

ALMODÓVAR'S LAWS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND DESIRE

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What has been called Pedro Almodóvar's «post-punk dadaism»¹ in a series of films capturing fractured representations of post-modern subjectivity has fascinated critics and audiences on an international scale. Yet, Almodóvar's films speak from the context of contemporary Spain, a country which, in less than two decades, has undergone and continues to experience profound political and social transitions. While the young democracy has largely embraced the consumer-capitalist configuration of the individual defined through the excess of materialism, it maintains, if only temporarily, ties to more traditional social institutions, such as family and the church. The juxtaposition of old and new forms that characterize this transitional stage of development has been depicted brilliantly by Almodóvar in films such as *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984), *La ley del deseo* (1986), and *Matador* (1986). However, the work of this essay is not to examine the sociological aspects of Almodóvar's cinema, but rather to look closely at how the aesthetic concerns of one film, *La ley del deseo*, embody a postmodern camp politics of representation and spectatorship.

SUTURING SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY

Almodóvar's most personal feature film, *La ley del deseo*, brings together the fundamental issues that inform his work: sexuality

¹ See the *Stagebill* from the 1989 New York Film Festival in which *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* was the premiere film, 20D.

and gender difference, the ostensible violation of narrative and societal norms, and the foregrounding of the audience's desire for pleasure in the guise of sex and violence. Yet, Almodóvar's exploration of the topical belies a more complex vision than the glittering surfaces of his pop imagery and the playfulness of metafictional pretense reveal at first glance.

In the opening sequence of *Deseo* the filmmaker cunningly disorients the spectator's relation to the ensuing narrative in his use of an unreliable point of view that explodes the dynamics of the conventional shot/reverse shot. As the spectator listens to the off-screen voice of a lame voyeur who directs a young man to engage in acts of autoerotic stimulation, s/he might anticipate a cut to a speaking subject whose presence would confirm the expectation of a diegetic relationship between the enunciative voice and the filmed subject.² Yet, the reverse shot leads the spectator's gaze out of the implied diegesis to the talking heads of two male film dubbers. As the camera cross-cuts between the filmed scenes of the young actor and the film dubbers whose moans and groans provide a humorous overlaying of sound, the unfolding cervantine metatextuality of the sequence destabilizes the spectator's position, underscoring an everincreasing awareness of the titillating voyeurism of film spectatorship.³ The sequence draws to a close in two shots in close-up: one is a take of an editor's grease mark on a film frame, followed by the final still of the film we have just watched being dubbed, a close-up collage including the money the actor has received for his sexual performance in the film-

² Kaja Silverman explicates the dynamics of the shot/reverse shot formation as allowing the viewing subject to know whose gaze controls what it sees within the diegesis, while both limiting the viewing subject's sense of visual freedom and maintaining the cinematic illusion, *Semiotics* 202-204. Almodóvar offers no such comfort of illusion, for his parodic and reflexive use of the shot/reverse shot serves to unbalance the viewing subject's sense of subjectivity in relation to the image.

³ The initial sequence of *Matador* also humorously plays with the dynamics of the traditional shot/reverse shot formation. While the film titles roll, the first scenes of the film show a televised slasher cult film that features the bloody deaths of a series of young women. As in *Deseo*, the reverse shot reveals the presence of a gaze outside the diegesis of the film-within-the-film, that of the masturbating matador. In both films the rupture of the spectator's expectation of an illusion defined by its diegetic and visual relationships, at once sets up the laws of Almodóvar's world in which he challenges our motivations for consuming visual images by means of his own parodic self-reflexivity, drawing striking parallels between the erotic impulses of voyeurism and spectatorship.

within-the-film-within-the-film. Almodóvar's visual outline of the workings of the cinematic apparatus exposes the unstable relations among the film event, narrative authority, and spectatorship, and ironically displays the monetary basis of the production and reception of cinema. The last section of the looping sequence functions as an overt critique of film production; the pleasures filmed and glimpsed may be feigned, but the economics of the art are not.

The metafictional montage and homoerotic content of the introductory sequence ruptures the received authority of sexual identity and visual form, while confounding the spectator's relation to the plane of vision ⁴. In the context of sexual subjectivity Jacqueline Rose has conjectured a drive in contemporary art to reveal fixed identity as a fantasy. Her contention that the sexuality represented in the image lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer (227), is illustrated by the effects of Almodóvar's reliance in the initial sequence on a shifting point of view that humorously disturbs the spectator's perception of both the visual field and his/her sexual subjectivity. When the young actor is directed to caress himself, the disruption of the spectator's identifications implies difference, rather than similarity, as a norm of response. Thus, the complexity of the roles of spectatorship and pleasure in *Deseo* suggests an analysis responsive to the dialogue between the sexual politics of the image and the aesthetics of pleasure.

