formula even less. Genre is an important way of marketing a film to a specific audience, and Hollywood films are more frequently associated with a genre as opposed to with a

¹⁷ Almodóvar, Strauss, XII.

¹⁸ Ballesteros, 97.

specific *auteur*. In the tradition of European art-house films, Almodóvar is considered an *auteur*, but far from being inapplicable to Almodóvar's films, genre greatly informs them."¹⁹ Again, Almodóvar borrows notes mainly from the Hollywood traditions of camp and melodrama to put a highly visible and unique stamp on his own films.

In the opinion of Pally, "Almodóvar is likely the keenest architect of the camp aesthetic in cinema today. Certainly, among those exploring the form, his films are the most visually sophisticated and political, with antifascism, anti-group-think propelling his disarmingly cheeky features."²⁰ John Waters crafted politically loaded camp as well, but in a way that was much less approachable for mainstream audiences. Almodóvar is highly mindful of the way he presents taboo subjects, which can be distressing to audiences even when they are only hinted at subtly. It seems that his desire to champion marginalized identities in a way that is both commercially viable and appealing to audiences has helped him, consciously or unconsciously, to cultivate a humorous style relying heavily on outright parody and more subtle satire.

Humor is the hardest thing to translate across cultures, making Pedro Almodóvar's utilization of comedy even more admirable. But while parody is easy enough to detect, the more subdued nature of satire can confuse international audiences. Professor Andy Medhurst at the University of Sussex explains how Anglophones can get lost in translation:

"There is a commonsense journalistic perception in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere of Almodóvar as a filmmaker of kitsch surfaces and shock-tactic sexualities...Even a travel guide to Spain feels entitled to present, and dismiss, Almodóvar as having 'a trademark obsession with transsexuals'. Faced with such misrepresentative simplifications, the urge felt by Smith and Allinson, two key champions of the director in the British academy, to insist on Almodóvar's seriousness makes sense, but the risk incurred by such moves is to overlook one of the most compelling aspects

¹⁹ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 122.

²⁰ Pally, 81.

of what Almodóvar does: namely, his skill in holding together the serious and the ludicrous, interpersonal profundity and the fart joke, in order to insist on the indivisibility of comedy and tragedy.”²¹

In short, despite Almodóvar’s attempts to avoid shock tactics, transexuals will still come across as shocking to some. Even though he tries to present other difficult or controversial topics such as rape or homosexuality with a humorous spin, his ultimate intention is not always fully understood, causing confusion or even outrage when dealing with such delicate subjects that are normally off-limits to comedy.

His irreverent brand of humor works in films such as *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, where Carmen Maura’s desperate housewife character kills her husband with a ham bone and then makes soup out of it. Her acting is completely serious, but the plot and mise-en-scène are exaggerated past the point of believability and to the point of comedy. It is at once a deeper social commentary on gender roles in Spanish society and a parody of housewives, but it is worth noting that “Almodóvar exaggerates to champion the thing exaggerated, never to demean.”²² Thus while he is frequently accused of misogyny for such satirical circumstances, this interpretation is drawn only from a shallow reading of the film’s themes.

Furthermore the exaggerations Almodóvar uses to evoke laughter are taken directly from the genre of melodrama. “Almodóvar has stated that if anything requires artifice and elaboration, it is melodrama. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith refers to melodramatic *mise-en-scène* as ‘excess’: a surplus of music, color, and movement.”²³ The Spaniard’s lush visuals, including his attention to detail and loud color palette, scream excess to the point that Cuban critic Cabrera Infante coined the term “Almodrama” to describe the director’s

²¹ Medhurst, 124.

²² Pally, 83.

²³ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 139.

repurposing of the traditional Hollywood genre.²⁴ The director's notorious attention to color, detail and music are all part of a pre-meditated plan to evoke a certain emotion or connote a particular meaning in the tradition of melodrama, but with the subversive nature of camp. While not all of his films use this sense of genre and style to communicate meaning, it has become his trademark as an *auteur*.

ALMODÓVAR ON GENDER: “A GAY MAN WHO LOVES WOMEN”

As a Spanish writer/director on the world stage, Almodóvar takes elements from European art-house cinema and the hegemonic Hollywood tradition in order to craft films that appeal to a wider international audience. Specifically, the Spaniard often writes dialogue-driven, nonlinear narratives rather than the special effects-laden, blockbusters of Hollywood. For all their success, the films of Almodóvar break with cultural assumptions about Spain and Hollywood cinematic conventions more often than they adhere to these standards and stereotypes.

The main manner in which his films subvert stereotypes is through the performances of his characters, predominantly women. The writer-director concedes that women are more spectacular as dramatic subject and has said, “A group of women talking is where fiction starts, the origin of all stories.”^{25,26} Almodóvar constantly reaffirms this belief by making films from a female point of view with ensemble casts of female characters dealing with the customary problems of women.

