

**Rated Equis:
American Reactions to the Films of Pedro Almodóvar**

Honors College Thesis

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Introduction

*Sweet heart of mine suddenly attacked.
All for loving more than the permissible.
All because a cigar sits in a mouth
And dampens in its succulent silks.
Because a provocative T-shirt points out
On his chest, the sculpted shield,
And a vigorous arm peeks from the smallest sleeve.
All because some legs, some perfect legs,
In the tightest pants, separate in front of me.
They separate.*

-Ana Rossetti, "Chico Wrangler" (Translated Catherine Wheeler)

Pedro Almodóvar, now the world's most celebrated Spanish film director since Luis Buñuel, has been hailed as the poster boy for the Madrid *movida*, an "anything goes" cultural movement that immediately followed the death of Francisco Franco in 1975. The *movida* has been called an attempt to unify all people regardless of birthplace, politics, economics, and sexual identity, while in practice it pertained mostly to the middle and upper classes. After nearly forty years of extreme conservatism under Franco's regime, the youth of Madrid reacted to its newfound creative and sexual liberty with unparalleled gusto. The *movida* emphasized a reversal of traditional gender roles, sexual experimentation, and drug use. By its end in the mid 1980s, politicians had embraced the *movida* as Madrid's new, post-fascism identity (Stapell). This political institutionalization of an originally pseudo anarchistic movement signified the death of the period of extreme self-liberation. The *movida* petered out by the mid 1980s, largely due to the spread of AIDS and *movida* members' rampant drug use.

Almodóvar released his first full-length film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*, in 1980. A caricature of his friend group, the film was meant as a folkloric representation of the Madrid movement (Willoquet-Maricondi 5). Almodóvar based the film on a "photo story" (a trendy variant on a comic book) he had written that had to be "punky, very aggressive, dirty,

and funny” (Strauss 11) in order to follow the current Madrid trends. “The New York Times” published a review of *Pepi, Luci, Bom* that encapsulates the cultural misunderstanding between the United States and Spain that I plan to illustrate. The reviewer, Janet Maslin, said, “Only in the context of an exceptionally taboo-ridden culture could this film's scatological silliness be construed as bold” (Maslin, “A Director”). Thus, Maslin simultaneously dismisses the potential that Spain had embraced a liberal mindset and that such an attitude could be progressive. She shows a lack of understanding of Madrid’s sociopolitical climate as well as a misunderstanding of her own culture’s puritanical attitudes. This type of criticism is representative of a large portion of the American reactions to Almodóvar’s films. Ten years later, this conflict between Spain’s post-Franco cultural ideals and America’s aversion to extranormative sexual representations came to a head with the 1990 release of *¡Atame!* The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) gave the film a rating otherwise reserved for pornography, which Almodóvar and Miramax contested with a lawsuit that challenged the American standards for sexuality in film.

During Spain’s shift from dictatorship to radically liberal social norms, the US was experiencing a more subtle movement towards conservatism after the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1981 and stayed in office until 1989. His presidency, which operated on more conservative ideals than the nation had recently experienced, coincided in great part with Almodóvar’s first decade of filmmaking. *The Law of Desire* (1987) was the first of his films to be released in the US. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* was released the next year to great critical acclaim, which widened American audiences’ interest in his films and prompted the release of the other films. Therefore,

Almodóvar's films were only received in the US after at least six years of conservative government.

In his introduction to *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, Paul Julian Smith calls attention to the orthodox ideals that American audiences subtly impose on films. Many critics, like Maslin, show little understanding of Spain's recent progressive culture. Foreign critics often view Almodóvar as "apolitical" or "ahistorical," a view which Almodóvar himself has reinforced, perhaps half-ironically (Smith 2). In an interview with Frédéric Strauss, Almodóvar said "My films were never Anti-Franco. I simply didn't even recognize his existence." (Strauss 18) One must take this type of statement with a grain of salt, however. Franco's existence pre 1975 was so pervasive that by representing a countermovement alone, Almodóvar was reacting to Franco without needing to openly acknowledge him. Thus, Almodóvar documented Franco's existence by representing his "non-existence". Regardless of this "apolitical" label, American critical reactions to Almodóvar's films often seem ignorant of the *movida* and incorrectly view him as a lone provocateur, set out to shock audiences foreign and domestic. Even if one is to view Almodóvar outside of his cultural context as a representative member of an important movement, this view demonstrates the difference between American artistic censorship and Spanish libertarianism. Many American reviews emphasize Almodóvar's intent to shock, which is unavoidable even within Spain's newly liberal culture. Almodóvar's films often deal with issues considered controversial also in Spain, such as rape, sadism, masochism, and pedophilia. However, American critics view these themes as culturally dangerous, as shown by the *¡Atame!* lawsuit. Smith attributes this to a conflict of "Spanish libertarianism (which saw the absolute freedom of the artist as an inevitable consequence of democracy)... with US regulative pragmatism (which subordinated artistic

autonomy to commercial well-being)” (Smith 5). However, some American reviewers confuse aspects of the *movida* and its aftermath with the trademark Almodóvar shock value plot points. One example of this confusion can be found in a “Cineaste” article comparing *Law of Desire* with *Matador*. The article says, “If *Matador* can be disturbing because of its treatment of murder, *Law of Desire* might turn out to be even more so for its open treatment of homosexuality” (Cadalso). *Matador* explores the romance between two serial killers, while *Law of Desire* is a semi-autobiographical story of a gay film director and his various lovers. This reviewer’s perception that an explicitly homosexual storyline could be even more disturbing than murder explicitly shows the American tendency to shy away from the thematics of heterodoxy.

I plan to explore this in more detail by focusing on the three most misunderstood films from Almodóvar’s first decade as a filmmaker: *Matador*, *Law of Desire*, and *¡Atame!* *Matador* must be examined because, despite its pervasive, grotesque violence, American reviewers seem to focus largely on its sexual aspects, which are no more explicit than in other Almodóvar films. *Law of Desire* must be examined because it focuses much less on what Almodóvar considered perverse and much more on the everyday life of a member of the *movida*, yet it scandalized American audiences. *¡Atame!* is another exploration of subversive ideas of love and sexuality, and this time is much less sexually explicit than other Almodóvar films. However, the American response in rating it pornography and the following court case provide ample evidence of orthodox ideals still present in current US society. My goal is to prove that, as Smith states, “Almodóvar’s films cannot simply be interrogated for ‘positive images’ and dismissed if they fail to live up to progressive Anglo-American norms... it is vital to examine the context of images or plot points and not to freeze them in censorious isolation” (Smith 3).

All of these films play with the traditional sexual roles which American culture holds dear. Judith Butler explains that gender is in practice a performance of what a given culture tells the individual that gender is. Men and women are meant to act within cultural expectations of manliness and womanhood. In 1980s American culture, these expectations were above all heterosexual. Men were dominant and aggressive, and women were submissive sexual objects. Butler describes this “heterosexual coherence” as a “regulatory fiction” that is “exposed as a norm and a fiction” when disrupted (Butler 136). Almodóvar portrays a fluidity of gender that plays outside of these rules on a number of levels, even in heterosexual stories. This fluidity was a common aspect of movida era Spain, but was not accepted or necessarily understood by the heteronormative American media. Because of the phenomenon Butler describes, American critics were quick to decry this threat to American heterocentrism.