GENDER INSTABILITY AND PLEASURE

Between the narrative film and the film-going audience there is an unspoken agreement which specifies pleasure as one of the primary effects of film on its public. Psychoanalytic film theory has linked that pleasure to the desire to see and know: to experience voyeurism as the pleasurable consumption of visual images and narrative as the spectator's movement through the imaginary

⁴ In the opening sequence Almodóvar parodies some of commercial pornography's visual strategies. Richard Dyer's work on gay pornography, in which he discusses narrative strategies specific to the genre, reiterates two strategies predominant in *La ley del deseo*, particularly the introductory sequence: the use of the film-within-the-film structure and the doubling and trebling of possible spectators (29).

(de Lauretis, *Alice* 136; Heath 53). The film event continually underscores the relation of the spectator's look and desire to figural and narrative representation, while calling attention to his/her subjectivity and response. Determined by the articulation of specific cinematic codes such as the gaze, transference to male and female icons has been considered to occur with regard to the core gender identity of the viewing subject, although film viewing can release spectators from the inscribed gender specificity of response.

Since the publication of Laura Mulvey's article on visual pleasure, feminist film theory has focused insistently on the relation of the controlling male gaze to the phallic female icons of the «dream screen»⁵. Recent film theory, however, speaks of «masquerade» (Doane, «Masquerade»), «double identification» (de Lauretis, *Alice* 141-144), or the «transvestite» spectator (Mulvey, *Other Pleasures* 37), terms which seek to delineate the complexities of reading both the construction of the image and the spectator's identification with figural representation. Teresa de Lauretis's theory of the «technology of gender» is a valuable effort to widen the aperture where discourse and representation meet by proposing a fluid paradigm which gives credence to differing experiences of sexual subjectivity on the part of the spectator (*Technology* 24-26).

In visual opposition to the traditional cinematic narrative of romance, Almodóvar configures the male body in *Deseo* as one of the primary loci of scopophilic desire and the gaze. The camera, often violently and seductively, reveals the lyricism of the male body and its specular display is always in visual relation to the gaze of another desiring male⁶. Within the diegesis, Antonio's (Antonio Banderas) obsession with seeing the male body and knowing masculine desire in order to affirm his unstable gender positioning parallels one possible spectatorial position in regard to narrative and visual representation. Antonio's need to suture

⁵ See also D.N. Rodowick, who calculates the lack in Mulvey's theory as her inability to see that the male gaze could, in fact, submit to the female object if one were to carry her argument to its completion by pairing masochism with fetishistic scopophilia, 8-12.

⁶ The film's visually specific homoerotic content invites not only a homosexual gaze; Suzanne Moore postulates that homoerotica may also invite the gaze of some female spectators, as long as pleasure is contained within a narcissistic discourse (55). On the other hand, certain types of male and female spectators could be classified under the theoretical category of the «resisting gaze» that refuses to be sutured into the narrative.

over sexual inadequacies motivates him to transform desire into narrative in the dramatic terms of seduction and violence. The sense of lack that impels his seduction of Pablo (Eusebio Poncela), his need to seek the imagined other, functions as a narrative mirror for the suturing of the spectator in the fiction. Disclosing the spectator's precarious position and mobilizing a desire for narrative closure, the introductory sequence of the film dramatizes the system of suture defined by Kaja Silverman as «the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate (i.e. create the desire for) new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack» (231). However, when the spectator's positionality is open to alterations across the range of masculinity and femininity, there is a tendency to seek fulfillment in narrative movement and closure—in this case, the dynamics of melodrama—rather than in the overdetermined visual configuration of sexuality (de Lauretis, *Alice* 141-144).

Foregrounded on the homoerotic triangle of romance that configures the male body as locus of visual desire is the spectacle of the transsexual (male to female) body. From the first scene in which Tina (Carmen Maura) appears silhouetted against the final shot of Pablo's film to the coke-sniffing senior detective's obsession with the dimensions of her figure, the representation of her generous proportions and dramatized femininity absorbs considerable visual space and narrative subplotting. Even though she changed her sex in order to conform impeccably to the law of the father's desire, Tina has since given up relations with men and become a lesbian. There is no little dramatic irony in the fact that her ex-lover, Ada's mother, is played by Bibi Andersen, the well-known transsexual and Spanish television personality. However, even Tina's choice of lesbianism is subject to flux, for, by the end of the film, she has been seduced by Antonio. While Tina's transsexualism could be seen as Almodóvar's parodic interpretation of the Oedipal narrative in which the castration threat is taken only too literally, her gender choice functions as the kind of visual transvestism described by Annette Kuhn in which performance and sexual difference intersect, constructing a readerly desire for closure in the spectator (52-59).