Although this juxtaposition of perspective does not sound like a radical feminist revolution, it is a simple and effective way that Almodóvar has used to dissociate himself

²⁴ Smith, *Desire*, 130.

²⁵ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 72.

²⁶ Almodóvar, Strauss, 189.

from classical Hollywood narrative and conversely identify himself as an international *auteur*. To understand the importance of this inversion, it is necessary to expose the invisible nature of patriarchy in classic Hollywood cinema.

“As it is a fundamental ideological tenet of patriarchy that men and masculinity are privileged over women and femininity, it should come as no surprise that Hollywood film has always privileged men and male roles over women and female roles. Partly this is due to the perseverance of classical Hollywood narrative form, which has always worked to privilege men as the active and powerful heroes of Hollywood film, while relegating women to the role of love interest waiting to be rescued.”²⁷

With men assumed to be the “active and powerful heroes” women are objectified by the assumed male gaze present in Hollywood cinema, making them shallow projections of femininity, mere representations of the patriarchal ideal of a woman. This femininity is thus solidified as a cultural and cinematic standard, both modes mutually reinforcing each other.

Movie reviews often chide Almodóvar for being an “unlikely feminist” for his frequent use of a female gaze and identification with female characters, but he does this in a way that undermines stereotypes rather than one that reinforces them.²⁸ In the same manner that he handles homosexuality and transexuality in his characters, Almodóvar encourages audiences to view gender and sexuality as performance, as constructed actively by a character. His housewives and female bullfighters alternatively exhibit masculine or feminine characteristics, and they are defined by these actions, not by their physiology. Almodóvar at once borrows elements of melodrama, oft considered a woman’s genre, and displaces its patriarchal and macho elements in order to defy gender conventions and challenge the rigidity of traditional binary modes of definition. He presents women as

²⁷ Benshoff and Griffin, 213.

²⁸ Allinson, 2001, 72-73.

emotional, yet strong, repressed by established cultural gender roles and at the same time, resilient and resistant to these accepted norms.

The Spaniard's films focusing on feminine problems and characters are some of his best received, both in Spain and the United States. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), and *Volver* (2006) focus on love, motherhood, and friendship from a feminine perspective. Even in *Talk to Her*, a plot with two male protagonists, the characters are sufficiently feminized as weepy, ballet-watching males. Although men are certainly allowed to attend dance recitals and cry, it is rarely depicted in Hollywood narratives or presented as a weakness in their character if they do, not as testament to the depth of their personality or the nature of gender as a performed identity.

The aforementioned films did well at both the box office and at *Los Premios Goya*, Spain's national film awards, and the Academy Awards, an intriguing situation since they turn both Spanish and American cultural assumptions about females and femininity upside down. In Spain, there exists a pervasive and strong concept of *machismo* and *marianismo*, whereby women are judged by how closely they embody the characteristics of the Catholic Virgin Mary.²⁹ In this way, the dominant cultural paradigm of Spain regarding gender roles is not far off from the dominant mode of representation of women in early American cinema, the virgin-whore complex.³⁰

While Spain has traditionally been a society of higher gender inequality, "it was only after the death of Franco in 1975 that *permiso marital* (the husband's power to control his wife's affairs) was abolished", though it would not seem so in the films of Pedro

²⁹ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 73.

³⁰ Benshoff and Griffin, 219.

Almodóvar.³¹ In his world gender is never assumed and only defined insofar as its performance by various characters; males, females and transexuals each navigate his or her own gender with a fluidity that resists binary gender conventions and upends the assumptions of a male or masculine gaze.

ALMODÓVAR ON HOMOSEXUALITY: “I DOUBT YOU’LL FIND A PURER LOVE”

If Spain, the United States and most of the rest of the world have found common ground regarding the notion of gender binaries and the assumption of patriarchy, they have also unquestionably agreed that homosexuality is taboo throughout their histories. Although the world is starting to imitate the art of Almodóvar, “heterosexism, the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation, and that it should be celebrated and privileged above all others is still pervasive and usually unremarked upon in our culture.”³² Almodóvar challenges this assumption by not only presenting homosexuality as another natural orientation, but even by taking it for granted.³³

In this way he confuses many gay rights advocates who strive for positive and pervasive images of homosexuality in cinema, especially Anglo-American gay rights movements.³⁴ Despite pressure from the left, Almodóvar refuses to play the game of identity politics and continues to present gay love triangles and lesbian affairs in the same way as their heterosexual counterparts, without any pretense that they are better, worse or even differently troubled than heterosexual relationships. To his critics he responds, “I never make obvious political statements in my films, but I think it is very clear what I think

³¹ Smith, *Desire*, 54.

³² Benshoff and Griffin, 306.

³³ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 99.

³⁴ Smith, *Desire*, 3.

about the world in which I live.”³⁵ Almodóvar’s films never show conflict related to gender or sexuality, rather an absolute freedom for all his characters complemented by open-mindedness and respect for others, in no way a radical political suggestion but political none the less.

