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# Fecundity and Almodóvar? Sexual Ethics and the Specter of Catholicism

## **Abstract**

The famed Spanish film maker Pedro Almodóvar has spent much of his film career narrating stories which subvert the Francoist-Catholic ideology of mid-twentieth century Spain, particularly its account of sex and family. But in several of his recent films prior to *Bad Education* both homosexual and heterosexual characters struggle with questions of sexuality and birth. As these themes are subtly and dramatically presented they exert what one may identify as the 'spectral force' of Catholicism. As such, this essay suggests that these films may offer resources for Catholics to engage the critical questions concerning homosexuality in the life of the church.

The media's recent saturation coverage of the papal funeral and subsequent papal election provides one more example of popular culture's ambivalence toward the Catholic Church: admiring its charismatic personalities and lauding its defense of the dignity of the human person, yet at the same time disdainful of its teaching on sexual morality. This disdain has its roots in, among other things, a reading of the tensions between traditionalists and progressives at the Second Vatican Council and the apparent triumph of the former resulting in *Humanae Vitae*, a document upon which popular culture has heaped scorn for decades. These tensions continue to haunt the Church's teaching on sexuality, and the flashpoint is no longer contraception but homosexual marriage.

In the twentieth-century, Catholic theology on marriage has undergone a well-documented shift from a juridical-contractual approach to a more personalist approach. In a series of articles and recent books, David Matzko McCarthy, among others, has helped to move the discussion of marriage and sex in a different direction by focusing on social relationships as the basis for offering a theological account of both heterosexual and same sex unions within the life of the church.<sup>1</sup> McCarthy does this by upholding rather than subverting conjugal love and procreation as the best articulation of the goods and practices of marriage. Within this context, McCarthy describes some homosexual unions as anomalies, i.e., while not paradigmatic, some homosexual unions cause conceptual dissonance for those

who would assume "an irredeemable difference between homosexuality and marriage."<sup>2</sup> For McCarthy, Catholic sexual ethics ought to seek to understand "how and why [some] same sex unions fair so well, given that so many good arguments are made against them."<sup>3</sup> Arguments against same sex unions have been recently elaborated in the press by various members of the hierarchy in countries where same sex unions have received support from the state. Nowhere have these arguments been more vociferously made than in Spain, where recent legislation approving same sex unions has earned the ire of the Vatican as well as the Spanish hierarchy. The debate has a unique tone in Spain because of the tragic legacy of Franco and his government's relationship to the Catholic Church in Spain.

Spain exists on the margins: the margin between Africa and Europe, between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, between modernity and post-modernity, between Catholic piety and the challenges of post-Christian secularism. Spanish identity is thus as problematic and complex as any in the western world. Complicating this identity is the existence of a significant gay community in Spain which, often through artistic production, gives voice to the "in between" and which has only recently flourished in the wake of the Franco regime. Among the most prominent figures in Spain's gay community is Pedro Almodóvar.

Almodóvar, in his most recent film, *Bad Education (La Mala Educación)*, narrates a semi-autobiographical account of a young boy in a Catholic boarding

school in Francoist Spain. The narrative, as one would expect, scathingly indicts the religious and political establishment of mid-twentieth century Spain for the way religiosity theatrically masked corruption and abuse with its pretense to moral and civil authority. It is precisely this notion of role-playing that also animates the film's exploration of gay identity in the era of *la movida* and that resonates with many of Almodóvar's fans—both gay and straight. Many critics have identified the virtue of Almodóvar's films as their normalization of alternative family relationships in response to global, political, and economic transformations. For these critics Almodóvar eschews any nostalgia for the heterosexual family. Instead, he takes for granted the existence of fictive families: loose amalgams of same-sex, heterosexual, and ambiguous friends. These critics interpret Almodóvar as "consigning bourgeois 'family values' to the ash heap of history" amidst the challenges of globalization and the collapse of identities. "He posits a radically alternative vision of the new domestic (dys)order that is post-nuclear and post-hetero."<sup>4</sup> Yet Almodóvar has produced a series of films prior to *Bad Education* which invite a different reading. In these films, both homosexual and heterosexual characters struggle with questions of sexuality and birth. As these themes are subtly and dramatically presented they exert what one may identify as a 'spectral force' in Almodóvar's work and offer resources for Christians to engage the critical questions raised about homosexuality in the life of the church.