The visual representation of Tina's female gender identification and sexual projection is emphasized repeatedly in her walk and

the clothing she wears —short, tight, figure-molding clothes and stiletto heels. She is overly aware of her feminine amplitude; at dinner with Pablo and Ada she obsessively runs her fingers around the black circles of her dress that cover yet accentuate, indeed deconstruct, the form of her breasts. Tina dramatizes her femaleness in the role of woman-as-caricature with striking self-consciousness. Combined with her screen role as actress, her performance of femininity continually brings to the surface her gender masquerade. In response, the spectator's relation to the visual representation of Tina's sexuality incites his/her voyeuristic curiosity; fulfillment of pleasure comes in the street scene after the premiere of Pablo's production of Cocteau's *La voix humaine*. In this scene Tina, suffering from the oppressive heat of summer, begs a workman to douse her with water from his industrial-size hose, and, as the jets of water flow forcefully across the ample contours of her body, she clearly delights in her exposed womanliness.

The instability of gender identifications in *La ley del deseo* precipitates a movement toward closure typical of melodrama. Yet, Almodóvar's camp of melodrama depends on his parody of several moments in cinema: the films of Douglas Sirk, the Hollywood woman's film, and the Spanish film comedy of the 1950's.⁷ The parodic detachment with which the filmmaker revives these «feminine» forms of pleasure and the ironic subversion of those forms that he achieves by destabilizing spectatorial response, problematize any fixed determination of gender-specific male/female spectators. We simply cannot infer a strictly heterosexual, homosexual, or female-centered reading of the film, nor categorize it as exclusively corroborating the narrative dynamics of the woman's film.⁸ The irresolute play of gender identifications on

⁷ Kathleen Vernon's paper, «Visual Pleasure and the Melodramatic Imagination in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar», which she presented at Clark University's International Conference on Spanish Film Since Franco (1990), reads Almodóvar's use of melodrama against Spanish film comedies of the 1950's.

⁸ Mary Ann Doane's, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* delineates narrative strategies, spectatorship, and reception of the woman's film. For a brief summary of the psychopolitics of the family melodrama, see «Is the Gaze Male?» in E. Ann Kaplan's, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, 25-26. In «Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory» Jackie Byars demonstrates how certain films and television programs structured around the family melodrama genre tend to subvert its dynamics by means of different enunciative practices, 110-131.

Tina's body, for example, runs the gamut of culturally-inscribed femininity and masculinity; not only does she camp her ultra-feminine persona, but she also knocks down a police investigator who insults her. Even if the spectator demands closure to figural gender instability in the fulfillment of narrative movement, the film's aesthetic patterning contrarily impels the spectator to seek pleasure on the aesthetic rather than the narrative plane.

Almodóvar's play on sexual identity as masquerade in the film seems to insist that sexual identifications are a «drag», not fixed, but mutable, and that they depend more on the subject's mode of expressing and fulfilling desire than on core gender identity. Gender confusion, gender masquerade, excessive otherness —all reveal and revel in the instability of dominant culture's attempt to stereotype patterns of human behavior as normative, or not. Tina's representation of what Judith Butler calls «gender trouble» and the homoerotic love triangle at the narrative center of the film postulate a broad range of identifications with or rejections of non-normative masculinity or femininity. Gender identity is neither normative nor stable, for it bespeaks cultural change and transition on a personal level. However, as the North-American filmmaker Jenny Livingston has recently demonstrated in her tender documentary, *Paris Is Burning* (1990), at the heart of drag lie serious concerns about gender, sometimes tragic ones. Although contemporary Spain's disavowal of Francoist sexual puritanism is portrayed with loving and self-reflexive laughter by Almodóvar's camp characters, their gender subversions lead to tragedies that are assuaged by a return to family, albeit a highly postmodern family.

MASOCHISM'S FAMILY AFFAIR

Postmodern theory's call-and-response motif has generated rejoinders to the psychoanalytic view of woman's subjectivity as lack, the sub-text of Mulvey's theory of the gaze. Recently re-edited, Gilles Deleuze's work on masochism provides a model for the psychoanalytic study of the masochistic dialectic which empowers the good oral mother in its contractual discourse and seeks a utopian world «ungoverned by the constraints of phallic desire» (Rodowick 84). Deleuze's construction of masochism not

only emphasizes the powerful aspects of the oral mother, but also insists on the absence of the father, for the masochist's desire is to achieve parthenogenic rebirth through the mother who combines the functions of father and mother (60-63)⁹. Almodóvar's *Deseo* conjures a world in which the father's absence is blithely subverted, such as during Tina's visit to the priest of the parochial church where s/he had once served as an acolyte and her reminiscence of their love affair before her sex change.