In American cinema, “Non-straight characters are usually defined primarily (if not solely) by their sexuality.”³⁶ When evaluated in the context of Hollywood cinematic portrayals of queerness, Almodóvar is far more of an advocate than he seems at first glance; the director humanizes homosexuality, giving gay characters depth in his stories. He makes societal taboos like homosexuality seem natural and challenges his Spanish audiences to do the same. In an article for The Washington Post following the release of *Talk to Her*, journalist Jose Antonio Vargas said, “It’s hard to think of another director in recent film history who has – in such a sustained way, with 15 feature films spanning 25 year – celebrated, accepted and, most of all, humanized the sexual outsider.”³⁷

Law of Desire (1987) is the director’s most vivid portrayal of homosexuality, with a plot centered on the love triangle between a film director Pablo (Eusebio Poncela), his lover Juan, and Antonio, the man who makes their world come undone (Antonio Banderas). *Desire* explores the potentially dangerous repercussions of repressed desire and plays out like a Greek tragedy. The final scene, without spoiling it, is chillingly memorable, as Antonio sings to Pablo in a whisper, “I doubt you’ll find a love more pure than the love you have in me.” *Law of Desire* for all its darkness is still a love story, though the universal rule of cinema in any culture is that conflict makes for a more interesting plot than harmony.

³⁵ Almodóvar in Russo, 68.

³⁶ Benshoff and Griffin, 310.

³⁷ Antonio Vargas, 2005.

In contrast to the films of Almodóvar, Hollywood focuses on “coming-out” narratives, posturing homosexuals as being in conflict with the rest of society and themselves as a person. Almodóvar has no interest in what the rest of society may think; his concern is the raw emotion of desire, love and loss as with any heterosexual narrative.

Professor at Baruch College, CUNY, Isolina Ballesteros remarked on this peculiarity:

“The gay male characters that populate Almodóvar’s cinema...neither hide nor publicly reveal their sexual preferences, which are assumed in the diegesis and flow liberally between the public and private spheres. Homosexuality here enjoys the same ‘taken-for-grantedness’ as heterosexuality, and coexists easily with transvestism, transexualism, and pansexualism. The ‘nonrevelatory’ nature of gay identity in Almodóvar’s films mirrors the director’s own quite public disavowal of normative homosexuality and his reluctance to engage in identity politics and to endorse its often rigid categorizations in favor of ambiguity and queerness. Accordingly, it is no surprising that he confers a special role to drag and cross-dressing in his depiction of the ultimately ‘authentic’ artificiality and instability of gender and sexual identity.”³⁸

From the lesbian masochists in *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls Like Mom* to the gay schoolboys in *Bad Education*, Pedro Almodóvar presents all manner of love, desire and sex as natural and authentic.

Although it is extremely important for the Spanish director to remain true to his work and his vision, commercial factors play an all-important role in the film industry. The production of any film requires significant financial investment, and for films with subject matter deemed risqué, investment is seen as risky. The transexual character Agrado says in *All About My Mother*, referring to her cosmetic surgeries, “It costs a lot to be authentic, ma’am.” For Almodóvar as a director and artist, it initially cost a lot to be authentic too. Since *Law of Desire*, which he took out a personal loan to produce, he and his younger brother Agustín have produced all their own films through their privately owned company

³⁸ Ballesteros, 88.

El Deseo (“The Desire”).³⁹ His insistence on complete artistic freedom prompted this decision and in the long run it has paid off. In order to be a dissident voice in the film industry, more so than in any other industry, capital is essential in order to be heard.⁴⁰ Although activists may argue that Almodóvar has not been vocal enough outside the world of his films, he has unquestionably boosted the visibility of gays and lesbians in a world cinema that reaches around the globe.⁴¹

Although *Law of Desire* did well at the box office in Spain and abroad, the film did not receive any nominations at the annual Goyas.⁴² Like *Law of Desire* before it, *Bad Education* (2004) was another film, featuring a gay director as one of its main characters, that was ignored by the elite voices in Spanish cinema. “It has been widely conjectured that this was due to the generalized homophobic response among Spanish film critics and members of the film industry toward what amounted to the groundbreaking treatment of the normalization of gay romantic narratives in Spanish film.”⁴³ Though many accuse the director of distancing himself from the gay rights movement, Almodóvar’s comments on the critical response to these two films reveals the true nature of his advocacy:

“There is no longer any official censorship in Spain, but moral and economic censorship still exist and I felt them keenly while making *Law of Desire*. It’s the key film of my career. I’ve received many prizes for my films in Spain, but none for this one. I don’t mean one should measure the worth of a film by the number of prizes it wins, but the silence was significant. The subject of the film discomfited the members of the commission for the advance. I was already well known at the time, both in Spain and abroad, and I was forcing the system to face its own contradictions.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Almodóvar, Strauss, 63.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Desire*, 170.

