



Disruptions of the Real in Almodóvar’s Films: The Psychological Perspective in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) and *Matador* (1986)

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Abstract

Pedro Almodóvar creates a cinematography that represents the sacrifice of the subject in its becoming a subject-of-language. Having been labeled the representative of Spanish idiosyncrasies, Almodóvar’s films also express universal post-modern concerns. The director makes use of destabilizing, dissonant, and dissident discourses that question the illusory coherence of the supposedly unified subject. Using as theoretical background explanations by Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva regarding the formation of the speaking subject, in this work I analyze the relation between the subject-of-language psychological processes and the techniques that inform the construction of plot, set, and character in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), and *Matador* (1986). This research highlights the importance of the discourses of psychology and psychoanalysis to understand the artistic representations of universal post-modern sensibilities.

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Critical attitude towards the films of Pedro Almodóvar must of necessity include an understanding of risky, but vital notions, such as the defiance of authority, the disturbance of the grand organizing schemes, and the inclusion of marginal behaviors into ordinary lives. This critical posture should endorse no position, and should place itself in a space that has no solid center, since the Spanish director’s cinematography is itself located in the place of no one. For their analysis, Almodóvar’s films demand the understanding, as well as the use of a destabilizing discourse. Thus, a study of Almodóvar’s films from a

psychological and psychoanalytical perspective is appropriate. Not many film directors are able to create a cinematography that represents the sacrifice of the subject in its becoming a subject of language. Almodóvar makes use of destabilizing, dissonant and dissident discourses that question the illusory coherence of the supposedly unified subject. His films are characterized by a desire to destroy prevailing cultural, political, and historical models. Almodóvar erases the barriers between the masculine and the feminine, the moral and the immoral, the rational and the irrational.

An exploration of Almodóvar's films from a psychoanalytic angle also helps to explain the universal appeal of this director's films. Given his portrayal of Spanish idiosyncrasies and of a variety of Spanish traditions, which at times could be misunderstood by a public not familiar with Spanish folklore, many critics pose questions regarding Almodóvar's success within the international film community. Vicente Molina Foix asserts that "Almodóvar es España. Rara vez un cineasta (o un escritor) encarna todo un país para los públicos del resto del mundo" ("Almodovar is Spain. Very rarely a film maker (or a writer) is able to incarnate an entire country for the spectators of the rest of the world") (9). In order to clarify the paradox of Almodóvar's coexistent folklorist vein and cosmopolitanism, we resort to Julia Kristeva, who, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, offers an account of the speaking subject as a split subject, which is dominated by social pressures as well as physiological mechanisms, divided between conscious motivations and unconscious impulses. Kristeva's description of the split subject and its environment transcends political and cultural boundaries, as do the films of Pedro Almodóvar. In spite of the presence of Spain, we can discern in Almodóvar's films the physiological and psychological processes that motivate the construction of plot and character, and which point towards universal concerns of postmodern societies.

Pedro Almodóvar has influenced, more than any other Spanish film director, the panorama of contemporary Spanish cinematography. During the last two decades, his films have created a new world attitude towards the Spanish character, and have contributed to a new understanding of Spanish subjectivities that remained hidden until recently. My intention in this work is to analyze two films written and directed by Almodóvar, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and other girls like mom*, 1980), and *Matador* (1986). These two films are revealing of how the inclinations, compulsions, and behaviors of social subjects are informed by the psychological processes explained by psychoanalytical discourse in relation to the formation of the speaking subject. I will explore the connection between the speaking subject's psychological processes, and those related to cinematography such as plot, character, and set construction. Julia Kristeva declares of Philippe Sollers's novel *H*: "*H*—a book? A text that exists only on the condition of finding a subject in its rhythm: phrastic, biological, corporeal, transfamilial, infinitely pointing in historical time" (*Desire* 207); in a similar

fashion, we could affirm of Almodóvar's films that they exist in the rhythm of sounds, the hue of colors, the dynamism and fluidity of primal drives, and the stern rigidity of the "Law of the Father."