The film's key scene, Tina's hosing on the street, is preceded by the camera's framing of Tina, Pablo, and Ada walking together, in one instance strategically placed under the arc of spouting water. Although the figural representation of a nuclear family dominates one of the film's pivotal scenes, in no way is it a traditionally patriarchal family, but rather a parody of normativity. Masochism's subversive defiance of the father's law is exemplified in Almodóvar's banishment of the father from homoerotic discourse and elucidated by Deleuze's proposal that the father's functions are distributed among three types of mothers —Oedipal, hetaeric, and oral (55)— all of whom are represented in the film. Antonio's fascist mother corresponds to the role of the punishing Oedipal mother, and Tina's ex-lover, the hetaeric mother, is associated with, if not outright prostitution, then a career supported by men. Tina, as noted, embodies the oral mother in whom father and mother coexist, a factor enhanced by her transsexual metamorphosis¹⁰.

⁹ Deleuze's work serves as the basis for Gaylyn Studlar's investigation of film aesthetic and spectatorship in which she assembles an analytical model for suturing empowered female subjectivity into psychoanalytic discourse about cinema. Studlar proposes that the spectator's desire for pleasure is related to the pre-Oedipal, masochistic phase of human psychological development in which the infant, whose polymorphous desire disregards gender polarity, engages in symbiosis with the all-powerful oral mother. Like the infant, the film spectator experiences the pleasure of shifting identifications of sexual subjectivity, seeks symbiosis with the «dream screen», and fetishizes male and/or female screen characters (*Pleasure* 35). However, both Rodowick and Silverman call Studlar's analysis of masochism into question. While Rodowick notes her desexualization of sexual difference in the masochistic paradigm (142-143), Silverman sees Studlar's reading of masochism as essentially apolitical («Masochism» 66).

¹⁰ In an interview with Almodóvar Marsha Kinder mentions that «cruel mothers» and «absent, mythified fathers» predominate in Spanish films, 42. She also remarks that there seems to be a «special Spanish version of the Oedipal narrative with a series of displacements of desire and hostility between the mother and the father», 42. Almodóvar, speaking of the mother, contends that he defended

Who, then, is the masochistic subject of *La ley del deseo*? While Marsha Kinder seems to suggest that Tina plays that role in *Deseo*, she also mentions Pablo as the controlling agent of the film who reenacts his father's seduction of his brother and inspires the sacrifice of his lovers (41). In Deleuze's theory, the masochist controls and dominates the pleasure/pain situation through contractual texts and disavowal, much as Pablo tries to govern the behavior of his lovers through letters, as well as choosing a lover who abandons him (Juan) and suspensefully disavowing his final union with Antonio by means of amnesia and withdrawal. As in all of Almodóvar's film fictions, there is no absolute functional corroboration of any one film genre or psychoanalytic classification. Deleuze's theory of the contractual relation of the masochistic subject to a punishing yet loving female is undermined in the film's topsy-turvy world of shifting gender identifications. Certainly, Pablo's relations to those he loves are continually circumscribed and defined by his theater and film scripts which feed on their experiences yet demarcate the contours of their passions. In particular, the letter which is the literary catalyst of the plot functions as a negotiated attempt to linguistically determine the affection he would have his young lover Juan (Miguel Molina) demonstrate. Nonetheless, the punishing mother is subsumed, not in Juan, but in the persona of Antonio, whose sadistic nature threatens the return of the banished father yet promises the hope of a rebirth, in accord with Deleuze's reading of Sacher-Masoch's pivotal figure of «the Greek», «the projection of the new man that will result from the masochistic experiment» (66). Pablo's rebirth depends on the painful loss provoked by Antonio's murder of Juan and allows him to experience the pleasure of reciprocal love, limited to the brief hour he spends as a love hostage with Antonio, who, in an authentic masochistic turn, transforms from controlling sadist to suicidal masochist. Pablo's parthenogenesis depends on the other's death as the fantasy fulfillment of his desire, and, ultimately, his

the mother in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* but adds, in regard to the cruel mother of *Matador*, «Yes, I find this kind of mother very hateful, but there are several other mothers in that film... I feel very close to the mother. The idea of motherhood is very important in Spain. The father was frequently absent in Spain. It's as if the mother represents the law, the police» (ellipses in the text), 42-43. With Kinder's prompting, Almodóvar reveals the plural dimensions of empowered motherhood in its masochistic aspects which are present in *La ley del deseo*.

symbiotic reunion with the idealized mother figure as represented by Tina.