Despite the extensive American research on Almodóvar, none represents the bilingual perspective. This poses a particular problem, as one must assume that researchers and reviewers only see the script as portrayed by the subtitles. Abé Mark Nornes describes subtitling as a “corrupt practice” in which the subtitler attempts to hide his or her own ideological assumptions while translating the original text into something that will “conform the original to the rules, regulations, idioms, and frame of reference of the target language and its culture” (Nornes 2007). Therefore, assuming Almodóvar’s English subtitles fit this description, the original film is already put through a filter of American ideals even before it is presented to the audience. My own experience as a bilingual viewer has proven this to be true; curse words are downgraded, if possible, to less offensive versions or omitted completely if not necessary to the meaning of the dialogue. In some cases, dialogue with an explicitly sexual undertone is changed to be only faintly sexual or at times completely chaste. My final chapter will highlight sections of dialogue

from the films during Almodóvar's first decade as a director in which I have found particularly significant discrepancies.

A look at the respective sociosexual politics of Spain and the United States explains a great deal of the American critical preoccupations in regards to Almodóvar films. It is necessary to first examine then remove the cultural filters through which Almodóvar films were viewed, starting with subtitles and following through the rating process to public criticism. Doing so not only reveals a more nuanced understanding of both Almodóvar's portrayal of Spain and Spanish culture outside of Almodóvar, but it also displays the level of sexual repression and cultural rigidity in the United States of which American critics seem unaware.

Chapter 1: *Matador* (1987)

Matador opens with a television screen showing a series of deaths from snuff movies; a woman's throat is slit in a bathtub; another woman is decapitated by a circular saw. The viewer of these films is shown for a moment, his breathing labored and his face contorted in pleasure. While the camera stays focused mostly on video screen and its grotesque images, it becomes clear that the man is masturbating to the on-screen deaths. This action is never made explicit, yet is shown by insinuation. His naked legs are propped up on either side of the screen. His breathing and facial expressions make his physical tension clear.

The camera cuts to another dual scene. The same man is shown teaching a class how to correctly kill a bull. Simultaneously, a woman seduces a man and kills him using the bullfighter's technique, plunging her hairpin into the nape of his neck. She proceeds to climax, using the death man's body to complete the act. Throughout *Matador*, violence and sexuality are mixed such that "the cultural values of the 'old' Spain are made equal to criminal and psychotic behavior, in which patriarchal values are only a façade for different types of

‘perversions’” (Acevedo-Muñoz 63): a man once hailed by all of Spain for his bullfighting skills is at heart a killer and member of Opus Dei leads her son to such extreme sexual repression that his first sexual instinct is to attempt rape.

The man shown in the first scenes is Diego, a famous ex-bullfighter, now a teacher. In the opening scene in which Diego teaches his students the art of the kill, he compares bullfighting to the seduction of women. The woman who acts out this metaphor is María. Despite her gender, she assumes a masculine role throughout much of the film. One American reviewer referred to her as the “handsome, elegant María” (Canby). She assumes the role of the matador, the pinnacle of Spanish masculinity. She seduces her prey in the same way that Diego seduces bulls and women alike, and she kills with a hairpin as phallic as the torero’s sword.

The metaphor of a bullfight as a sexual relation continues throughout *Matador*. Diego was gored in a bullfight and can no longer be a professional torero. He continues to utilize his skills of seduction on women, but he finds that he is not satisfied without the constant killing of his past profession. Diego succumbs to his instincts, and it is eventually revealed that he has been mixing the “bull as woman” metaphor quite literally. He arouses himself by watching snuff films, can only have sex with his girlfriend, Eva, when she plays dead, and he seduces his female students before killing them, much as María makes conquests of men before ending their lives. María and Diego only find fulfillment in death, and agree that they are of the same species. The ending of the film thus makes itself clear. María and Diego only find satisfaction in killing, and sexual arousal. Because of their love, they cannot experience a fulfilling sexual relationship without killing each other. They agree that the ultimate manifestation of their love would be to see one another dead, and they arrange to do so at the moment of their first mutual sexual climax.

The morbidity of the relationship between sex and violence is, as a “Variety” review states, the result of the psychosexual repression of the Franco years. Almodóvar’s argument in *Matador* is that, treated as a perversion, sexuality is easily mixed with other repressed impulses (Besa). Thus, the characters cannot separate their sexual feelings from violence. This is not only evident in Diego and María’s characters. When Diego’s questions the sexuality of his student, Angel, the student’s immediate reaction is to try rape his neighbor, Eva, a model and Diego’s girlfriend.

Almodóvar is not the first to draw the parallel between pornography and explicit violence. In *Hard Core: Power and Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, Linda Williams analyzes the comparison Almodóvar makes explicit in the opening masturbation scene of *Matador*. Paul Julian Smith summarizes Williams’ argument: “penile penetration is substituted by another, more definitive piercing of the flesh; and the involuntary spasm of female orgasm, stubbornly invisible, yields to a new frenzy of the visible, which culminates in death (pp. 192-4)” (Smith 66). While Diego is the ultimate example of the violent and sexual masculinity represented in film, Angel is the opposite. Despite his violent impulse to rape Eva, he fails because he ejaculates before entering her. When Eva then runs away, she falls and cuts her face. Angel faints at the sight of her blood. He cannot sustain an erection long enough to enter a woman, nor does he have the constitution to kill without fainting at the sight of blood. Angel cannot penetrate in either of the ways often used in film, and thus William’s analysis works also in the inverse. However, he is training to be a matador and clearly wishes to emanate Diego’s masculinity. It seems as if Almodóvar is playing with traditional Spanish values in regard to gender by playing with the double-edged sword of penetration used in film. Diego, a man of national fame for his penetration in the bull arena, now is unable to be satisfied by sexual

penetration alone. Angel, a young man hoping to emanate Diego's bullfighting masculinity, is unable to penetrate with his penis, much less a sword, and therefore his sexuality is called into question.

Matador's mixed sexuality and violence reached international audiences to mixed reactions. While Besa from "Variety" understood the film's satirical comment on repression, the shocking nature of the images distracted other audiences from the cultural allegory. Countries that often show sexuality and violence as separate entities in film were put off by the appearance of the two as a linked phenomenon. Even in Spain, critics accused *Matador* of being pornographic. Britain delayed its release because of "concern over its graphic combination of sex and violence" (Smith 66) and the United States rated it NC-17 for "aberrant sexuality including violence."

Even by American standards, *Matador* is rather violent, and it is more explicitly sexual than most Hollywood movies—there are multiple scenes with both female and male nudity, and the sex scenes are shot in a way that is more explicit and realistic than most Hollywood-style sex. Characters grunt and grimace in pleasure in scenes that Hollywood would likely portray with mood music and romanticized cinematography. However, the wording of the US rating seems to focus on the issue of the sexuality and violence portrayed together rather than their respective explicitness. A closer look at the wording reveals that, despite grouping the two, the MPAA emphasizes sexuality more than violence. The word "aberrant" only describes the sexuality and not the violence, and violence is only used as satellite of the sexuality. *Matador* is not rated NC-17 for "aberrant sexuality in conjunction with aberrant violence," but for "aberrant sexuality *including* violence." This wording almost implies that the violence would not be worthy of comment were it not associated with the sexuality, as it does not get its own category in the

rating. This attitude is conclusive with general American acceptance of violence over sex in media.

