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Pedro Almodóvar's First Film: Giving Visibility to Queerness

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La Movida was a countercultural and urban movement that embodied the liberalization of Spanish society. It emerged after Franco's death in 1975 and took place in Madrid and other big cities, such as Barcelona and Bilbao. *La Movida* was characterized by freedom of expression, hedonism and the growth of libertarian ideologies, as a response to Franco's dictatorship (1936-1975) founded on prohibition and imposition of rigid models of morality, inspired in the most conservative Catholic Church. *La Movida* showed its counterpoint in rudeness and frivolity, adopting much of the British punk style.

After Franco's death, an avalanche of political movies and screen adaptations of books about the Spanish Civil War were the products of mainstream Spanish filmmakers. Five years later, at the peak of the democratic process, the seriousness and conservative aspects of these leftist filmmakers seemed uninterested in showing the new society and its fascination for radical changes, including freedom to express their sexual liberation. The left party that had combated the Franquism had also excluded and condemned any expression of homosexuality; by contrast, other visual expressions during *La Movida*, such as the cartoonist movement, moved specifically to forget the Franco period, and to re-create a sense of national cultural identity, by installing a postmodern aesthetic that promoted the individual sexual freedom rather than a factional political discourse.

Pedro Almodóvar was strongly related to this generation of queer artists. He moved to Madrid in 1968, worked for the National Telephone Company and saved up enough to buy a super eight camera, got together with a group of friends and felt ready to take his first steps in movie making (Strauss, 1). He participated in several super-eight-film festivals, but Almodóvar's works passed with no recognition. By the late 1970s, he led a rock-punk band called *Almodóvar and McNamara* and performed a small role in a play of *Los Goliardos*, an independent theater company.

At that time Almodóvar was also writing stories for the magazine *El Vibora* and created a photo-story, described by the director as “punkie, aggressive, dirty and funny” (ibid, 11). Carmen Maura, a performer of *Los Goliardos*, convinced him to turn his photo-story into a film, renamed *Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Girls*.

While the serious style and the installation of a hegemonic discourse based exclusively on past politic events was the dominant style of Spanish cinema between 1975 and 1980, Almodóvar by contrast, proposed frivolity in his first commercial film, emphasizing textures and surfaces, privileging humor and hedonism, and using parody, bricolage, incongruity and theatricality to provoke and subvert the family structure, nationality, gender roles, authority and social conventions about sexuality.

Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Girls is an urban comedy that recreates the atmosphere of young people and *La Movida* in Madrid, combining the visual aesthetics of pop and the provocative and insulting ideology of punk. The main characters of the film are the liberal and modern Pepi (Carmen Maura), her lesbian punk friend Bom (real punk singer Alaska), a middle-aged housewife Luci (Eva Siva), and her sexist husband and corrupt cop (Felix Rotaeta). The film opens when the policeman discovers marijuana plants in the balcony of Pepi’s apartment and accuses her of drug possession. Pepi offers oral sex in order to buy his silence, but the policeman rapes Pepi, who loses her virginity. Thirsty for revenge because she wanted to sell her virginity for a good amount of money, Pepi’s friend Bom and her punk band give to the policeman a terrible beating, but the next day Pepi realizes that the policeman’s innocent twin brother was attacked by mistake. In order to accomplish her revenge, Pepi invites the policeman’s wife Luci for knitting lessons and realizes that her marriage had been motivated by masochism, but Luci is frustrated because the policeman respects her like his own mother. In Pepi’s apartment, Luci meets Bom, like each other and start a romantic relationship. The film revolves around Pepi and the romance between Bom and Luci, who leaves the policeman. At the end of the film, Luci goes back to her husband when he starts to beat her, while Pepi and Bom plan a new life together.

As Moe Meyer suggests, camp can be described as strategies of queer parody that operate as political and critical techniques. Meyer includes Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as the most effective instrument of post-modernity; it is closed to the original model but introduces the critique into the new interpretation. He argues that camp, as queer parody, is the production of queer social visibility, including the total body of performative practices used to enact a queer identity

(139). In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* Almodóvar systematically uses parody to deconstruct Spanish stereotypes, such as the traditional family represented by the sexist and homophobic husband and the oppressed housewife. The housewife Luci is entirely frustrated because her husband doesn't slap her in the way she dreams. When she confesses to Pepi that her husband "respects her like his mother," Almodóvar presents the Spanish tradition of male's dominance over their women except men's mothers. For the stereotypical Spanish male, the mother represents, like the Virgin Mary, the unique feminine figure that can be respected and obeyed. Almodóvar parodies Luci and the policeman, not only by giving new meanings to the traditional male dominance, but also by subverting the traditional housewife image: the masochist Lucy is entirely in love with Bom when she urinates over Luci's face.