In my analysis of Almodóvar's films, I will be referring to the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva as they formulate the processes of the subject's coming-into-language. Lacan and Kristeva's psychoanalytical theories help us to understand the incursions of the subject's primal drives, instincts, and impulses into social life—or the realm of language, and the subject's illusory formation as a coherent and unified self. As mentioned earlier, such disruptions of the subject's desires, which are reminiscent of a life prior to the entering into the world of signification and language, indeed motivate the actions of many of Almodóvar's characters, and are the cause of symbolic turmoil in his films. A brief explanation of Lacan and Kristeva's theories regarding the formation of the speaking subject will help us contextualize this study.

The Symbolic order is also named by Lacan the 'big Other,' 'big O,' and 'the name of the father.' The 'big Other' is a "non-natural universe [which is made up] of inter-subjective and trans-subjective contexts into which individual human beings are thrown at birth...a pre-existing order preparing places for them in advance and influencing the vicissitudes of the ensuing lives" (Johnston). Lacan states that "the human action par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts" (the emphasis is the author's) (*Seminar* 230). The Symbolic stage of the subject's formation marks the entrance of the subject into the realm of language and signification; that is the world of norms and rules that control the subject's behaviors and desires. The Symbolic forbids the Real and works with the Imaginary. Even though the Real is forbidden in the Symbolic realm, both the Real and the Imaginary cause regular disruptions that reflect the subject's desires, and at the same time destabilize the Symbolic and the subject's life within it.

Lacan defines the Real as a state of nature from which subjects are forbidden as they enter into the realm of language and intersubjectivities, or the Symbolic realm. Very young or neo-natal children are close to this state (Felluga). The stage is characterized only by needs and the urge to satisfy those needs, and the fact that the subject does not see himself as a separate entity from its environment. Lacan's characterizations of the Real have changed with time. Initially, Lacan employed the term to refer to "material being(s)." In the 50s, according to Adrian Johnston in "Jacques Lacan," "Lacan tends to speak of the Real as an absolute fullness, a pure plenum devoid of the negativities of absences, antagonisms, gaps, lacks, splits, etc." Later, Lacan reformulates the Real as a stage which "involves the convergences of opposites as a register of volatile oscillations and unstable reversals between excesses and lacks, surpluses and deficits, flooding presences and draining absences". According to Lacan, for humans, the Real is impossible because it

cannot be expressed into language. The entrance into language marks the subject's separation from the Real; however, the Real tries to make incursions into the Symbolic, or "big Other", by reminding subjects of the materiality of their existence (Felluga). Although this is a traumatic perception for the subject, it also confers the subject, according to Lacan, a sense of *jouissance*.¹

The Imaginary stage of subjective development is also named by Lacan the 'mirror stage,' and he characterizes it as 'identification,' or "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (*Écrits* 2). This stage is marked by the knowledge of the self as separate from the environment, and thus, separate from the world of the mother. The child, still dependent on the mother, and with motor skills not fully developed, creates an image of the "symbolic matrix" in which he will function as a subject: "The I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (*Écrits* 2). This stage is also characterized by a sense of loss and lack. In a desire to return to the Real, the child demands to make the other part of himself, which is impossible. The child misrecognizes his own image in the mirror as that of the unified, stable, and coherent self, (an Ideal-I, according to Lacan) an image which is a fantasy created by the child to compensate for the sense of loss and lack. The end of the mirror-stage, after the child has identified with the *imago* of the other, marks the beginning of the relationship that links the I to the world of intersubjectivities. The other, and a desire of the other constitutes the subject's object, and "turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of sexual object, by the Oedipus complex" (*Écrits* 2-6). The Imaginary stage also continues to influence the subject as it becomes entangled with the Symbolic. It is precisely the entanglement of the Imaginary with the Symbolic, as well as the forays of the Real into the Symbolic that will cause the subjective disruptions that attempt to cause a breakdown in meaning (Symbolic); this is precisely what Julia Kristeva defines as 'the Abject.'