One could argue, however, that the violence in *Matador* is more “aberrant” than the sexuality. The opening scene depicts image after image of grotesque, explicit violence, yet Diego’s masturbation is only implied. The scene in which Maria kills her sex partner shows the majority of her naked body, but in shadow. While they are in the throws of passion, the camera focuses largely on their faces or the back of her head. However, when she kills him, the camera shows a close-up image of Maria’s hairpin entering his flesh. Nearly each scene of violence includes a close-range shot of penetration of flesh by a sharp object, yet all penile penetration is only implied. Of course, real penile penetration shown on screen would be pornography. However, Almodóvar chooses to never show an exposed penis throughout the film. Only the final sex scene has close-up nudity, and even then only Maria is shown fully nude. Men are only shown naked from the back. While Maria and Diego’s consummation of their relationship starts out very explicitly, most of the actual intercourse is cut out, and what is shown is shot from the shoulders up. Compared to most American cinema, the close-up shot of Maria’s pubic region that occurs in the final scene is extremely explicit. However, if one deconstructs each scene of violence in comparison with each scene of sexuality, it hardly seems that the sexuality could be considered the more “aberrant” of the two.

American critical reactions to *Matador* sometimes showed a cultural understanding of the *movida* and Spain’s political climate, but even those reviewers that understood Spain’s generally more liberal mindset filtered their criticisms with conservative American beliefs. Vincent Canby of “The New York Times” dubbed *Matador* a “surrealist sex comedy,” once again focusing on the sexuality instead of the violence. Canby calls Diego and Maria’s morbid attraction

problematic “even in a society that tolerates virtually anything that consenting adults agree to do.” This reference is presumably alluding to the *movida*’s freedom and experimentation, but it does so with a slight air of disdain and disapproval. Canby once again shows his knowledge of Spain’s cultural climate at the end of his review by stating that *Matador* shows the “exuberant heedlessness with which it portrays a society breaking loose from decades of fascist repression.” There is a slight difference between using *Matador* as an allegory for psychosexual repression and saying that its plot demonstrates the “exuberant heedlessness” of Spain’s post-Franco state. The jump that this statement makes is from Almodóvar’s penchant for exploring marginal fetishes and psychological traits to applying this fetish to a society as a whole. Perhaps Canby’s disdain comes from the fact that *Matador* can be easily seen as a comedy. Paul Julian Smith points out that “one British critic of *Matador* registered surprise that a scene of attempted rape could be played for laughs” (68). Canby emphasizes that *Matador* is a comedy, but does not call it a satire. Perhaps he had a similar reaction to that of the British critic and attributed the use of comedy not to satire but to a general exploration of post-Franco amorality.

A “Washington Post” article by Hal Hinson also sees *Matador* as a comedy, and places it “in the symbolic landscape where Almodóvar’s films take place—in the terrain where camp and pornography and poetry converge.” Perhaps this statement is an accurate description of the Almodóvar canon, but only in a society such as that of the United States, where violence is shrugged off and sexuality is gasped at, does a recipe for *Matador* include pornography but not violence. Hinson makes no reference to any cultural interpretation, but rather states that *Matador*’s characters “aren’t so much real figures as embodiments of psychological drives and impulses.” He even goes on to say that the characters “represent places in the head that Almodóvar would like to visit.” The use of “the head” implies a generality that applies to more

than just post-Franco Spain. Hinson seems to think that in his own, exaggerated way, Almodóvar is revealing a link between violence and sexuality in human psychology in general, not just in that of a particularly repressed group or culture. Hinson sees comedy not in cultural satire, but in the extremism of this melodrama of human psychology. He points out that Almodóvar approaches Maria and Diego's romance with sincerity of the sort that is so exaggerated that it becomes comic.

In an article from "Film Quarterly," Marsha Kinder refers to *Matador* not as a sex comedy or a comedy at all, but as a "psychological thriller." Kinder, like Hinson, focuses largely on the psychological undertones of the film rather than the cultural ones, and she successfully avoids ethnocentric judgment. She points out an "Oedipal subtext" in the rape plotline. If Angel looks up to Diego as a nearly fatherly figure, his attempt to rape Diego's girlfriend is a variant on the fulfillment of an Oedipus complex. This is particularly interesting, as Kinder views Angel as "sexually disturbed" in part by his "evil repressive mother who belongs to Opus Dei" (Willoquet-Maricondi 43-44). The Opus Dei is a particularly conservative branch of Catholicism often associated with Franco and Fascism, and Angel's mother's membership thereof implies a very conservative view of sexuality (Acevedo-Muñoz 66). Because his mother is an object of sexual repression for Angel, he displaces his Oedipus complex to Eva.

Both Kinder and Desson Howe, also of the "Washington Post," find space in their one-page-or-less reviews to mention the police inspector's potential homosexuality, implied by his interest in Angel and his prolonged gaze toward the bullfighting students' tightly clad genitals. Neither reviewer develops this idea further than to point out its existence. To an American audience in the late 1980s, a homoerotic implication might have seemed scandalous enough to be noteworthy even in such a fleeting way. However, both Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz and Paul

Julian Smith explore a slightly different use of this detail. Throughout much of *Matador* and cinema in general, the female body is fetishized and objectified. It is important that the future toreros are being examined as if they were women, for their careers embody the Spanish idea of masculinity.

“Between all the blood and the phallic symbolism of picador stabs, *banderilla* pricks and the matador’s sword thrusts, lies a strangely feminised group of sportsmen. Almodóvar emphasizes that by putting the future toreadors in the usually feminine position of being the objects of the (homoerotic) male gaze and desire” (Acevedo-Muñoz 72).

Perhaps what is more important than the inspector’s homosexuality is that traditional Spanish culture’s idea of masculinity can easily be turned on its head and treated as femininity. Smith quotes Naomi Schor’s theory, which states that this scene might represent female fetishism of men’s phalluses, and that in order to make this clearer, Almodóvar chose a gay viewer because female fetishism is “invisible... because it coincides with the norm of phallicism” (Smith 73). This is to say that phallic images are so prevalent in current cinema and society that Almodóvar chose to call attention to them by using a homosexual subtext.

Where some American critics are intrigued by the psychological implications of the sexual themes in *Matador*, others clumsily mix in cultural assumptions, consciously or not. Some view *Matador* as an exploration of the link between sexuality and violence in psychology and culture, but other American critics get tangled in its unconventional portrayal of sexuality.

Chapter 2: *The Law of Desire* (1988)

The Law of Desire, Almodóvar’s first film after *Matador*, also opens with a man masturbating. This time, an off-screen voice instructs a young man in his underwear to touch himself. Once again, the opening scene turns out to be from another film-within-a-film. To reuse

a quote that juxtaposes the two films, “if *Matador* can be disturbing because of its treatment of murder, *Law of Desire* might turn out to be even more so for its open treatment of homosexuality” (Cadalso). The general American reaction to *Law of Desire* follows this line of thinking, in which the film’s challenge of traditional gender roles seems inherently threatening. Nearly every character displays sexual characteristics that stray from heteronormativity. The protagonist is Pablo Quintero (Eusebio Poncela), the openly gay director of the opening film. He has relationships with two different men during the film: Juan (Miguel Molina), who leaves him early in the film, and Antonio (Antonio Banderas), his lover-cum-stalker.