⁴¹ Allinson, *Labyrinth*, 107.

⁴² Smith, *Desire*, 88.

⁴³ D’Lugo, 59.

⁴⁴ Almodóvar, Strauss, 64.

The sexual revolution the Spaniard proposes is neither a radical takeover nor a violent protestation. Almodóvar does not preach politics in his films; he merely shows that sexuality in any form is natural.

ALMODÓVAR ON TRANSEXUALITY AND CROSS-DRESSING: “YOU’RE BORN NAKED AND THE REST IS DRAG”

Similarities have often been drawn between the Almodóvar and Andy Warhol, and on the couple occasions they met each other at parties in the early 80s, the Spaniard was introduced to American as the Spanish Andy Warhol. After this happened several times, Warhol finally asked Almodóvar why, an inquiry to which he cheekily responded that it was probably because there were lots of transvestites in his films.⁴⁵ Transvestites and transexuals figure prominently in the works of Almodóvar, because in his role as director he is predominantly concerned with the art of performance. A transvestite or transexual actor or actress in many ways represents a performance within a performance and these *mise en abîme* techniques or metadiegetic performances are a consistent presence in the Spaniard’s films, in the form of plays, ballets, commercials, and movies within Almodóvar’s films.⁴⁶ The director, in much the same way as with his homosexual characters, presents transexual, transgender, genderqueer, and cross-dressers as natural and authentic in his and her own definition of the term, allowing what is considered normal to be negotiated actively.

Drag kings, queens and transexuals became a marginal interest in Spanish culture during the *movida*, which “provided the occasion for the transvestite to emerge as ‘a prophet,’ an exotic object of interest for media eager to ‘show off’ their politically

⁴⁵ Almodóvar, Strauss, 15.

⁴⁶ Allinson, *Mimesis*, 148.

progressive attitudes.”⁴⁷ Almodóvar himself, actively involved in the formation and promulgation of this movement, has been known to dress in drag when he performed with Fabio McNamara during the *movida* and also known to write in drag in his fake memoirs of porn star Patty Diphusa. The Spaniard understands well the nature of performance involved with parodying or invoking a gender counterintuitive to one’s culturally constructed understanding of him or herself.

When one discusses the nature of authenticity and representation as related to the work of Almodóvar, one must consider the domain and context in which the Spaniard operates. He never operates under the pretense that his films are realistic, preferring to construct his own world where he has complete artistic license. He plays with representation by alternatively enlisting real transexuals in his films or having actors and actresses interpret the role of a transexual or transvestite. In *Law of Desire*, well-known transexual woman (in Spain) Bibi Andersen interprets the part of Ada’s biological mother, whereas the well-known cissexual Carmen Maura interprets the part of a transexual woman. Almodóvar explains:

“For me Bibi is a woman and I’ve always known her as a woman. Cinema is representation in all senses of the term and it’s through this representation, not through a documentary process, that I arrive at the truth of reality...I didn’t want a real transexual for the transexual in *Law of Desire*, but an actress who could interpret a transexual. This is very difficult to do because a transexual won’t show his femininity in the same way as a woman. A woman’s femininity is much more relaxed and serene. I was interested in a woman showing the exaggerated, tense and highly exhibitionist femininity of a transexual. So I asked Carmen Maura to imitate someone imitating a woman.”⁴⁸

Almodóvar is acutely aware that acting is necessarily always a performance, and in order to avoid the politics involved with the authenticity of representation, he maintains that

⁴⁷ Ballesteros, 90.

⁴⁸ Almodóvar, Strauss, 71.

performance occurs in movies and real life. For the Spanish director, the entire world is a stage, and all people are performers as they actively negotiate their own identity.

With this assumption that acting and performance is a daily ritual even for people whose sexual identification matches their chromosomal composition, Almodóvar approaches transsexualism and cross-dressing in a way that “universalizes drag.”⁴⁹ He emphasizes shared experiences or emotions rather than pointing to the specific differences. “Over the past decade, Almodóvar’s work has become more precisely drag (and less simply parody or satire). Drag does not call on or embellish real women; it enlarges women who are already distortions or theaters of femininity...Drag exaggerates an exaggeration.”⁵⁰ Agrado, played by transsexual actress Antonia San Juan, is perhaps the most iconic example of transsexuality in Almodóvar’s films, contrasted by her best friend and foil Lola (also transsexual). The audience is immediately drawn to the caring and comedic Agrado but must learn to understand and live with the notorious Lola. Again, Almodóvar refuses to kowtow to stereotypes and instead portrays traditionally marginalized characters as thoroughly integrated and human.⁵¹

DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN RECEPTION: ALMODÓVAR AS AMBASSADOR

When *Dark Habits* screened at Venice and Miami films festivals in 1983 and the cinema of Almodóvar was finally exported abroad, he became an unlikely ambassador for a country and culture widely understood as macho and Catholic.⁵² After mixed reception in Spain with his first two features, which were cult hits but poorly reviewed by critics,

⁴⁹ Pally, 84.