Kristeva outlines her concept of the Abject, a something that is opposed to "I." It's a human reaction to a "threatened breakdown in meaning." The sight of a corpse, which reminds subjects of their own materiality, of vomit, of sewage can elicit such reaction. The abject, Kristeva says, is radically excluded from the Symbolic order, "and it draws me towards the place where

¹ *Jouissance* according to Jacques Lacan is a state of perfect bliss and enjoyment, but as many Lacan theorists have expressed, the term resists translation. For a detailed account of the term "jouissance," please see: Bruce Fink's "*Knowledge and Jouissance*" in *Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink's Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*. NY: State University of New York, 2002: 21-46.

meaning collapses,” towards the Real. To Kristeva, the Abject is a result of a sudden incursion of a remnant of the Real into the subject’s world of language and signification: “A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome” (Powers 2). This sudden emergency comes from a reality that is forbidden from the world of signification, and which has the power to annihilate the subject, if it is acknowledged. The abject and abjection, saves subjects from annihilation: “abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (2).

Pedro Almodóvar began to be recognized in 1980 after his film *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* was produced. This period marks the center of what in Spain has been called la *transición*, that is, the transition between the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco and a democratic government. During this time of transition, the stern rigidity of the moral and social laws of the Franco regime dramatically clashed with the new mentality of *apertura* (openness) demanded by the new modern society. It was a time when Spanish society looked to the rest of Europe and the United States for a model. We could say figuratively that Europe and the United States were Spain’s ideal ego, as images of political freedom, sexual permissiveness, and other marginal behaviors flooded in from abroad. The clash between the conservative ideology of the dictatorship and the new outlook on life, which reflected people’s desires, bring to mind the psychological disruptions caused by remnants of the Real into the Symbolic order.

Almodóvar has been labeled as the representative of the *movida*, a countercultural movement that took place mainly in Madrid during the time of the transition to a democracy. The *movida* was a movement that represented the appearance of a new and marginal Spanish identity characterized by freedom of expression, transgression of the laws and the taboos imposed by the defunct Franco Regime, the use of recreational drugs, and a sexual revolution in which all sexual practices were considered and practiced. This movement, in addition to the cultural changes that had been occurring in Spain since the death of Franco, brought with them a sort of filmic transformation described by Peter Evans as the repolitization of film language in post-dictatorship Spanish cinema. Making use of psychoanalytical discourse to refer to the abolition of censorship and the freedom awarded film-makers to express previously prohibited themes, Evans states that during this time—the late 70s and 80s, film-makers “rush to speak the unspeakable”, and to the “spectacular return of the repressed” (Back to the Future 326).

Pepi Lucy Bom y otras chicas del montón was Almodovar’s first film success, a tale of sexual masochism and sadism in which the characters, as well as the spectators, catch glimpses of the Real only to be absorbed ultimately by the Symbolic. This film tells the story of Pepi (Carmen Maura), Luci (Eva Siva) and Bom (Olvido Gara, a.k.a. Alaska), three women who meet during Madrid’s *movida*. Pepi and Bom are both single, in their early twenties, and

Luci is a middle-aged, married woman. The first time we see Pepi, she is lying on the floor of her small one-room apartment. She entertains herself by gluing cards and pictures on a theme album. Music is playing loudly when suddenly, the doorbell rings, and an insistent knock on the door is heard. As Pepi opens the door, we see a full shot of a middle-aged policeman (Félix Rotaeta) who threatens to take Pepi into custody for growing marijuana on her window sill. Pepi, who happens to be a virgin, bribes the policeman by offering to have oral sex or anal intercourse (Pepi is a virgin and plans to sell her virginity); he agrees, but goes on to rape her. Later on, Pepi will attempt to take revenge by having her punk friends assault the policeman at night, and by turning the policeman's wife, Luci the masochist, against him. She befriends Luci and encourages her to have a lesbian relationship with her good friend, the sadist Bom, a punk singer. The relationship between Luci and Bom ends when the policeman kidnaps and assaults Luci, who ends up in the hospital badly hurt, but masochistically happy in a resumed relationship with him.

Some contradictory practices in this film attract our attention. Pepi, the representative of the *movida* is the one who seeks the revenge that would establish order within the Symbolic community; the policeman, a model for Symbolic law and order, is who actually transgresses the law; and more interestingly, the representation of Luci as a lesbian masochist, who is also the object of desire in both heterosexual and homosexual relations.