## The Specter of Catholicism

The work of the late Jacques Derrida illuminates the "spectral" aspect of Almodovar's films. Throughout his career, Derrida provocatively voiced a fascination with ghosts and mourning. Perhaps his most sustained presentation of this topic is offered in conjunction with a series of essays on "the specters of Marx."<sup>5</sup> The occasion for such writing was a conference on the apparent demise of socialism and Marxism, and Marx's own obsession with ghosts and spirits provided ample warrant for such a collection of essays. As in previous works, the themes of history, politics, and the role of the academy predominated. For Derrida, history is full of moments of beginning and end, moments that look to the future and other moments haunted by the past. In the context of the early 1990's, Derrida chose to focus on a politics of mourning and haunting—a politics of indebtedness. The demise of Marx and Marxism is not altogether unlike the fate of Catholicism in Western Europe, and perhaps, more dramatically, the fate of Catholicism within Spain's gay community.

For Derrida, ghosts live (and threaten) the world through the force of their injunctions. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida identifies three aspects to the haunting presence of specters: mourning, language, and work.<sup>6</sup> A specter, according to Derrida, must be mourned, and for mourning to occur, "the body must be dead." Derrida uses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to make this precise point: the death of Hamlet's

father is presupposed, but the appearance of the dead king's ghost and his injunction to set things right begins the play. Thus the certainty of Marx's death and that of communism gives birth to the specters of Marx. The statement, "Marxism lives!" is true for Derrida (in spite of what Fox News might say). The demise of socialism and its ideological infrastructure (i.e., communist "states," "communist parties," etc.) has purged our senses for us to hear Marx's original injunctions and embrace our responsibility—no longer able to hide behind the institutions. Similarly, the demise of Catholicism for the homosexual community in Spain is equally palpable—Almodóvar admits as much in his caustic humor and in his portrayal of ecclesiastical figures in his films. In some ways this contrasts with the US where positive concern for the Catholic Church and participation therein is a prominent part of gay activism in the United States (e.g., Dignity USA). Gay investment in the Catholic Church is, however, far less evident within the Spanish context and testifies to the death of Catholicism in the Spanish gay community.

The second aspect of haunting involves language, particularly the language of the specter. The voice of the specter requires mediation in order to enjoin. In *Hamlet*, Horatio is enlisted to speak to the ghost and to speak on behalf of the young prince upon his death. In the case of Marxism, Derrida speaks for Marx, and, I suggest (noting the irony) that Almodóvar may in fact be read as speaking spectrally through his films for the church. It is entirely appropriate that Almodóvar do so, for

part of Spanish identity has been its marginalization in the eyes of Europe—' Spain is not the home for serious scholars or philosophers'. But as the center of artistic production, Spain has found its voice in the European community. Like so many other Spaniards (e.g., Cervantes, Lorca, Picasso), Almodóvar found in artistic production a vehicle for scholarship—a medium to speak to and on behalf of the ghosts that haunt Spain.

Finally, and probably most importantly from Derrida's perspective, the specter demands work—a particularly intellectual form of work. For Derrida, as for *Hamlet*, "time is out of joint;" history is truncated. This recognition demands that we "set time right," and, therefore, invokes justice. For Derrida, time is unhinged, pregnant, waiting to give birth. Today is the time when justice should be done, and in the case of Almodóvar, it is justice to the church and the place of gay Christians therein. Fascist ideology had high-jacked the richness and depth of Christian theologies of marriage and sex and set these theologies in their most restrictive and oppressive frameworks. Almodóvar unmasks the cultural and political disvalues of the Franco era (and in turn savages the trappings of Catholic tradition in Spain) but also uncovers the lost social depth of the church's understanding of generativity and sex. Almodóvar "sets time right" by provocatively mediating the voice of the specter of Catholicism. His films participate in this important work—doing justice

to Catholic notions of the fecundity of sex while at the same time savaging the church as institution.

*Live Flesh (Carne Trémula)*<sup>7</sup>

Almodóvar's 1998 film *Live Flesh* brings out the reproductive nature of sexuality. Two of the main characters become involved in an affair focused on 'sexual education' in which Clara encourages young Victor to learn empathy and sensitivity in the act of sex. She encourages her young pupil's enthusiasm for sex yet asks him to show restraint and sensitivity—"Don't dive into me" she tells her curious lover. His eagerness and sensitivity stands out in sharp contrast to that of her husband, Sancho, whose pattern of abuse and contrition taint all his gestures of affection. Almodóvar also contrasts Victor and Clara's sexual activity with that of David and Elena whose sexual practices, because of David's injury (an injury related to his affair with his partner's wife—Clara), are not life giving. These sexual practices are instead suffused with guilt and deception. In fact, David does anxiously "dive into" Elena in an attempt to satisfy her with oral sex in order to make her less likely to seek satisfaction elsewhere, but David's insecurity about Elena drives her away in the end. Interestingly, both of the married couples in the film, David and Elena as well as Sancho and Clara, are childless. The infecund nature of their relationships is encompassing—their sexual practices are as dysfunctional and non-productive as their relationships. Clara makes this point dramatically in her last letter to Victor

when she contrasts the women's roles from their partners, saying, "We are not killers." Indeed, neither Clara nor Elena is a killer, but out of fear, guilt, and pity, they have surrendered themselves to "killers"—David and Sancho—apparently unaware of other possibilities. Victor, however, brings liberation from these relationships, though unintentionally at first.