Shortly after the opening scene, Juan announces that he is moving, and he and Pablo share a tender last night together. The two men are not shown making love, but instead the camera cuts to dawn breaking on their nude, sleeping bodies entwined. Acevedo-Muñoz argues that this scene breaks with the previous tradition of homosexual film in that it treats homosexual relations not as a novelty, with gratuity and “reflexive rarefying effects,” but as any other romantic or sexual relation portrayed in film. By doing so, *The Law of Desire* starts a new tradition in queer cinema, one in which homosexuality is treated as normative (81). Perhaps this treatment causes the “disturbing” nature to which Cadalso refers in this chapter’s opening quote. Had Almodóvar continued to treat homosexuality as a novelty, in keeping with film tradition, he would not have challenged so directly the norms to which American critics clung so tightly. To return to Butler, this type of challenge to heterosexuality as a norm brings about an awareness of what is a norm, and therefore a fiction, that can seem dangerous to a society’s framework. Almodóvar’s treatment of homosexuality as a possibly normative, romantic human relationship poses a direct threat to American critics’ trusty heterocentrism.

Outside of the main homosexual plotline, Almodóvar packs *The Law of Desire*'s characters full of gender-confusing traits. Tina (Carmen Maura), Pablo's sister, is an exaggeratedly womanly transgender who changed sexes to entice her father, who left her even so. Tina is a very convincing woman, which adds to the cross-association of gender performance. She is now a single mother, caring for a daughter, who is the result of a relationship with a famous model. The daughter, Ada (Manuela Velasco), serves as a constant reminder of Tina's past as a man. To add a metafilmic level to the play on gender performance, Bibi Anderson, a famous transsexual, plays Ada's mother. Butler states that, "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (137). She continues to say that, "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (137). In true *movida* style, Almodóvar plays with as many aspects of gender perception as possible. By casting Carmen Maura as a man who identifies as, and therefore becomes, a woman, he removes the performance of gender multiple times from biological gender, and therefore calls gender norms into question. The same can be said of the casting of Bibi Anderson. Almodóvar does not cast a famous transsexual queen as another transsexual. He casts her as a woman, and therefore claims her gender performance as normative and authentic. Paul Julian Smith comments on the outward nature of gender in society, saying that "Tina is a living icon of the falseness of appearance... The fact that Bibi Anderson, the actress playing the 'GG' (genuine girl)... only heightens this tyranny of the visual. A look is no guarantee of mutual comprehension" (86). This conflict of outwardly expressed gender and biological gender is inherently confusing to simplistic American concepts of gender. Thus, American critics labeled *The Law of Desire* as amoral and disturbing.

In the grand scheme of morality in Almodóvar films, *The Law of Desire* follows rather closely conventional moral norms. Pablo has his “vices” namely cocaine and promiscuity, but they are portrayed as weaknesses and are not shown to a great extent. Unlike in *What Have I Done to Do This?* and *Volver*, murder does not go unpunished. Despite the rather unexpected conformation to moral convention in *The Law of Desire*, American film critics still saw the film as amoral. Janet Maslin of “The New York Times” states that “casual drug use and casual homosexual encounters are all in a day’s work for Pablo, who exists quite happily in a film devoid of moral opprobrium.” Maslin’s use of hyperbole in this sentence shows both judgment and misunderstanding. Pablo can hardly be considered happy, and the two “casual” vices mentioned by Maslin help him cope with the fact that he cannot be with Juan, with whom he would likely enjoy very conventional monogamy were he given the chance. In fact, what seems more important to Maslin than the casual nature of Pablo’s sexual encounters is that they are with men. Casual sexual encounters could hardly be considered a novelty in American film in 1988, and few critics would bother to consider their morality or lack thereof. However, homosexual encounters were seldom treated as commonplace subject matter in 1988, which is what caused Maslin to raise an eyebrow. Maslin uses the word ‘casual’ once again in describing Antonio and Pablo’s initial sexual encounter. In Maslin’s words, Antonio is a “younger man who is fascinated by him (Pablo), and whom he casually seduces.” In her review, Maslin does not present Antonio as a criminal, but instead nearly presents Pablo as the culprit. Given the wording of the aforementioned sentence, it seems as if Maslin would blame Pablo for the outcome, seeing as how he ‘casually seduced’ Antonio. She admits that the trouble is “caused by Antonio,” but does not cast nearly as much doubt on his character as she does Pablo’s. Furthermore, in the

“casual seduction” Maslin mentions, it is Antonio that pursues Pablo, who only seduces by nature of being more experienced.

This latent homophobia is not unique to Maslin, nor to American critics alone. In an interview with Almodóvar, a British reviewer for “Time Out” named Tim Clark asked if the actors playing gay parts were stigmatized because of the AIDS epidemic. Almodóvar responded, “You have to accept you’re living in a country under heavy censorship, and I feel very sorry for you.... The kind of sexual intolerance you mention is more dangerous than AIDS itself” (Willoquet-Maricondi 60). Almodóvar seemed very aware that despite its conservative history, Spain had moved ahead of more historically liberal countries. Meanwhile, the United States continued to fumble with the concept of acting the part of a homosexual, which it somehow found harder to separate from reality than it did other fictional plotlines. In interviews with American journalists, Antonio Banderas often had to clarify that he himself was heterosexual, that he had never had a sexual relationship with Almodóvar, and that acting the part of a homosexual man was the same as acting any other part (Perriam).

The issue of homosexuality seems to induce an interesting sort of conclusion jumping in American journalists and critics, who seem to see the spread of AIDS around every corner at the mere mention of homosexuality. To these critics, and therefore presumably to the public as well, homosexuality involves a clear chain of events. First comes contact with homosexual culture, even in the form of acting a part in a movie, then comes promiscuity (for example sleeping with the film’s famously homosexual director), then comes the HIV virus. As is evident in the “Time Out” anecdote, the journalist jumped from step one (playing a homosexual in a film) to the final step (being stigmatized because of AIDS). “New Yorker” critic Pauline Kael makes a similar jump. Kael notes that throughout *The Law of Desire*, sexually transmitted diseases are only

mentioned once. When Antonio and Pablo first have sexual relations, Antonio interrupts them to ask if Pablo has any diseases. Pablo answers in typical Almodóvar fashion, saying that pleasure is much more important than such questions. Kael focuses on this answer, claiming that, “Law of Desire is a homosexual fantasy—AIDS doesn’t exist” (“Manypeeplia Upsidownia”). She does not think that Almodóvar is unaware of AIDS, but that he chooses to ignore it in his films to create an alternative reality in his films. This argument can easily be supported by the ever-quoted anecdote of Almodóvar saying that he likes to ignore Franco’s existence as a personal rebellion against Fascism. Kael assumes that *The Law of Desire* is not only a film in which Franco never existed, but one in which AIDS does not exist. However, this is a simplified view. Antonio’s question about disease shows that there is a general concern about safety in sex, be it specifically homosexual in this case. True, Almodóvar does not choose to focus on this issue, and he has his protagonist brush the question off. However, it is presumptuous to think that any given homosexual narrative must have an AIDS plotline. The question of sexually transmitted disease is addressed briefly, then left alone. As white music critics (namely John Hammond) once criticized Duke Ellington for writing academic music instead of music that reflected what was presumed to be the African American experience, straight film critics seem to be criticizing Almodóvar for choosing to exclude AIDS from a homosexual narrative. Perhaps this is a willful exclusion, as Kael seems to believe, but it also stands to reason that a gay narrative might need to focus more on other things. Furthermore, Pablo seems to be in a relatively monogamous relationship with Juan before the breakup, and Antonio is a virgin, so he does not increase Pablo’s chances of getting AIDS. An AIDS plotline would have likely served only to underline Pablo’s promiscuity, as there is no reason to add one to either of his other relationships. Kael

argues that Almodóvar made an effort to exclude AIDS from his story, but it is equally likely that including AIDS in the story would have involved more of an effort.