Pepi is initially presented within the small confines of her apartment; a place which is evocative of what Julia Kristeva calls the *chora*. Kristeva borrows the term from Plato's *Timeus*, who describes it as a receptacle. Within the *chora* is a being that is not yet a subject: "Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures" (Revolution 25).² The receptacle to which Kristeva refers constitutes a space outside and previous to language and signification, a place of primary drives and impulses. Likewise, Pepi's apartment is represented as a space of bliss. In the first scene of the film, the camera pans vertically to offer the spectators a view of the side wall of a working-class, three-story apartment building. At the end of this shot, we realize that we are looking to the outside from inside of Pepi's apartment. An extreme close up of Pepi's marijuana plants on the window sill is immediately followed by a shot of Pepi lying on the floor, playing with her Superman picture album. She is also surrounded by an array of small objects and toys. The accumulated objects are placed without order, given the impression of

² In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva speaks of the Semiotic as the place of the subject prior to becoming a subject-of-language. In this space, the subject is governed by physiological drives, rhythms and sounds. The Semiotic is repressed by the Symbolic, but it never totally leaves the subject, causing disruptions to the Symbolic through different venues.

chaos and irrationality. With this kitschy, turbulent décor, Almodóvar expresses the character's personality as eccentric and erratic. Spectators can discern the enjoyment in Pepi's facial gestures, free from social constraints. It is evident by this scene that Pepi has created her own world here, which is separate from the outside world—later in the film, we learn that Pepi does not have a paying job; she lives from her father's allowance.

The scene of Pepi's happy play in her apartment is abruptly interrupted by a loud knock on the door. This knock signals the conflictive encounter of Pepi's 'semiotic' habitat, the apartment, with the Symbolic. Within this space of desire takes place an act that constitutes a Symbolic prohibition: Pepi's rape. The conflict of an encounter between the Real and the Symbolic is reinforced in this film by the nature of the characters involved: the invader/transgressor happens to be a representative of the law, a policeman; the sufferer is a representative of the *movida*. This rape expresses the imposition of a subject's desire on another. The desire, which is caused by a remnant of the Real, causes a disruption to the Symbolic. The disruption comes in the form of the sexual aggression, a Symbolic prohibition that has been violated. This first scene reaffirms the semiotic essence of Pepi's initial space.

Almodóvar represents the inclusion of Pepi into the Symbolic realm through sound. From the ringing of the doorbell and the insisting knock on the door, we are taken to Pepi's deafening scream as she is being raped. Pepi's voice thus enters the dimension of intersubjectivities, the 'big Other,' to use Lacan's terminology. The scream marks a denunciation of an imposition of the Real, of someone else's desire. As Slavoj Žižek states of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Man who Knew Too Much*, "This is the scream of release, of decision, of choice, the scream by which unbearable tension finds an outlet...an act of civilization" (*Enjoy* 134). This is the voice that signals that the subject's choice—Pepi's, is within the community. The scream marks the sacrifice of the subject, as she enters the realm of intersubjectivities. Contrary to this alarming sound, are the policeman's intentions as he states, "I'll keep my mouth shut, and you move your plants." This statement defines a prohibition, in psychoanalytical terms, the forbidden act that cannot be spoken, a remnant of the Real, and the unattainable object of desire. The Real cannot be spoken because the Real is previous to language; therefore, a silence must mark the horror of the encounter with the Real. Pepi's rape by the policeman is rarely mentioned in the film again, but it is the core that gives impulse and drives all of Pepi's actions.

The film's next frame is a poster which announces that "Pepi is thirsty for vengeance." Even though the rape is rarely mentioned, Pepi does recruit his friends to avenge the transgression. Pepi's community of friends approaches the policeman at night loudly singing before they beat him up, another voice that signals the community's action towards the transgression. Almodóvar resorts to contrapuntal sound to dissolve any hint of coherence. Singing a popular and traditional Madrilenian tune from a Spanish traditional operetta