⁵⁰ Pally, 84.

⁵¹ Caro, 1999.

⁵² D’Lugo, 8-9.

Almodóvar has gone on to produce eighteen feature films in the short span of about 35 years.⁵³ Perhaps the most significant testament to his success as a filmmaker is that all of his films have turned a profit, despite his amateurish beginnings and persistently taboo subject matter. Although his cinema has changed en route from his modest beginnings to his latest production, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), every step of the way he has challenged the government's perception of exportable, transnational cinema.⁵⁴

A true *enfant terrible*, the authoritative voices in Spanish cinema looked down upon the fledgling director for many years until he achieved some success abroad, giving him the initial validation he needed to prompt his later works.⁵⁵ These later films were all executed with more technical experience under his belt and a craftier approach to his signature characteristics, which would go on to establish Almodóvar as a respected *auteur* and ambassador of Spanish cinema in time. The comparison to Andy Warhol is hackneyed at this point, but it is nonetheless valid. The initial reception of pop art by American elites in the art world, marked by ambivalence, distaste, and even hostility, was quite similar to that of Almodóvar by Spanish elites in the film world, who would cringe at his amateurish technique, tawdry themes and even his characteristic narrative style.⁵⁶

For a self-taught cineaste, it seems logical that his first films would be shunned from a technical and even aesthetic perspective, but as a representative of the *movida*, he was simultaneously heralded as an *agent provocateur* of the underground. There are, however, more reasons why Almodóvar did not burst onto the cinema scene as a universally loved and adored filmmaker, other than a lack of technical knowledge and controversial subject

⁵³ D'Lugo, 26.

⁵⁴ D'Lugo, 55.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Desire*, 102.

⁵⁶ D'Lugo, 9.

matter. The strong tradition of realist cinema in Spain had long ago established notions of what was and what was not national cinema, and pulpy comedy flicks or low pop culture references were certainly not national cinema in the eyes of critics.⁵⁷ It was not only what Almodóvar said, but the way he said it, dressed it, colored it and wrapped it up in a sickly satirical bow that initially irritated reviewers of his films. Spanish critics considered comedic films to be a sign of immaturity, and left Almodóvar to ripen or rotten of his own accord.⁵⁸

Conversely, director Carlos Saura “constituted traditional cultural capital for the promotion of Spanish cinema abroad: an established and much-honored auteur and subject matter that reflected a privileged national cultural patrimony.”⁵⁹ In many ways, though the film was produced by a Spaniard in Spain and seen by Spanish audiences, it was as much a study in cross-cultural interpretations due to its camp and melodramatic references, imported from the traditions of Hollywood.⁶⁰ Although some scholars examine the cross-cultural understandings of Almodóvar outside of Spain, few tend to see his domestic reception as another form of cross-cultural interaction between the counterculture and mainstream.

In an international cross-cultural context, Almodóvar has been both championed by elitists and chastised by the conservative right for his foreign exports. Regardless of the reception of his films abroad, he is still a remarkable figure in cinema for his ability to create films with universal themes that can strike a chord with audiences in many different countries, languages and cultures. It is doubtless that Almodóvar’s success is his ability to connect with multicultural audiences on some deeper level, but it is almost inconceivable

⁵⁷ Hays, 17.

⁵⁸ Medhurst, 123.

⁵⁹ D’Lugo, 53.

⁶⁰ Medhurst, 127.

that films like *Law of Desire* have been “singled out as a model of ‘universal appeal’...a film that in most national contexts would be marginal, to say the least.”⁶¹ How then does a gay Spanish director with no formal film schooling and origins in the countercultural *movida* movement find a viewership with audiences around the world?

If it is not the thematic content that speaks to a broad global culture, it must then be Almodóvar’s flare for storytelling. Professor Mark Allinson at the University of Bristol states, “The originality of Almodóvar’s cinema lies in its hybridity; it takes much from the world of Hollywood movies, but maintains a more intellectual, European skepticism, a distance marked by irony and self-reflexiveness.”⁶² With dexterity the Spanish director combines elements of Hollywood melodrama, a widely disseminated and replicated style, with local Spanish jokes and references and mixes in a European sensibility.⁶³ Then, from a business and distribution standpoint, he has a product he can market and export to Spain, the United States, Europe, and Spanish-speaking countries around the world.

Although his product can find a market in every country, this does not mean every country views his films the same way. Quite the opposite, Almodóvar has admitted that he would love to see the different cultural interpretations of his films compared and contrasted. He notes that in France and Italy he is generally “considered with more objectivity and freedom” than in his homeland. In Germany, the cultural differences often result in confusion. In the United States and Great Britain, his films are often attacked as misogynous, immoral, homosexual, etcetera.⁶⁴ Almodóvar is often at odds with the Motion Picture Association of America and sees the Hollywood production, ratings and

⁶¹ Kinder, 41.