The sexual intolerance of which Almodóvar accuses England is evident also in the United States. However, Kael seems to think of the US as a more progressive society than that of Spain, even while subjecting *The Law of Desire* to a heterosexist viewpoint. Her response to Almodóvar's scriptwriting prompt, "What if Franco never existed?" is "That's America!" While America has indeed never had a fascist dictator, Kael fancies herself and her culture much more progressive than they are, especially in comparison with Almodóvar's vision of a fascism-free society. She even credits the US with the vivacity and temperament of Almodóvar's Madrid. Kael simultaneously claims that the sexual and social freedom displayed in *The Law of Desire* is an imitation of the United States while she imposes conservative and simplistic American beliefs about sexuality.

While international critics greeted the homosexual themes in *The Law of Desire* with clumsy labels, straight critics in Spain eagerly awaited a homosexual narrative from Almodóvar. "Far from being repressed, homosexuality was actually promoted by the straight media, anxious to procure 'personal' statements which could be presented as unambiguous testimony to the body of the author" (Smith 80). *The Law of Desire* is easily considered the most autobiographical of Almodóvar's works, and the straight media in Spain waited eagerly for a film to represent a personal viewpoint. Smith compares this pressure to a "gay seduction" in which it was "not at all clear who was the leading partner" (80). Where Kael viewed *The Law of Desire* as a homosexual fantasy, viewers within Spain applauded its realism and tenderness in approaching a story of gay love. This was so much the reaction that there was some backlash. Critics worried that Almodóvar was viewed too much as a gay icon, and that *The Law of Desire* was seen as too

much of a summary of gay life. Santiago Fouz Hernández and Chris Perriam elaborate on this theme, saying that Almodóvar never actually came out in Spain, and that his characters are too much part of his “apolitical hedonism, mere style rebellion” to be the representative gay figures in Spanish cinema (97).

Paul Julian Smith offers the idea that perhaps AIDS was implied as a metaphor instead of referred to as explicitly as American critics would like.

“When Antonio leaves the bed after last making love with Pablo, the latter is shot from behind a sheet which is like a shroud. It is Antonio, the obsessive lover, who is about to shoot himself, choosing to pay the price of a criminal passion. But it is as if Pablo is dead already, in life. It is an ominous image for gay men in Spain” (Smith 90).

Spain has had the highest incidence of AIDS infection in Europe. Smith’s theory is that this is tied to the high rate of mortality of gay men in *The Law of Desire*. This reading would satisfy American critics such as Kael looking for an AIDS commentary in *The Law of Desire*. However, she and other critics found themselves too wrapped up in their discomfort inversions of traditional heterocentric gender roles to dig deep enough to find this interpretation.

Chapter 3: ¡Atame!

____ In 1989, *¡Atame!* (translated “tie me up”) was the highest grossing film in Spain. It was released in early 1990 in the United States under the title *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* and received a less welcoming reaction. This sadomasochistic Beauty and the Beast tale chronicles the unlikely romance between an ex-junkie porn star turned movie star, Marina (Victoria Abril), and her kidnapper, Ricky (Antonio Banderas). Upon release from a mental hospital, Ricky searches for Marina, whom he had slept with once before. Ricky breaks into Marina’s apartment, tying her to the bed. Ricky laments the fact that he had to resort to violence, saying that he only hurt

her to keep her from leaving. Once Marina calms down, Ricky explains that he is in love with her and that he will keep her hostage until she loves him. He introduces himself by saying “I’m twenty-three years old, I have 50,000 pesetas, and I am alone in the world. I’ll try to be a good husband to you and a good father to your children.” Many critics and audiences took the film literally, and were dismayed at the portrayal of a sadomasochistic love story involving kidnap and violence. However, Almodóvar has stated many times that the story was a satirical allegory in which the symbolic ties that bind couples together were made physical (Willoquet-Maricondi 86).

When first released in the US, *¡Atame!* was rated X, a title which stigmatized the film as pornography. The X rating was not originally intended to denote pornography, but to label a film “adult,” a heading that today also has a pornographic connotation. The original ratings that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) determined in 1968 were G (open to general audiences), M (for mature audiences), R (for restricted audiences; seventeen and older unless with guardian), and X (only for audiences aged seventeen and older). Early X-rated movies such as *Midnight Cowboy* and *A Clockwork Orange* were often not of a pornographic nature, but instead were rated as such for patently adult content. However, the pornography industry embraced the X rating to such an extent that it more or less monopolized the rating by the mid 1980s, and an X rating became a de-facto denotation of hardcore pornography (Gentilviso).

This caused multiple problems for those releasing films rated X. Not only were their audiences limited to those above the age of seventeen, but fewer theatres released such films and fewer newspapers publicized them. Furthermore, the X rating was a misleading title. While pornography would embrace the rating as verification of its smuttiness, other explicit movies that were not pornographic were lumped in with a very different product. For multiple reasons, an X

rating would automatically remove a movie from mainstream consumption, which made cinematic success for *¡Atame!* extremely unlikely in the US.

In response to the X rating given by the MPAA, Almodóvar and Miramax sued. The MPAA had overlooked the metaphorical interpretation of the bondage in favor of a literal reading, and even the literal reading had received a more stringent treatment than had it been in an American film. The Miramax attorney proved this by creating a montage of equally explicit and controversial films from recent American films that had been rated R. While the case was dismissed, the judge declared that the MPAA “impos(sed) censorship, yet all the while facilitat(ed) the marketing of exploitative and violent films (with) an industry seal of approval” (Smith 117). He also admitted that the rating system favored extreme violence and drug use in film over explicit sex. This once again reveals the American opposition to explicit sex that is not present in Spanish society, despite its label as a “less progressive” country. As Smith states, “the rating controversy revealed the conflict between two national ideologies, each of which pledged allegiance to freedom of expression; but it also confronted the US literalist readings of the text... to Spanish figurative readings” (118). Later in 1990, the MPAA changed the use of the X rating to NC-17 in order to avoid the sexual stigma highlighted in part by this case.

As Frédéric Strauss is quick to point out, *¡Atame!* is indeed “almost hard-core.” However, he understands that Almodóvar is “flirting with pornography and vulgarity precisely in order to show how different they are from real porn” (102). This point is what the MPAA seemed to be missing. They pinpointed the only sex scene in the movie as the offending material that merited an X certificate. The scene is long, with explicit dialogue. However, as Almodóvar happily points out, “The *mise en scène* was totally different from porn. Apart from one mid-shot, the actors are shot almost entirely in close-up. You can only see their faces” (Strauss 102). As in the

final sex scene in *Matador*, the actors' faces and exclamations give the viewer an explicit idea of what they are experiencing, but without having to show almost anything of the rest of their bodies. This is starkly different from pornography, where the camera is apt to crop out faces and focus only on the active parts.