(zarzuela) *La verbena de la paloma* (*The Festival of the Pigeon*), Pepi's friends proceed to deliver repeated blows to the policeman. The sound of the singing voices acts as counterpoint to the image the spectators are about to see, creating a sense of confusion and dis-harmony. Pepi's gaze is also fixed on the assault, her gestures signal a sense of sexual and sensual satisfaction and *jouissance* as the Symbolic's debt is being paid. Jacques Lacan first asserted that *jouissance* is a form of perfect enjoyment and absolute bliss, but in his Twentieth Seminar he declared that the theme of *jouissance* is "Ce n'est pas ça" (That's not it), or as Adrian Johnston explains "the very cry by which the 'jouissance obtained' is distinguished from the 'jouissance expected'. What the subject is always doomed to experience is 'jouissance obtained' "a pleasure that falls short of the idealized standard...in most cases, *jouissance* manifests itself as a "pleasure-in-pain" (as with Freud's position that the ego experiences the success of repressed drives as pain" (The forced choice). The frustration in Pepi's expected sense of *jouissance* is represented by Almodóvar as the effect of a mistake. The director places an ironic twist in this narrative: the man who received the beating was not the policeman who raped Pepi, but his twin brother. Thus, in order to keep her desire for vengeance alive—her expectations of *jouissance*--, Pepi decides to take her revenge using the policeman's wife, Luci. This is a case of displacement, as Pepi unloads her frustrations on a less threatening individual, but it is also what wards off the threat of the demise of Pepi's desire and expectations for *jouissance*; such is the paradoxical nature of *jouissance*: "an enjoyment that is enjoyable insofar as it doesn't get what it's allegedly after" ("The Forced Choice of Enjoyment"); therefore, it requires repetition.

Thus, Pepi befriends Luci, and learns early on that Luci is a masochist, which is possibly the reason she married the policeman in the first place. She encourages Luci to leave her husband and to begin a lesbian relationship with her friend, the very dominant and sadist young singer named Bom. It becomes clear after a while that the lesbian relationship between Luci and Bom does not work; Bom is not aggressive enough for Luci. The policeman then, decides to kidnap his wife from Bom's clasp, and as he does, he almost kills her from a beating. Not surprisingly, in her hospital bed, Luci reaffirms her genuine happiness at being again in the very rough hands of her husband, the sadist. He continues to inflict pain on her even while in the hospital. We see the signs of *jouissance* in Luci's gestures.

Slavoj Žižek points out that "far from bringing any satisfaction to the sadistic witness, the masochist's self-torture frustrates the sadist, depriving him of his power over the masochist. Sadism involves a relationship of domination, while masochism is necessarily the first step towards liberation" ("Are we allowed?"). It is the "servant" who actually moves the strings by provoking acts of aggression and enjoying the experience. Thus, the sadist would be frustrated in view of the servant's *jouissance*. In a confrontation of both sadists, the policeman and Bom, at Luci's hospital bed, Bom is the loser

as she is witness to Luci's happiness produced by the policeman's continuous torturing. It is then made clear that the adventure between Luci and Bom, which was orchestrated by Pepi to fulfill her desire for revenge, was really provoked by Luci in order to elicit the proper aggressive response from her husband. The view of Luci's happiness is repugnant to Bom. However, the policeman is also a sadist, and he should find no satisfaction in view of his wife's happiness. This is how Pepi could possibly accomplish her revenge towards the policeman and obtain her expected *jouissance*, but the vision of the happy couple frustrates Pepi. Luci makes clear from her hospital bed that Pepi and Bom have acted as facilitators of the sado-masochistic relationship between her and her husband. Luci is clearly the winner. Bom states "lo que más me jode es que ese policía se haya cachondeado de nosotras" (what infuriates me most is the fact that that policeman has made a fool out of us). Pepi and Bom accept defeat and renounce enjoyment. Almodovar's comic representation of this situation is related to Lacan's notion of *jouissance* in his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter." As Žižek explains, "The name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course enjoyment," but the renunciation to enjoyment "produces inevitably a surplus enjoyment that Lacan writes down as the 'object small a' (*Enjoy* 26). It's a satisfaction that comes from sacrifice, "pleasure-in-pain." Thus, in a painful, but pleasurable symbolic ending, Pepi and Luci decide to live together and protect each other, or in the words of Jacques Lacan "the letter has reached its destination."³

If sadistic and masochistic behaviors drive character's actions in *Luci, Pepi, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, a world of highly violent, ritualized sexuality is represented in the film *Matador*. This film, as Peter William Evans states "concentrates, through the relationship between María Cardenal (Asumpta Serna) and Diego Montes (Nacho Martínez), a retired bullfighter, on violent sexual reciprocity" ("Acts of Violence" 103). The entire film is based on representations of the extreme proximity of the Real within the subjects' ordinary lives, and of disruptions of the Real into the Symbolic. Such disruptions come in the form of the protagonists' quests to achieve their desires. The film is all about desire and fear.