⁶² Allinson, *Labyrinths*, 209.

⁶³ D’Lugo, 31.

⁶⁴ Almodóvar, Strauss, 118.

distribution system as “infantile” and “reactionary”, criticizing its inherent contradictions and conservative alignment in a manner reminiscent of Kirby Dick’s *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006).⁶⁵ The Spaniard observes:

“Movies from the American studios...are becoming so infantile that they refuse to accept even the most basic realities such as the fact that people go to bed with each other. The public can bear this, but not the Motion Picture Association of America...I’m considered a scandalous phenomenon, almost a danger to the American people...When I go over there I always get the impression I’m laying bare their contradictions. Without wanting to, my sense of freedom brings out the lack of freedom in American cinema. And the absence of prejudice of my characters only serves to show the enormous prejudice extant in America.”⁶⁶

For a nation that considers itself a democracy and a land of freedom, it is remarkable how despotic the MPAA is as the unkind ruler over Hollywood and independent films. It is also remarkable how simply an outsider to this anonymous yet conservative oligarchy can put this contradiction into words.

The American interpretations of Almodóvar *are* often facile and literal, and while this can be partially blamed on conservatism, sensitivity to the subjects of rape and kidnapping in the literal sense, and the concern that people will not be able to separate reality from celluloid, language can also present a significant barrier to understanding. A dialogue-driven writer-director, Almodóvar says he is surprised his films can be understood at all when they are shown dubbed or subtitled.⁶⁷ Truly though, language should be no excuse for any literal interpretations of Almodóvar’s films.

The Spaniard paints his moving pictures in lurid colors with wacky characters, costuming and plot devices, and all these elements must be viewed together in context to

⁶⁵ Almodóvar, Strauss, 119, 164.

⁶⁶ Almodóvar, Strauss, 119, 164.

⁶⁷ Almodóvar in Noh, 122.

see the subtle satire and camp parody essential to understanding of Almodóvar's films.⁶⁸ It would be difficult to interpret a film such as *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* literally, although people still did. This film initially received an X rating from the MPAA, a rating usually reserved for hardcore pornography.⁶⁹ Despite the Spaniard's protestations, the rating stuck and the film's distribution suffered. For a film that received uniformly positive reviews in Spain, it was as good as banned in the United States.⁷⁰

Despite bumps like these along the way, Almodóvar must be appreciated in any cultural context for his ability to cross from the counterculture to the mainstream in his native Spain; there he is unquestionably a celebrity. "On the streets of Madrid, in the bars, in the clubs, everyone knows him: his audiences at home cross every boundary of class, age, and sex, and he's regularly pestered for autographs by little old ladies."⁷¹ The only name that can open a film is "Almodóvar".⁷² Taking all this into consideration, it would be untrue to say that the Spanish people have unanimously accepted him, and it is even less true that all his films were applauded in his home country. *Matador*, for example is a very Spanish movie at first glance, with a steamy heterosexual romance and bullfighting galore, but the subtleties of Spanish culture proved more powerful. It caused the most uneasiness and had the least success in Spain of all the countries it was shown in, because, according to Almodóvar, "to talk about the pleasure and sensuality of bullfighting is taboo in Spain," a

⁶⁸ Smith, *Desire*, 3.

⁶⁹ Pally, 87.

⁷⁰ D'Lugo, 75.

⁷¹ Clark, 59-60.

⁷² Smith, *Desire*, 194.

national tradition even more revered than religion.⁷³ In Argentina and England, however, *Matador* is one of his most highly regarded films.⁷⁴

Regardless of the varying reception of the films of Almodóvar at home and abroad, the Spaniard is and will remain an *auteur* with a distinct perspective and style of sharing it with the world. He has found receptive audiences within his native Spain, both mainstream and marginal, and he has been able to export his work abroad with varying, yet encouraging, degrees of success. He has thought about doing an English-language film, and although he came close to directing *Brokeback Mountain*, he vehemently avoids anything resembling a blockbuster in the classic Hollywood tradition for fear of losing his artistic control and integrity in the Hollywood system.⁷⁵ Almodóvar, having been raised in the traditions of Francoist Spain, values independence and freedom of expression above all else, and these will always be universal themes of mutual understanding for the Western world.

The Skin I Live In: **“Art Keeps You Free”**

For a director identified as a figurehead for queer cinema, it is interesting to consider his most recent film in light of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Spain on July 3, 2005. It was the third country in the world to do so after the Netherlands and Belgium. As a celebrity who happens to have an interest in lives lived at the margins, despite his own sexual orientation, Almodóvar was one of the first to comment on the passage of the law and said, “It’s a historic day, but it is only politics at last catching up with

⁷³ Almodóvar, Strauss, 54.

⁷⁴ Almodóvar, Strauss, 202.