While the MPAA did not openly use this as a reason for the X rating, there was a general negative reaction in the United States to the sadomasochistic undertones in *¡Atame!* Almodóvar was barraged with questions about rape and sadomasochism, which he deflected, saying that the film had been misunderstood. In response to the accusation that *¡Atame!* promotes violence against women, Almodóvar responded, "Me, macho—who are they kidding?" (Willoquet-Maricondi 87). Almodóvar's history of making female-centric films with stunted male characters backs up this retort, despite the obvious misogynistic reading of the film.

In the mainstream American media, only Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* acknowledges the sexist implications of *¡Atame!*, calling it "retro-sexist hook" used to shock and intrigue audiences. He states that, "Marina, seduced by Ricky's caveman tactics, is giving in to what she wanted all along" ("Tie Me Up!"). While Gleiberman seems more aware of the sexist implications of *¡Atame!* than other reviewers, he then shows a very conservative American proclivity for traditional gender roles by claiming that, "in an era of blurred sex roles, when both men and women are desperate to know whether to be more aggressive or passive within courtship rituals, this sort of thing can have a simplistic, clarifying appeal" ("Tie Me Up!"). Despite his awareness of the blatant sexist interpretation of *¡Atame!*, he cannot separate himself from the comfort of a story with Tarzan and Jane type sexual roles.

Unlike Gleiberman, other reviewers focus their page allowance largely on masochism with a quick nod to the sex. In response to questions about sadomasochism, Almodóvar claims in

an interview with Marcia Pally that the ropes used to bind Marina to her bed are not in fact a reference to sadomasochistic bondage, but to the symbolic ties of family and coexistence (Willoquet-Maricondi 86). This stands to reason, despite the evidence of further exploration of sadomasochism and domination between Marina and Ricky. The main issue in the American critical reaction to *¡Atame!* was that it did not allow for a symbolic reading of the film. Critics seldom looked past the sex and violence which make up a vast majority of Hollywood cinema to see a symbolic reading of the film that allowed for a much more nuanced understanding of Almodóvar's message, which played heavily on the horror genre, the porn genre, family structures, addiction, and gender performance.

When Ricky leaves the mental hospital, he tells the director that he plans to work and form a family, and he sets this plan in action immediately upon his release. The situation he creates in which he and Marina spend nearly all their time together in an apartment is that of forced coexistence, which quickly resembles a marriage. Once she stops actively trying to escape, Marina starts to treat Ricky like a husband, even before she is in love with him. The two eat lunch together in front of the television. When Ricky does not offer to help Marina cook, she reprimands him, telling him to set the table. Even though Ricky repeatedly hurts Marina in his attempts to keep her from leaving, he becomes fixated on finding painkillers for her, an endeavor that proves to be dangerous given her need for illegal drugs. Ricky shops for softer ropes and gags so that Marina may be comfortable while tied up in his absence. When Ricky decides that they should move into a neighboring apartment so as to not be found, he carries Marina through the doorway like a newlywed. A look at their living situation with the hostage circumstance removed reveals a rather peaceful and giving coexistence that all too easily seems like marriage long before Marina gives in to her feelings.

This is exemplified by the use of the bathroom as a pivotal place. Perhaps the most intimate place in a house, the bathroom represents the deepest aspect of coexistence. As Acevedo-Muñoz points out, there are three scenes of Marina and Ricky in the bathroom together, and each represents a new stage in their relationship. The first scene is Maria's first attempt at escape after being taken hostage. She throws a glass at Ricky and tries to run out, but he catches her. Once his arms are around her, he makes no further violent moves. The two are caught in a simultaneously rough and tender embrace, as Marina stops struggling, caught by Ricky's gaze. Ricky and Marina next find themselves in the bathroom when they are preparing to go to Marina's psychologist to get a prescription for painkillers strong enough to satisfy Marina's post-addiction drug tolerance. The two stand in front of the mirror together, preparing to leave the apartment together as a couple. Not only does this show a classic scene of married life, but it is their first public venture together.

The third bathroom scene is the most pivotal, as it is when Marina's attitude towards Ricky finally changes. Ricky has just returned from an attempt to find Marina's drugs. He is badly beaten by the drug dealers he stole from after his first fight with Marina, who takes him into the bathroom to clean his wounds. As she tenderly takes care of him, Ricky recounts his only memory of his family, which is of his mother shaving his father on the porch. He says that scene reminds him of Marina's care of his wounds, and it is clear that Marina and Ricky can now truly be seen as husband and wife. Marina slowly starts to kiss Ricky, and they proceed to make love.

Ricky's comparison of Marina to his mother shows multiple things. Marina resembles Ricky's image of a woman caring for her husband, but she also fills a maternal role for him. His need for family comes from the fact that he was orphaned at an early age, and while he explicitly looks for Marina as a wife, it also becomes clear that she doubles as his mother. Furthermore, she

is cleaning his wounds with markedly maternal care. As Peter William Evans argues, Marina is a “hybrid object of desire, whom (Ricky) can simultaneously worship as the nubile wife and potential ideal mother and denigrate as pornstar” (Epps and Kakoudaki 114). Marina is not the first woman to be a mother figure in Ricky’s life. In fact, the other sexual relationship he discusses is with a woman who represented his mother. The older mental hospital director speaks to Ricky in a maternal way, and she is clearly old enough to be his mother. However, their goodbye consists of sex in her office. While Marina is not always Ricky’s mother figure, she seems “perfectly content to play out her implicit Oedipal role” (Epps and Kakoudaki 114) in the final bathroom scene. Paul Julian Smith takes the importance of Marina as mother as well as wife further. He sees Marina’s family, which consists only of women, to be a “matrilinear and parthenogenetic lineage of women, within which men are granted only temporary accommodation” (109). He concludes, stating that “It is not the least of *Atame!*’s paradoxes that a film often accused of condoning male violence against women should be placed so clearly under the sign of the mother” (109).

The hybrid woman that Evans describes is fully evident in the way in which Marina speaks to Ricky. Although she is technically not in power due to her physical lack of agency, Marina scolds Ricky like a mother, nags like a wife, and dominates him sexually like a pornstar. This further plays against the misogynistic implications of Marina’s bondage. While Marina is tied up, she and Ricky never engage in sexual acts. Furthermore, Marina even sometimes ties herself up. When the two finally make love, Marina is in full control. She demands that she be on top, and her grunts of pleasure are interspersed with directions to Ricky “Don’t slip out! Don’t come!”

The question of sadomasochism in *¡Atame!* is functionally linked much more to this scene than to the bondage, despite its being a less literal example. All scenes of Marina's bondage strictly avoid sexual pleasure. However, when Marina and Ricky finally have sex, there is a marked link between pain and pleasure. Marina is first drawn to Ricky when he is in extreme pain. She not only tends to his wounds, but kisses them. This may be seen as a maternal healing gesture, but it also implies that seeing Ricky wounded arouses her. When they are in bed, Marina continually asks if she is hurting him, and the question displays both her care and her slight excitement at the prospect. While she has not directly caused his wounds, she can be seen as the indirect cause, for Ricky was beaten while searching for painkillers for her. Marina is also in pain from her previous attempts to escape, and therefore the love scene is one of sadomasochism, as both Marina and Ricky ignore and delight in their respective wounds as a result of their relationship.