Victor, laboriously anointed by Almodóvar with an array of christic images—born under a star in a Christmas display, having no known father, and lavished with gifts from various authorities for his "miraculous" birth on a city bus—brings redemption by unleashing Clara and Elena's sexual desire. However, Victor also learns to be responsive to Clara and Elena, to their sexual desires, and is transformed by his encounter with them. Though initially out for revenge after his incarceration, Victor finds his own redemption through these women. As he does so they all discover sex as liberating, responsive, creative, and salvific. The story of these women echoes the stories one finds in the gospels: broken figures and tragic lives are gifted with the grace of new life which pulls people out of their old existence. But the film presents sex as salvific only in the context of giving birth and creating life. While Clara and Sancho kill each other (with David's help), their death—accompanied by shallow rhetoric of Sancho's love for Clara—is juxtaposed in the final scene with Elena and Victor who work in a child care center and welcome their own child in scenes that recall Victor's own birth.

Throughout much of *Live Flesh* Almodóvar continues the trend he established in earlier films by valorizing sexual desire, but in the dénouement of the film we find a fairly "conservative" understanding of sexual expression, particularly through the director's identification with women. The men in the film are almost props and foils for the female characters, and the issues the film works out are centered on women and their capacity to give birth, a capacity frustrated by corrupt marriages but liberated by sexual expression within the right social context.

*All About My Mother (Todo Sobre Mi Madre)*<sup>8</sup>

Almodóvar won an Oscar for his 1999 film *All About My Mother*, which tells the story of Manuela, her lover Esteban, and a variegated group of friends. Manuela left Esteban when she became pregnant, and we learn that her departure had to do with Esteban's promiscuity and his transformation into a preoperative transsexual named—of course—Lola. As a single mother in Madrid, Manuela kept silent about Lola, but her secrecy becomes a point of contention with her adolescent son the night he tragically dies. As she waits in the hospital for news of his condition she reads the final entry in her son's journal which describes the void left by his father and his unbounded desire to know his father no matter what he had done. Subsequently, Manuela travels to Barcelona to search for Lola to tell her about their son. As Manuela searches she encounters two important figures, one from the past and the other determinative for her future. Agrado, a preoperative transsexual

prostitute, is an old friend of Manuela and Lola. Rosa, a young nun working with the prostitutes and addicts in Barcelona, has become pregnant through Lola's sexual exploitation of her. This eclectic group of friends works together to bring Manuela through her sorrow, but her grieving is worked out through the practices of mothering both Agrado, by getting her out of her life as a prostitute, and Rosa, by bringing her through a disastrous pregnancy and mothering her orphaned child upon Rosa's death.

In *All About My Mother*, as in *Live Flesh*, Almodóvar centers his narrative on women and their theatrical role as mother.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the director invokes other theatrical productions like Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* in several scenes in order to portray the trap of heterosexual relationships and the therapeutic role of homosocial (and indirectly homosexual) relationships.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, theatricality is foregrounded when the male characters take on female personae that connect them to life-giving interest—to procreation. The role of preoperative transsexuals in the film (Agrado and Lola) is indicative of this. While a male to female transsexual would give up their role in the procreative act, the hermaphrodite becomes both the father and mother. While fatherhood is important, motherhood permeates the entire film, and though Manuela is the dominant maternal figure, Agrado provides an interesting example of this theme.

Agrado "makes life easier" for others (agrado means "I please"), and her sexual acts have a mothering side to them. While Almodóvar portrays this poignantly at times, he just as readily mocks it (e.g., the stage director persistent solicitation of Agrado). He plays with the roles, expectations, and performance. Agrado's soliloquy on authenticity in front of a theatre crowd brings together ideas about transformation, performance, and authenticity, and several moments in the film make apparent the value of honesty, openness, and confrontation (e.g., Esteban's lines repeated numerous times about the void within him caused by the absence of his father). Any truth, no matter how awful, would be better than the gap, the lie, the absence he lives with. For Agrado, authenticity involves becoming what one has always dreamed of being rather than any essentialist or naturalist notion of authenticity. At several moments in the film Agrado does seem to acknowledge the vanity of her physical transformation (e.g., the cost of her surgeries and the time she spends on her appearance), but this transformation—this acting a role—seems central to the meaning of the film. To be mother is to act, to take on a role, and to make things agreeable. She admits how old and ugly and false she feels—but her desire to please, to mother, underlies and perhaps redeems it all. In some way Agrado and the entire film is very mariological.