Diego, a retired bullfighter who now runs a school for novice matadors, is turned on by killing, not only bulls, but also women with whom he has had sexual encounters after their death. He meets María, a lawyer, who is also obsessed by sexuality and death. María learns the art of killing from Diego, and thus kills his victims by penetrating a hair pin in the back of their necks, as one would kill a bull. María also reaches orgasms with the corpses she has

³ As Slavoj Žižek explains of the film by Charles Chaplin *City Lights*, when the final moment arrives "the letter arrives at its destination," the film can end at once (Žižek 22). See also Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *The Purloined Poe*. John P. Muller and William J. Richards, eds. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988: 53.

created. In their midst is Angel (Antonio Banderas), a novice matador who attends Diego's school. Angel is a seer, a visionary capable of seeing things into the future, the past and at distant locations. He admires Diego and wants to be a bullfighter.

The film's main protagonists allow themselves to be overtaken by the unspeakable forces of Eros and Thanatos, and are able to live their fantasies through strong and powerful experiences of sexuality and death. These experiences are related to the Real, and are described by Lacan as "available to consciousness in extremely brief and fleeting moments of joy and terror" (Booker 35). They are represented by Almodóvar through a parallel with the world of bullfighting in which love and death become one, and whose ultimate goal is the death of one or both of the opponents. The film's first scenes establish the mood: as the credits roll, we see the face of a woman being pushed into a bathtub full of water, the woman is being drowned; blood colors the water, her wrists are being cut; another woman's head is being separated from her body by means of a circular saw; screams of horror are heard. Suddenly, a cut to an extreme close up of a man's face who is masturbating at the sight of the violence seen on a television screen. Extremely violent sounds and images of dismemberment, blood, and beatings accumulate as the man watching television continues to masturbate. Immediately, without transition, we are shown the same man teaching students in a classroom setting how to kill a bull. As this man, Diego, lectures his students on the art of killing a bull, the scene is cross cut to that of a woman, María, who is picking up a man in a public plaza. María leads the man to her apartment and begins to undress him. We hear a voice over of Diego's instruction to the novice bullfighter on how to kill a bull in the *corrida* or bullfight. Again without transition, we are shown María bestriding the man and commencing to make love to him; there are brief cuts to the students in Diego's arena practicing bullfighting. María drives her hair pin into the back of the man's neck and the students practicing finally kill the fake bull. María reaches orgasm after the man is dead. These rapid cross-cutting of scenes at the beginning of *Matador*, illustrate the disruptive and conflictive conjunction of the Symbolic (structured teaching) and the Real (seduction and murder), and at the same time, they express the Symbolic's attempt to channel the Real's disruptive flows of energy towards law and order, as it happens in organized bullfights. The *corrida*, as John Corbin signals, lends its structure to this film in which Diego and María play their game of sexual encounters. There is an affinity between the process of the bullfight which is divided into tercios, or thirds, and the process of the lover's sexual encounters; and there are also analogies between the moment of climax in both the *corrida* and the film (324).

Diego and María are serial killers; both are obsessed with sexuality and death. Paul Julian Smith informs of Almodóvar's synopsis of this film as the identification "between characters in their search for substitute objects which will fit ever more closely their exorbitant desires" (67). María's killings simply

imitate and repeat what Diego did in the bullring. Her obsession with death drives her to kill men, but desire is never satisfied, thence her drive to continue killing. Diego's fascination is with death itself, the ultimate encounter with the Real. Diego's necrophiliac inclinations are expressed when he asks Eva (Eva Cobo), his girlfriend, to play dead during love-making. He only reaches orgasm when Eva resembles a corpse. As Julia Kristeva affirms, "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live," (the emphasis is the author's) that is, the desire to be one with pure materiality, the compulsion to return to a subjective stage which is previous to that of signification (*Powers* 3). Such feeling creates a "vortex of summons and repulsions" (3) that is unspeakable and the subject must reject in order to be part of the Symbolic. The encounter between Diego and María necessarily leads to the inevitable, an encounter with Death (Smith 67).⁴