While Marina completes multiple ideal female roles in her relationship with Ricky, she is generally a dominant character, nearly to the point of masculinity. There are two men in her life: Ricky and Máximo, the director of the horror film she is starring in. As Evans points out, both men are "crippled." Máximo is in a motorized wheelchair as the result of strokes, and despite his obvious lust for Marina, is the image of impotence. Ricky is crippled mentally, as we know from his stint in the mental hospital. Ricky nearly functions as the "active projection of the wheelchair-bound director" (Epps and Kakoudaki 109). Only the final scene of the film-within-the-film is shown, and portrays Marina as the heroine conquering a masked monster-man who plans to keep her captive. He refuses to expose his face, for it is too ugly for her to see and love. Far from the typical horror movie heroine, Marina kills this monster and remains dominant.

The theme of the horror film, referred to in multiple arenas in *¡Atame!* is particularly interesting in regards to Ricky and Máximo. They can both be seen as monsters like the one in Máximo's film. Máximo is deformed in that he is crippled, and can only transport himself in his wheelchair. He pursues Marina in a nearly predatory way, which in his case can only be with his gaze. "Don't look at me that way," Marina demands. Máximo's response is "I'm not looking at you. I'm admiring you," to which Marina responds, "Don't admire me that way." Paul Julian Smith calls attention to the use of the horror film cliché (analyzed by Carol J. Clover) of the male's "sadistic-voyeuristic position in relation to a passive female object" (111). Later, Máximo continues this allegory of the male viewer when he watches a porn film starring Marina. Ricky is even more easily seen as a monster, despite his lack of physical deformity. He is mentally stunted, as we know from the mental hospital and as is evident from his childlike advances on Marina (he attempts to impress her by doing a handstand on set). When rejected, his reaction is both childlike and monstrous. He goes for the most literal method to win Marina's affection, both with brute force and with naïveté.

Marina is the one to turn the horror film cliché on its head, for she is nothing of the aforementioned "passive female object." She is the dominant role in her relationships with both of these men, confidently rejecting their advances and telling them what to do. This reversal of the traditional sexual roles complicates the issue of *¡Atame!*'s misogynistic implications (Smith 112). Furthermore, while Marina's body is gazed upon in the tradition of male objectification of the female body, both Máximo and Ricky's bodies are portrayed as feminine. Máximo's lack of mobility implies impotence, which, while not explicitly feminine, is decidedly not masculine. Ricky assumes an even more feminine role. In the mental hospital, the nurses and the director treat him particularly well because he gives them sexual pleasure. Smith calls attention to this,

saying that “Ricki is also placed in the feminine position of exchanging his body for material favours” (109). This objectification of Ricky made some journalists uncomfortable, and one complained about “the supposed homosexual image of Antonio Banderas in his jeans” (Smith 116). *¡Atame!* plays with gender performance to an extent that presents a much more complicated view of gender roles than the immediate reaction to Marina’s capture and submission.

The final interpretation of Almodóvar’s use of bondage, which most American critics overlooked while gasping at the potential of sexual violence, is that of addiction (Smith 110). Marina is a former drug addict, and while she no longer uses, she experiences lasting effects. The toothache caused by her first violent encounter with Ricky leaves her craving illegally strong painkillers throughout the rest of the film. Ricky takes it upon himself to find her these painkillers, a mission which consumes much of the film and motivates a great portion of the action. Even after quitting, Marina is tied to her former addiction nearly as strongly as she is tied to her bed. Similarly, Ricky is addicted to Marina. After their first encounter (which Marina did not remember because she was strung out), Ricky was solely motivated by his need to find Marina. He used the thought of her as an incentive to reform and be released from the mental hospital, and as soon as he could, he found her. He regretted the need for violence in his conquest, but admitted that it was necessary. This is the mindset of an addict.

¡Atame! poses some rather serious moralistic problems for itself. In order for the audience to accept the love story, they must dismiss both the obvious issue that Ricky and Marina’s romance could be just a side effect of Stockholm Syndrome and the misogynistic implication that women want to be tied up. Both these are viable readings of the film. However, American critics seemed less preoccupied with these issues than with the theme of sadomasochism in and of itself.

American literal readings of *¡Atame!* seldom went further than the initial storyline as it could be written in a plot synopsis. Most got caught on “man attacks woman, man captures woman, woman falls in love.” However, the Spanish audience’s figurative reading allowed for the film to comment on gender roles, the presence of horror and porn in media, addiction, and family.

Chapter Four: Subtitling Almodóvar

A film is put through a series of cultural filters before it is released to a public audience. I have already examined the two filters all films encounter in the American film system. The first is the rating system, the MPAA. As shown by the *¡Atame!* lawsuit, the MPAA imposes a specific system of categorization that is very closely tailored to American cultural preoccupations. The second filter is the media, in this case film critics. While criticism does not brand a film as strongly as, for example, an X rating, it still describes a film to the public through a specific lens. While this lens is that of the public’s own culture, and therefore likely to be the lens through which any given American would view the film, it still reinforces cultural predispositions.

A foreign language film goes through one more hoop before it reaches a public audience. Before even the MPAA views it, the film has to be subtitled. To reference Abé Mark Nornes once again, subtitling is “corrupt practice” in which the subtitler attempts to hide his own ideological assumptions while translating the original text into something that will “conform the original to the rules, regulations, idioms, and frame of reference of the target language and its culture” (Nornes 2007). They must do so by creating a line that can be read in approximately a second and a half, and using forty-five or fewer characters (Rosenberg). It stands to reason that a subtitler needs to keep the dialogue within the frame of reference of its audience. This surely accounts for some of the discrepancies between Spanish dialogue and English subtitles that I have found in Almodóvar films. For example, the frequent Spanish use of *coño* simply does not translate in English. *Coño*, which literally means “cunt,” is used very casually in Spanish

conversation, and does not carry the same stigma as its English equivalent. Coño can also be used as a general profane exclamation, without literally meaning “vagina.” In *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto*, a character says “qué coño haces en la cocina?” The English subtitle for this line says, “what the fuck are you doing in the kitchen?” This is an appropriate interpretation of the line, given that “what the cunt are you doing in the kitchen?” is not an idiomatic English expression. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls on the Heap*, a character tells a barking dog, “Cállate, coño!” While a direct translation, “Shut up, cunt!” might have seemed too harsh given the connotation of the word “cunt” the subtitle, “quiet!” does not quite portray the level of exasperation in the scene. *Pepi, Luci, Bom* is nearly crude enough a film to use the word “cunt” casually, and the use thereof would preserve the playfully profane dialogue. However, I think the subtitler could have found a compromise that would have preserved the feel of the script without using such a taboo word. My preference is “quiet, you little shit!”