Andrew Ross defines camp as a recycling operation of popular culture, the rediscovery of history's waste (320). According to Ross, camp is more than just a remembrance of past things or the resurrection of deceased cultural forms; camp objects are associated with historical power but reveal that this power is already exhausted (321).

In order to create a homogeneous Spanish identity, many elements from popular culture were re-employed by the Franquism to promote an identifiable Spanish image to the rest of the world. The "matador" representing the courage and the individualism of Spanish people, an idealized Andalucía, its dance, customs, stereotypical Spanish women, and musical genres, such as the "zarzuela" and the "copla" served to highlight "the flavors of Spain" promoting a fictitious national identity (Yarza 115-116). During the 1980s, Spain was concerned about liberalizing the cultural and artistic discourse from the fascist legacy, and camp parody was one strategy and political response that queer artists used to give new meanings to old forms. Almodóvar uses parody and at the same time a recycling operation of popular culture when Bom and the punk band are wearing Andalusian costumes and singing a zarzuela while attacking the policeman's twin brother; they show a punk attitude and represent traditional Spanish characters.

During Franco's dictatorship, gays and women suffered the same emotional repression. Family and Catholic Church were the two pillars and the moral foundations of Spanish society, and family was structured by fixed gender roles. The man as represented in Franquism, constructed his identity through the marginalization of women. As Acevedo Muñoz notes, until Franco's death, Spanish men did have legal control over his wives, using the law to keep women in line (20). While gay culture was condemned to invisibility, women were sentenced to exercise

a role of inferiority to male supremacy. Franquism used Andalusian women as stereotypes of femininity, devoted to Catholicism, and alleged virgins until marriage. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* the emphasis on revisiting iconographic characters is also presented when underground and experimental gay artists that share the apartment with Bom and Luci are working on large paintings of typical Andalusian women wearing coloring dresses. With these links between traditional icons and characters of *La Movida* Almodóvar not only recycles old forms and gives to them new meanings; the reconfiguration of the national identity can include heterogeneity and difference. As Ross suggests, camp can operate to destabilize, redesign, and transfer the existent balance among identities and sexual roles. Through exaggeration and parody, Almodóvar neutralizes the patriarchal ideology, transforming the traditional family and its respective roles assigned by the social script.

Bom, representing the modern, lesbian and punk singer, discovers at the end of the film that she will be a *Bolero* singer. The lyrics of bolero songs, always sad, melodramatic, and old-fashioned are linked with the libertarian and hedonist attitude of Bom. The camp technique that juxtaposes these two opposite worlds, the melodrama and the punk, serves to redefine national identities.

Almodóvar also uses the juxtaposition between the traditional Spanish culture and the pop in the physical spaces. When Luci, the policeman and the twin brother are sitting on the breakfast table, displaying the sexist male attitude and the submissive female response, the space is surrounded by pop objects, geometric wallpaper, and a cutting edge style, which is not consistent with the stereotyped family they represent. As Jean-Claude Seguin Vergara notes, in Almodóvar's films kitchens are strategic places, where the director combines pop art and Spanish culture (60). The consumption society's goods, such as blenders, refrigerators and canned soups are mixed with peppers, Spanish ham and smoking saucepans, confronting modernity and tradition. In Almodóvar's films kitchens are feminine rooms, places for female bodies, but far from be innocent places, kitchens are body's extensions, where bodies can be transformed (ibid 60-65). When Luci decides to return to her husband, Pepi invites Bom to her apartment and cooks a traditional Spanish dish. In the kitchen, the most traditional space that represents women's submission, two liberal and punkie girls exchange caresses and kisses and make evident more complicity and intimacy than in any other sequence of the film.