The actions of Diego and María are mediated by those of Angel, a character that best illustrates the disturbances of the Real. Angel is a student in Diego's bullfighting school; he admires the retired bullfighter and wants to be like him. He voluntarily takes the blame for Diego and María's serial murders. The narrative does not make it clear whether Angel is trying to save them, or he is just out of touch with reality; but either way, he absorbs the effects of Diego and María's fantasy realizations, making it possible for them to continue pursuing their sensual desires and obsessions. Angel is a telepath, and more than any other character in this film, he is in tune with nature. The immediacy of the Real is felt through this character. Angel is able to identify deadly poisonous mushrooms by the recognition of subtle markings; he is absorbed by Diego's detailed anatomical explanations on how to kill a bull; looking at the clouds causes him to have vertigo; he claims not to be afraid of his own death; and he possesses the talent of seeing into the future and the past. Through Angel we catch a glimpse of what Julia Kristeva calls the Abject, a reaction suffered by the subject as a result of an encounter with the Real. Kristeva asserts that "If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that is non other than abject" (*Powers* 5).

Powerless to identify with the "outside," Angel finds the impossible, the unspeakable within. Angel's father is absent, and he is unable to identify with his own mother, an ultra-conservative Catholic who significantly takes the place of the dead father. Angel's mother, Berta (Julieta Serrano), is an extremely strict woman who attempts to control Angel's every move. Comparable to an exorbitant Symbolic umbrella, she concerns herself with each minute detail of her son's life. While Berta sees herself as the model of

⁴ 'Lo inevitable,' according to Smith, was the working title of the film (Smith 67). Smith quotes Pedro Almodóvar and Jesús Ferrero, 'Lo inevitable,' Madrid 1986.

the typical suffering and sacrificing Catholic, and she is characterized as an ultra-conservative woman, the Real finds its way to disrupt her illusory coherence. The insinuation of incest is present in this film: Berta watches Angel while he is nude, in the bathroom, about to take a bath. The mother's face appears disfigured, seen through a distorting glass, as she urges Angel to hurry with his shower and to stop looking in the mirror. Without transition, the next scene shows her wrapping a cilice, a Catholic instrument for self-punishment, tightly around her leg. Notwithstanding, Angel's mother functions here as Angel's superego and her acerbity is so strong, that Angel is unable to meet her demands. Susan Martín-Márquez states that "In Almodóvar's work, feminine identity is inexorably linked to maternity" (497); however, in *Matador* the figures of both, Angel's mother and María are masculinized.⁵ Angel's fruitless attempts to fulfill the superego's calls, makes him want to find, to use Kristeva's words, "the impossible within," thence his strange and neurotic behavior.

Angel turns himself in to the police for raping Eva, and then decides to confess to all of Diego and María's murders. In this sense Angel constitutes the deject, a term used by Kristeva to describe the one by whom the abject exists: "a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (the emphasis and parenthesis are the author's) (*Powers* 8). Angel's self-abjection marks the ultimate recognition of a revelation of loss, or the fact that his being was based and formed on lack and want. Angel's desires are unattainable, and he is aware of this situation, perhaps due to the extreme Symbolic pressure from his mother.

In a sardonic turn of the plot, no one believes that Angel has committed the serial murders; he is not taken seriously. Angel's self-abjection is met with rejection from the others.

He is unable to overcome the interferences of his mother into his affairs. His desire to imitate Diego, his ideal ego, flops. Angel cannot be a bullfighter because he faints at the sight of blood; he cannot prove his masculinity to Diego because his rape of Eva is unsuccessful as he is unable to penetrate her. According to John Corbin, Angel's impotence and passivity "are not attributable mainly to family history. He faints at the sight of blood and has visions because of his peculiar nature, not because of his repressive mother and absent father" (329). However, if we take into account the psychological dimension, Angel's "peculiar nature," is precisely determined by the presence of the Real as proven by his reactions of abjection and the effect of his recognition of the unspeakable loss in his becoming a subject-of-language.

⁵ As a matter of fact, and as Susan Martín-Márquez states, "la protagonista María Cardenal, [que] se niega a encarnar una feminidad ligada a lo materno y concebida como abyecta, se señala como 'problema' para los feministas" (the protagonist, María Cardenal, who refuses to incarnate a femininity which is linked to the maternal and conceived as abject, is marked as a problem for feminists) (497).