In other situations, the word coño is used specifically referring to a vagina, but the subtitler opts for a nonsexual phrase. In *¡Atame!* the phrase “ponerse la pipa del coño,” which refers to female masturbation is changed to “to have a bug up one’s ass.” In the context, a woman is not actually masturbating, but it is Almodóvar’s playful way of saying that she likes something. The dialogue is “no hay derecho porque a la mujer del productor se le ponga la pipa del coño y quiere el sofá,” which the subtitler translates to “just because the producer’s wife has a bug up her ass for the couch.” In English colloquial dialogue, one might use this same masturbation metaphor for nonsexual objects, and there are multiple crude English phrases to demonstrate the same notion. A subtitler could easily demonstrate Almodóvar’s wry use of crudeness by saying that the producer’s wife “flicks the bean” for the couch. However, this crudeness might come across more harshly in the United States than in Spain, largely because

there is not a casual term for female masturbation that is not viewed as extremely crude. I suggest a middle ground subtitle that keeps a sexual connotation without the explicitness of the colloquial reference to masturbation: “Just because the couch gets the producer’s wife all hot and bothered...”

¡Atame! displays a very different instance of sexual censorship in another scene. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, American critics were preoccupied with ¡Atame!’s sadomasochism. The opening scene in which Ricky is released from the mental hospital shows that the subtitler also looked for sadomasochism where it was not present. The hospital director gives Ricky money, which she says is in exchange for “los momentos de placer y locura” (the moments of pleasure and insanity). However, the subtitle translates this to “the moments of pleasure and pain”. The implication of the word locura implies ecstasy more than pain. The subtitler’s use of “pain” does not give the English subtitle the same meaning as the line in the original script, but rather it furthers the American preoccupation with sadomasochism in ¡Atame! While it does not roll off the tongue as well as “the moments of pleasure and pain,” my translation, “thank you for the insane pleasure” sticks much more closely to the intended meaning of Almodóvar’s script.

Matador includes a similar instance in which the sexuality of a phrase is reduced so much that it nearly means something else. Diego says, “les pone cachondas que he sido torero,” which is translated to “being an ex-matador excites them.” This is a faulty subtitle on multiple levels. If one had read the subtitle out of context, it would seem as if the women Diego is talking about find it exciting that they themselves are ex-matadors. He means to say that his being an ex-matador excites them. However “ponerles cachondas” means to sexually arouse. While one reading of the subtitle could imply this, it is not necessary the primary interpretation. The life of

an ex-matador could easily excite someone, meaning that they find it thrilling, not that they are turned on by it. There are plenty of easy ways to translate this subtitle that are both more grammatically correct than what was chosen, but that also stick much closer to the intended meaning. There is no vagueness in the use of “les pone cachondas” and “excites” is all too vague in reference to the sexuality of the dialogue.

Roger Ebert writes that the word “fuck” may be used in a PG-13 movie up to four times as long as it is used as a general profane exclamation and not in the literal, sexual sense (Ebert). While this further demonstrates America’s aversion to sexuality in film and tolerance of other possible taboos (in this case profanity), it also provides some perplexing information when considering Almodóvar subtitles. In both *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Matador*, the word *joder* (fuck) is replaced with a different exclamation. In the case of *Women on the Verge*, *joder* is changed to “Christ,” and in *Matador*, *joder* is “Jesus”. Neither of these instances uses “fuck” as a verb, and therefore even the literal translation would have been allowed in a PG-13 movie. What is more interesting than the fact that *joder* was not translated as “fuck” is that in both cases, it was replaced with a religious exclamation. While one can take the Lord’s name in vain to replace any number of expletives, it is interesting that these subtitlers think that the use of the word *joder* in Spain is the equivalent thereof. Relative levels of profanity aside, the religious connotation that comes along with blasphemy could easily be seen as a cultural criticism that in this case, Almodóvar is not making. To those reading the subtitles, it could easily seem as if Almodóvar’s scripts contain new levels of anti-Catholicism that are in fact a subtitler’s sex-dodging. There are a number of profanities that can be used in general as exclamations of surprise, for example “damn” and “shit”. What is interesting in this case is that the subtitler chooses to replace a sexual word, even in a nonsexual context, for blasphemy. In the

context of the scene in which this happens in *Women on the Verge*, the word “fuck” might have been more adequate than said blasphemy. A woman has set her bed on fire, and a man walks in to see the flaming bed. In such an extreme situation, I will argue that “fuck” is a more effective expletive than “Christ”. “Christ” and “Jesus” as profanities are rather commonly used in casual English dialogue, so they do not quite express the level of shock in the scene.

There is one scene in *Pepi, Luci, Bom, and Other Girls on the Heap* in which two women discuss their sexual proclivities. One continually playfully calls the other various words for slut, such as *guarra*, *cerda*, and *loca*. However, the only word used in the subtitles is “bitch.” While “bitch” is a catch-all negative term for women, it does not inherently imply loose sexuality. Curiously enough, the most commonly used Spanish word for “bitch,” *puta*, is not used in this scene at all, even though it can also mean “slut or whore”. The dialogue in this scene is inherently sexual, but by only using “bitch,” the subtitler takes away a bit of the sexual charge. The English language does not lack for synonyms for “slut.” I would suggest the translator work in a few uses of “slut”, “tramp” and “whore” to preserve the colorful dialogue.

In trying to avoid sexuality in subtitles, American translators seem to accidentally work in other issues that are absent in the original dialogue. The word “bitch” more commonly refers to an abrasive personality than promiscuity. In an effort to avoid the word “fuck,” which is actually allowed in movies with lower MPAA ratings than those of Almodóvar’s films, subtitlers opt for gentle blasphemy. “To have a bug up one’s ass” in English more commonly means “to be angry” than “to want something.” All of these instances have rather simple and colloquial American slang options that convey the same meaning as the original Spanish dialogue. Furthermore, the substitutes I suggest have stayed within the character limit for a subtitle. However, American subtitlers are as apt as the rest of the film industry to try to whitewash

sexuality before a film reaches the public. Therefore, they remove all they can without blatantly changing a scene's meaning.

Conclusion

In the discussion of American reactions to sexuality in early Almodóvar films, the question arises of whether the fascination with sexuality inhibits the audience's deeper film analysis, or whether the American audience is inherently more likely to take a film literally, and therefore focus on the surface factors, which in this case are often sex. As previously cited, Paul Julian Smith states that American critics of *¡Atame!* preferred a literal reading of the story to the Spanish audience's figurative reading. He also states that these same critics missed the film's metaphor for addiction because they were preoccupied with the principal sadomasochistic and quasi-pornographic images. In response to *The Law of Desire*, Pauline Kael claims that the film is a fantasy in its disregard for AIDS. Meanwhile, Smith points out that on a less overt level, the film could be an allegory about AIDS and its impact on Spain's gay population. The question arises: do American film critics prefer literal readings by principle or do they simply not know how to look beyond explicit sexuality?

The key is the subtitles: while some subtitles tried to subtract sexuality, others promoted the American media's agenda by changing the subtitles to support the preferred sexual image (for example, the "pain and pleasure" line in *¡Atame!*). In instances such as these in which extranormative sexuality is portrayed as normative, the American media often prefers the literal reading because it helps to pigeon-hole a film with which the public is not comfortable. The American public sees explicit sex that goes outside accepted gender performances and deliberately chooses to avoid further readings to keep the film in a "novelty" category. The cycle repeats itself: in order to limit the sexuality portrayed in American film, critics label films only

by their sexuality and thus categorize them as “subversive”. Almodóvar’s early films exemplify this in their critical reception, their MPAA reception, and the treatment of their subtitles.

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