***Talk to Her (Hable con Ella)***<sup>11</sup>

Like the other films discussed above, *Talk to Her* (2002) includes many characters and plot developments that strain the sensibilities of many mainstream viewers—particularly the rape and pregnancy of a comatose woman. As in other films, Almodóvar consistently utilizes extraordinary characters and plot developments with parabolic flair, arresting the viewer with a strangeness accented with a hint of familiarity and sympathy which challenges prevailing assumptions and boundaries about sexuality and gender roles. In *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar further draws out the importance of birth and mothering, and he asserts continuity between *Talk to Her* and *All About My Mother* by using the final scene from *All About My Mother*—the curtain on which the dedication appeared—as the initial scene in *Talk to Her* thereby signaling the theatricality of "mothering" once again.

*Talk to Her* is a disturbing yet beautiful film about the relationship between two men attending to two comatose women. The title of the film captures the injunction given by Benigno to Marco when the latter begins to despair of his comatose lover, a female bullfighter named Lydia: "Talk to her [i.e., Lydia]; be patient." He is eager to show Marco how he cares for another comatose patient, Alicia, and invites Marco to do the same for Lydia. The gender role of Lydia (la lidia is the art of bullfighting) provides an interesting contrast to that of Benigno, a male nurse assistant. Bullfighting has long been eroticized in Spanish literature, and the scene in which Lydia prepares for the fight highlights the androgynous

sexuality of the bullfighter. We never see Lydia's face, but her legs, her torso are dressed with the traditional accoutrements. As she prepares for the fight she assumes a masculine role—and is destroyed by it. First she is destroyed by her old lover (another bullfighter) and then by the bull. The message of *Streetcar* and Lorca's *Blood Wedding* echo once again Almodóvar's concern for women in heterosexual relationships. With a more straightforward gender identification than either Agrado or Lola, Benigno nonetheless represents a similar dynamic: men playing the role of mother and father, a dynamic made explicit early in the film a conversation with Alicia's dance instructor illuminates this feature Benigno's character. The dance instructor reverses customary binary relationships: "Life comes from death; women come from men." Alicia's pregnancy brings her out of her deathlike coma, and a man, Benigno, performs the role of mother.

In *Talk to Her* normative heterosexual relationships are depicted negatively from the perspective of women while the homosocial relationship of Benigno and Marco, and particularly Benigno's role as both father and mother, supplies a richly textured alternative. Throughout the film the issues Almodóvar raises may indeed pose problems for Catholic sexual ethics, but these questions may also simultaneously disclose its real power—to call people to new social relationships in conjunction with the advent of new life.

## Conclusions

David McCarthy has rightly emphasized the profoundly public character of sex, its connection to social status and identity and that our sexual activity communicates social goods. Sexual expression is generated and shaped within social practices, incorporating both social roles and the process of personal self-discovery. These ideas, often obscured in contemporary theologies of marriage, are powerfully evoked in Almodóvar's recent films. While not suggesting that same-sex unions are paradigmatic for the Christian church, this essay has suggested that Almodóvar's provocative voice within popular Spanish culture, rather than obliterating a Catholic theology of marriage, actually speaks to its ghost and on its behalf. The question which remains is the extent to which we are ready to listen.

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<sup>1</sup> David McCarthy Matzko, "Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 371-397; idem., "The Relationship of Bodies: A Nuptial Hermeneutics of Same-Sex Unions," *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998):96-112; David Matzko McCarthy, "Sexual Utterances and Common Life," *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 443-459; idem., *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* (London: SCM, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy Matzko, "Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage," 376.

<sup>3</sup> McCarthy Matzko, "Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage," 372.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Ritinger, "(Dys)figuring Notions of Family: Hegel, Lacan, Almodóvar, and the Post-Nuclear Family," *Vanishing Point* 2 (1996): 33-51, 49; see also Paul Julian Smith, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (New York: Verso, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994); see also, *The Work of Mourning* ( Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> *Specters of Marx*, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> *Live Flesh*, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar (MGM: DVD release 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *All About My Mother*, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar (Columbia/Tristar: DVD release 2000).

<sup>9</sup> The title of the film as well as several references ties the film to *All About Eve*, the Bette Davis film about women and the theater. At the conclusion to *All About My Mother* the dedication: "To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider, to all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to all men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers, to my mother."

<sup>10</sup> The film also references Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* which explores themes similar to *Streetcar* (i.e., the violence inherent in traditional notions of marriage) but includes a mother's mourning of her dead son.

<sup>11</sup> *Talk to Her*, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar (Columbia Tri-Star: DVD release 2003).