⁷⁵ Gorov, 2004.

society. My films haven't changed society, merely supported the progress it was making.”⁷⁶

Despite this public affirmation of support for the law, he continues to disavow the gay rights movement writ large has added that marriage is not “him” and that he will not be planning any sort of wedding for himself.

Despite this dramatic change in the social and political climate of Spain, the director’s art has remained persistently constant. He released *Volver* (2006) and *Broken Embraces* (2009) following the passage of the law, neither of which constitute a dramatic change in theme or presentation. *Volver* is an Almodóvarian classic, with an ensemble cast of the director’s favorite *chicas*, the term of endearment used for his preferred and reprised actresses. It is a story about returning to one’s roots and rediscovering one’s family, a mature theme for an aging Almodóvar.

Broken Embraces meanwhile, is much darker, a thriller about a director writing under the pseudonym Harry Caine who becomes tangled in a dangerous love affair. Both films reflect a new phase in Almodóvar’s filmmaking, which began arguably with *Bad Education* in 2004. “More sober and somber, Almodóvar has modified his gaze and his camera and has moved from performers and performances that are just meant to be fun, to performers and performances that are deadly serious.”⁷⁷ The newfound darkness in the Spaniard’s cinema is disconcerting for his loyal fans, but not disappointing as his films still manage to reuse and recycle the same ideas and interest of the director.

Almodóvar laments his notoriety at times, wishing he could release films under the pseudonym he eventually used for the character in *Broken Embraces*. “When you make your first film, there are no pressures: you have no line, no style, no audience yet, you’re

⁷⁶ Farouky, 2012.

⁷⁷ Ballesteros, 91.

starting out. So I thought of taking a pseudonym. I found a name: Harry Cane. Because if you say it quickly it sounds like hurricane, a typhoon! But my brother has forbidden me to use a pseudonym. We now have our own company, it took us long enough to get where we are, so we're not starting again!"⁷⁸ For all its departures from Almodóvar's past work, a director named Harry Caine could have conceivably been the creative force behind *The Skin I Live In* (2011), but the deception would have been weak at best.

Skin represents a departure from the Spaniard's past work primarily because this latest piece is "a horror film without screams or frights" according to the director.⁷⁹

Almodóvar authority Paul Julian Smith found the film problematic and wrote:

"What kind of Almodóvar movie *is* this? Where are the exuberant humor, the farcical coincidences? Where is melodrama? Where, in a more subdued mode, is the tender reconciliation that gives *Volver* and *Broken Embraces* their emotional force? Where, finally, is the polymorphous eroticism?"⁸⁰

While it is true that these elements are missing, it is impossible to see Marisa Paredes and Antonio Banderas together on the screen and not know it is "a film by Almodóvar." It is impossible to watch a movie about bodily transplants and sex changes, and not wonder if the liberally minded Spaniard had a part in it. For all his strident warnings as an academic of and advocate for Almodóvar, Paul Julian Smith has fallen victim to literal interpretations of the plot and characters.

It is true that the vibrant colors and wacky characters are no longer vibrant or wacky. These were easy indicators of parody and satire for those who could read into the double meanings of the director's camp references. Here the Spaniard's color palette is

⁷⁸ Almodóvar, Strauss, 165.

⁷⁹ Rios Pérez, 2010.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Escape*, 2011.

white, a color he claims he does not even understand.⁸¹ His characters are gravely serious, like the infamous Dr. Ledgard played by Banderas, but in a way that merits a deeper interpretation of who they are, why they are the way they are, and what they could possibly represent. Almodóvar made this assertion long before *The Skin I Live In*, when he said in an interview with Frédéric Strauss:

“A filmmaker who wants to make personal films cannot respect all the rules of a genre. As time passes, we inevitably see stories a different way. Nowadays, it’s no longer important to say who is bad and who is good, but rather to explain why the baddie is the way he is. Genres force you to view characters in an elementary manner. I don’t think that’s possible anymore. That corresponds to the mentality of another age.”⁸²

In this newest addition to his *oeuvre*, Almodóvar takes what he likes of the horror genre and fuses it with his own worldview to create a film that is unarguably chilling. The film as well received by international audiences and critics and was also nominated for 16 Goyas, winning four.⁸³ There have been criticisms, because any movie he produces rarely inspires indifference.⁸⁴ Regardless, *The Skin I Live In*, with its beautiful cinematography and twisting, suspenseful story line, engages viewers visually and mentally, keeping them guessing until the end.

Another complaint of Smith’s regarding *Skin* was that there was a disconnect between Almodóvar’s film and the reality of contemporary Spain that he described as “reeling from the financial crisis and wracked by popular protests.”⁸⁵ It would be hard pressed to find any other reference to a financial crisis in the past work of Almodóvar, but the claim that the director has lost touch with popular social movements in Spain is an important yet imprudent one. Since the legalization of gay marriage in 2005 by the

⁸¹ Epps, Kakoudaki, 12.