Almodóvar proposes alternative hetero-social boundaries that according to the definition of Stephen Maddison (2000) are the reversal of the homo-social

discourse. Homo-social relations strive towards an appropriate masculinity, suggesting that rigid classifications of straight women and men, lesbians, and gay men, are cultural classifications organized to facilitate exclusion, oppression, humiliation and powerlessness of any category that functions out of the strict male-female structure. Rather than suppress bounds with women, homo-social relations operate to display domination over them, through public institutions of romance and courtship and the display of rigorous, penile male power (ibid). By contrast, hetero-social identification opens the possibility to denaturalize gender differences. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* we can see this idea in the dialogue between Luci and Bom. When the masochistic housewife decides to abandon her female partner and reunites with her abusive husband only when he starts to be entirely violent, Almodóvar does not intent to perpetuate the patriarchal stereotype, but subvert the hegemony of the heterosexist paradigm in the traditional Spanish families. "You couldn't give me what I deserved [...] my husband nearly killed me [...] he hates me, it would be crazy to pass up an opportunity like this." In this dialog Luci justifies the reasons for abandoning Bom and her arguments are focused on her masochist desire. Implicitly she states that her sexual identification is beyond a fixed categorization of straight or lesbian.

The authority, represented during the dictatorship by the law and the male figure, is also parodied in the film. The law is parodied to celebrate the Spanish society living radical changes based on their freedom, and the authority represented by the male figure, is parodied to deconstruct its supremacy and dominance within the Spanish social discourse. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* the authority and the law represented by the policeman are not relevant. Luci's husband is listed in the credits only as "El policia" (the policeman) without any name. For Almodóvar, the policeman does not need to display his life's story; he is a utilitarian instrument that helps to create the story of the three girls (Cromb 16). In the first scene of the film, the force of law threatens Pepi (because her marijuana plants), but far from being frightened by authoritarian credentials, she offers oral sex to avoid arrest, suggesting that she does not recognize the authority of "the law." Both civil and patriarchal laws the policeman represents have been exposed as dead words (ibid). The relationship between power-law and power-male-dominance represented by the policeman is useful for Almodóvar's political intentions. Through this character, the director can associate both the stereotypical Spanish male and the authoritarian figure of the dictator. We can see this association when the policeman goes to the nightclub and forces Luci to come back to their home, "Tonight you'll pay for everything you've

put me through,” and then violently rapes Luci yelling “Communist, fucking communist.”

Almodóvar also uses parody to deconstruct the Spanish tradition of Catholic Church. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* the reference to Catholic iconography is presented in the scene of the hospital. When Luci is hospitalized after the husband beat her, we can see Luci lying on the bed, presided over a crucifix and flanked by her husband. According to Alejandro Yarza, in this scene Almodóvar deconstructs the Christian myth of sacrifice: Luci, representing Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself to expiate humanity's sins is now taken care by fascism and under the patriarchal figure of god (120-121). The female is Jesus Christ, who accepts sacrifice and suffering in order to perpetuate the family structure, the base of the society for Franco regime.

“Bricolage,” or the assemblage of different texts is another camp technique systematically used in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. The bricolage technique works to give visibility to the queerness, providing additional sources that emphasize the political intentions of the film. New elements arise from each Almodóvar's film, delimited zones that seem to have their own life. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* we can distinguish several mini stories within the main story of the three girls: When the girls go to a party in where Pedro Almodóvar plays a role of the organizer of the biggest penis size competition, the winner receives the opportunity to do whatever he wants, how he wants, with whomever he wants. In this sequence the director proposes alternative ways to present the freedom and fluidity associated with sexual desires. Male gays, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual participants share the same physical space and same desires. The winner of the competition, presented in the film as a gay man, chooses Luci for partner. This coupling represents Almodóvar's vast range of sexual alternatives, including desire for men, lesbian and gay males.

The deconstruction of traditional family structures, rigid gender identities, and alternative forms of desire is also evident in the mini-story of a neighbor that is looking at the party from his window. He and his wife had been discussing the husband's lack of sexual desire. The unusual wife has a beard and decides to shave her face, failing to perceive that the sudden excitation of her husband was motivated after his voyeurism and by his homosexual desire. These mini-stories are additional sources Almodóvar uses to promote sexual fluidity and alternative forms of desire, combining heterosexual couples with homosexual desires. The neighbor appears again in the film as a spectator at the show where Bom and her punk band are performing. He is with the gay male winner of the party's competition.