In *Matador*, the moment of climax is planned by both lovers as they intend to stab each other with a hair pin in the back of their necks as they reach orgasm. This is also the *corrida*'s final stage that corresponds to the moment of death. The scene takes place in María's secret refuge, a place away from the city. Spectators see an aesthetically constructed image of both lovers as they make love on a red, spread out cape. A roaring fire is burning on the fireplace and a song by Mina, "Espérame en el cielo, corazón" (Wait for me in Heaven, my Love) is heard. We hear the following dialogue between Diego and María:

MARÍA: Te quiero más que a mí misma muerta ¿te gustaría verme muerta?
DIEGO: Sí y que tú me vieras muerto a mí.
(MARIA: I love you more than my own death. Would you like to see me dead?
DIEGO: Yes, and I'd like you to see me dead too.)

A close up of the lover's faces as they make love is cross cut with the arrival of the detective, Angel, Eva, and Angel's psychologist. The scene takes us back again to the lovers at the point of climax, María thrusts the hair pin into Diego's neck, she begs him to look at her and see how she dies, but Diego is not able to hold his head up. She immediately grabs a gun, puts it into her mouth and with no transition the scene moves to the outside of this country house. Paul Julian Smith argues that this scene is the "hardest" of the film's soft-core sex scenes, with its glimpse of female (if not male) genitalia (76). Indeed, purely physical, material pleasure and the interdependence between carnal enjoyment and nature are highlighted here by the occurrence of a total eclipse of the sun at the time of climax. It is also at this point, when the others arrive at the country house, that we hear a shot and have to assume that María has killed herself. The visitors come to the inside of the house to find Diego and María dead. The main protagonists have fulfilled their desires, they have become pure materiality. In their killing spree and also during the final death scene Diego and María both revert to a stage that is forbidden by the Symbolic. The only way for the lovers to free themselves and do away with the constant reminder of prohibition is through death. Their fantasy—incompatible with the "Law of the Father," takes over, resulting in death.

According to Isolina Ballesteros, "performance is a central aspect of Pedro Almodóvar's cinema that at once underscores and outstrips, in its particularities, the general performative conditions of cinema itself... his characters most acutely redefine or deconstruct their identities, generally in opposition to established social and sexual norms" (71). I would take this declaration further and add that many of Almodóvar's characters not only act in opposition to established social and sexual norms, many actually attempt to leave the realm of intersubjectivity and norms—the realm of social coexistence, in pursuit of their inner desires. Almodóvar's characters range from those who fail the attempt, and are finally absorbed by the system of laws,

to those who actually achieve their wish of exiting the “big Other,” or the social realm.

In an interview with the Spanish film magazine *Fotogramas*, Almodóvar declared: “I have invented *Matador*, a story in which people love and kill for pleasure, because everyone has a right to find their own sense of living in this valley of tears” (qtd. in Holguin 325). John Corbin interprets this declaration as Almodóvar’s way of “toying with the liberal sensibilities of his audience by saying that people had a right to kill for pleasure, but bracketing the pleasure of killing with the pleasure of loving indicates that Almodóvar’s target is sensual pleasure generally, not sexual pleasure particularly” (Corbin 316). If sensuality means the fulfillment of pleasure through the senses, an arousal of primal appetites, the enjoyment of physical sensations, and a lacking in moral restraints, then sensuality is closest to the Real and to all that subjects must forgo as they make their entrance into the Symbolic realm. Both of the films analyzed in this study are based on representations of the unsettling invasion of the Real into Symbolic reality: desire, sensual pleasure and its lack are paramount in the construction of the plots, and are the principal motivators for the characters’ actions. Almodóvar represents extreme and opposite behaviors within the same plane, unveiling the enjoyment of trespassed prohibitions, and demonstrating how the Real colonizes the subjects’ daily existence. These psychological notions transcend the barriers of nation, identity, and gender differences, thence the international appeal towards Almodóvar’s filmic art. We, as critics and spectators, observe in these films the psychic rejection finding its place within the narrative discourse; we are able to examine, from an undefined space, the ins and outs, the uncontrollable drives, the sinking and the rise, and finally either the absorption into language and ideology of what we call subjects, or their psychic dissolution into pure materiality.

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