⁸² Almodóvar, Strauss, 121.

⁸³ Smith, *Skin*, 2011.

⁸⁴ Marsh, 2006.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Escape*, 2011.

Socialists who came to power after the death of Franco in 1975, the center-right Popular Party has represented a dramatic changing of the political guard, winning by a landslide in the general elections. One of the party's crucial campaign promises was to overturn the legalization of gay marriage in favor of something more along the lines of a civil union. This would be a huge loss for gay couples that have worked hard since Francoism to achieve this newfound sense of equality, in a legal sense at the very least.⁸⁶

Now, looking at *The Skin I Live In* from a Spanish context, how does the Spaniard slyly incorporate his particular brand of politics into this film? Through the character of Vincente/Vera, the audience discovers a willful resistance to pressure from all sides. The physiological surgeries that threaten to take away everything that identifies him as a man, the physical and mental torture of being raped by the brutish Zeca and objectified, and in a way penetrated, by the lustful gaze of Dr. Ledgard. Despite these constant assaults on his identity, he remains faithful to Vincente throughout the film, never missing a chance to escape and return to his friends and family. The plight of Vincente mirrors that of gay couples in Spain, and although Almodóvar read Thierry Jonquet's *Mygale* ("Tarantula"), the inspiration for *The Skin I Live In*, some ten years before the making of the movie, it is no wonder that the story stayed with him and evolved in the way that it did.

Furthermore, the newest flick by filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, his eighteenth feature in a mere 35 years of making movies, represents a new curiosity for the Spaniard while staying faithful to his *auteurist* worldview and politics. He has produced another film that upholds the integrity of his own artistic sensibilities, without input from a Hollywood studio or censorship by a production company with strictly commercial interests. He has

⁸⁶ Rainsford, 2011.

explored yet another dark tale, this time featuring a mad scientist, a tortured hostage, and a rogue criminal dressed as a tiger among others, while he continued to explore the same themes that have always interested and preoccupied him. The intrigue of *The Skin I Live In* can only be seen when viewed with a careful and cautious eye, requiring a profound contextual reading and an intimate understanding of Spanish culture and politics. The meaning of Almodóvar's films is never "skin-deep." That is the intention of the Spaniard with his newest film, which is at first glance a departure from his past work but with careful examination and appraisal is as much "a film by Almodóvar" as ever.

Conclusion: "Always About Almodóvar"

Throughout history, the mystical power of cinema has been its ability to simultaneously entertain and educate. Professors Steve Marsh and Parvati Nair of the University of London summarize its potency:

"Herein lie both the attraction and the force of cinema: on the one hand it invites, entertains, and enthralls while on the other it has the capacity to reinforce, challenge and subvert configurations of identity among its viewers. The curiosity and visual interest that cinema inspires, therefore, arises not so much from its potential to represent reality as from the possibilities that it puts forward to transform, refract and breach the imagined horizons of social identity."⁸⁷

Almodóvar, with his notoriously precise attention to the smallest details in acting, set design, shot framing, dialogue writing, and every other aspect of his cinema, also pays close attention to the power his films wield. In public statements, the director claims to care little about social activism for women's rights, gay rights, transsexual rights, but his art speaks for itself. "In his loving attention to lives lived at the margins, Almodóvar suggests a respect for

⁸⁷ Marsh, Nair, 1.

others, however rich and strange they may be, that can only be called humanist.”⁸⁸ The reality is that he just cares little for what he sees as the extremism and inconsistencies on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum.

Above all else, Almodóvar values his freedom as an artist to explore the lives and stories of characters that interest him, without even any limitations from Hollywood studios or even expectations from a queer world order that already look to him as a figurehead. It is not that the Spanish director is insensitive to the gay rights cause; he is just true to his own cause and belief, making films that remain deeply personal and in a way, always about Almodóvar. Through his films, Almodóvar crafts his own brand of advocacy.

By presenting marginalized characters as wholly integrated and completely human to a worldwide audience, and by making provocative cinema that raises eyebrows and questions, the ingenious cineaste from humble beginnings in La Mancha, as Mark Allinson notes, “shifts the frame of reference for Spanish cinema (and culture more generally). The cultural myths and stereotypes of high passion, religious fervor, death-obsession, machismo and backwardness are all still in the frame, but they are decentered.”⁸⁹ In this way, Pedro Almodóvar will always represent the break with Francoism, freedom, and the founding of a New Spain, a cultural shift always seen as beneficial.⁹⁰ While his cinema has been ignored, ridiculed and outright attacked, he has managed to rise above the criticisms and find his way in world cinema, a balancing force between the mainstream and counterculture, European film and Hollywood, and, first and foremost, a talented and respected Spanish filmmaker.

⁸⁸ Smith, *Desire*, 194.

⁸⁹ Allinson, *Labyrinths*, 215.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Desire*, 47.

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