The incongruity of the bearded woman also displays a technique of camp, juxtaposing opposite features, as well as representing possible modifications within gender identities. The combination of female identity with male features suggests a re-signification of essentialist gender identities. As Yarza suggests, the beard loses its mono-generic character and can be transformed into an appendix of no sexual difference; the presence or absence of facial hair facilitates to go from one state to another, from woman to man (149).

Within the bricolage strategy, we can see Pepi working in the advertisement industry, using her creativity to promote new products, such as PUTON panties. One ad recreates a romantic couple, including all the clichés, such as a male wearing a black tuxedo, a beautiful woman wearing an elegant dress, the champagne and the flowers. We can hear the women's thoughts, "I'd prepared so the afternoon would be perfect [...] but, I really need to fart," and a male narrator, "Go right ahead. PUTON panties contain a substance that transforms the smell of your fart into an elegant perfume." In this clip Almodóvar deconstructs the idealized image of love, using parody to associate the repulsive to the heterosexual romance.

Esther Newton distinguishes three main characteristics of camp: humor, incongruity and theatricality. Camp is theatrical because it is exaggerate and performative; always involves performers and an audience, and it is suffused with the perception of being as playing a role and life is theater (126). The relationship between queer identity and performative practices arises from the constructionist approach of gender identity. If gender is no way a stable identity, but constructed in time through stylized repetition of acts and performed by bodily gestures and movements (Butler 270), the constructed identity must be manifested through the bodily gestures in order to produce social visibility. In Almodóvar's films there are always actors, dancers or musicians that are performing. Almodóvar declares that he loves "the settings that represent themselves, the false representing the falseness [...] this is the theatrical part of the film [...] the authenticity of the naked artifice" (Seguin-Vergara 137).

In *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, camp technique of theatricality includes Bom and her punk band performing in an underground nightclub, and the transvestite played by Fanny McNamara. As Judith Butler points out, the transvestite appearance is an illusion and plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. The transvestite, as a male character with feminine clothes, attitudes and appearance criticizes the validity binary categorizations; she/he confronts us to question if feminine and masculine are constructed or

essential, biological or cultural (Yarza 89). In the film, the transvestite sells drugs and he/she is at Bom's apartment when the postman calls the door. Displaying any sort of exaggerate body gestures, he/she intends to seduce the postman, and finally steals his pen (or penis), and the embarrassed postman escapes unarmed without his tool. In this sequence Almodóvar deconstructs the recurrent fantasy of films in which the upper-class lady is visited by the worker-class plumber or postman, dealing with her social position in favor to get a sexual transaction. As Yarza suggests, the social myth based on the superiority and control of male body over the inferiority of female power is subverted when the transvestite exerts his/her power over the male body (102-104).

The emphasis of camp on performance, the theatrical and the artificial suggest political ramifications. On the one hand, the idea of the stage emphasizes that the audience is there only to see the spectacle. This performative approach serves to obtain visibility, a way to invoke presence, to have "a voice." On the other hand, the artificial nature of representation deconstructs the logo centrism that privileges the essence over the appearance, the content over the style, and the signified over the signifier. Camp questions the traditional narratives and proposes new ways of representation, restoring the aesthetic of social marginalization, privileging the style over the content. As Yarza points out, "in camp, the style is no more the supplement of the content, but a substantial part of it" (43-44).

Pepi, Luci, Bom is the most imperfect Almodóvar's film; it was planned as a photo-story and although the financial and technical constraints of its production could affect the visual result, the film operates as a laboratory to explore and experiment Almodóvar's original style. As a queer director, his aesthetics shares common queer and camp techniques, such as parody, bricolage, incongruity and theatricality, but his subversive production of queer visibility must be read from specific cultural and historical contexts, social discourses, and specific modes of dominance. Almodóvar's radical queerness is expressed by a remarkable sexual fluidity, beyond the structures of any categorization of homo, hetero or even bisexual, his camp operates in order to destabilize, redesign, and transfer the existent balance among identities and gender roles. Almodóvar's first commercial film radically deconstructs the family structure of the Spanish society and reconfigures it with alternative paradigms. Almodóvar also reconfigures the national identity through a recycling operation of popular culture, presenting new relationships between tradition and queerness, and giving new interpretations of gender, nationality and sexuality.

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