CAMP SENSIBILITY, AESTHETIC MASOCHISM

From the self-consciousness of metafictional design, through the narrative indulgence in the twists and turns of melodramatic sub-plotting, to the exorbitance of Tina's visual configuration, the aesthetic mien of *Deseo* is based on a surplus of pleasure derived from the roles that theatricality and artifice play in its aesthetic articulation. From the performance-oriented features of the film—its metafictional design, performing characters, and theatrical sexual posturing—I would like to draw parallels between two positions, camp and masochism, for both models rely on certain aesthetic devices in order to achieve political ends.

Masochism is both a pathology and an aesthetic paradigm, as Deleuze has argued. In the pathological dimensions of masochism the subject transgresses the social order in a pact «between mother and son to write the father out of his dominant position within both culture and masochism, and to install the mother in his place» (Silverman, «Masochism» 57). Masochism as an aesthetic model is based on the mechanisms of disavowal and fetishism that are projected in the fantasy, fetishizing the suspenseful anticipation of pleasure and thus creating elaborate and ironic structure of formal artifice in order to prolong the painful waiting for symbiotic rebirth¹¹. The aesthetic preoccupation with theatricality and artifice results from the obsessive repetition patterns, as exemplified in Freud's analysis of the *fort/da* game (14-15), which structure the suspensefully painful delay of pleasurable fulfillment. The fetish of excess captured in the replaying of the scene of separation from and reunion with the mother results in formal features which emphasize the repetition of visual and aural motifs, as well as the disavowal of traditional structures of suspense in narrative, for suspense is displaced from the dramatic to the aesthetic realm (Studlar 120). Almodóvar's aesthetically distinct and excessive visual style reveals a fondness for particular types of

¹¹ See Gaylyn Studlar's work on the aesthetics of masochism in *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*.

shots. A trademark in his films, the shot which either reveals an ambivalent subject of the gaze or privileges the point of view of an inanimate object occurs frequently. In *La ley del deseo* the camera shoots Pablo typing his filmscript up through the typewriter's keyboard, and, when Pablo and Tina have decided to produce *La voix humaine*, snorting coke to celebrate, there is a cut to a dream-like scene in which white powder drifts across the theater program. Not only do these shots occur as repetitive visual patterns, but they also reveal the omnipotent look of the camera's pro-filmic gaze, rupture the seamlessness of illusion, and actualize the spectator's desire for closure¹².

Susan Sontag's well-known outline of camp in «Notes on Camp» delineates camp as a taste that esteems artifice and style over content¹³. Considered in this light, camp's aesthetic impulse is not unlike the aesthetic predilections of masochism which also depend on the theatricality of ritualized gestures and the ironic disavowal of obsession. Sontag's conceptualization of camp, ever a taste, not a pathology, records the camp delight in artifice as never seeking to close but rather to ironically widen the gap between form and content.

Camp's fundamental metaphor of life-as-theater (or performance) reverberates throughout *Deseo* —from Pablo's melodramatic interpretation of Cocteau's theater piece, to Tina's overstated histrionics as actress, to the final scene in which all the players assemble for the peripeteic dénouement. The camp sensibility, while venerating the sometimes shocking outrageousness of bad taste —as illustrated in the title of Pablo's homoerotic film, *El paradigma del mejillón*— also pays homage to a certain kind of sentimentalism which reveres the past, notwithstanding its de-

¹² Silverman speaks directly to this phenomenon in her analysis of *Psycho* in which Hitchcock privileges an inanimate object's point of view, that of the money Marion has stolen. «We enjoy our visual superiority to Marion, but at the same time we understand that the gaze of the camera —that gaze in which we participate— exceeds us, threatening not only Marion but anyone exposed to the film's spectacle». And she concludes that «suture can be made more rather than less irresistible when the field of the speaking subject is continually implied», *Semiotics* 208.

¹³ My evocation of Sontag's essay is intentional; her work serves as a guide to Almodóvar's camp of traditional camp themes. That is, *La ley del deseo* is not only a camp film, it is also a film about the classic camp that Sontag profiles.

tached posturing. Almodóvar's camp attitude toward filmmaking, which venerates the artifice of passé film fashions, allows him to resuscitate melodrama for his own parodic purposes. His construction of romantic passion, of desire's law, appropriates the tensions and identifications of the melodramatic prototype yet, in the camp manner, maintains an ironic detachment from the emotional rhythms of narrative movement.

Furthermore, camp's sentimental attachment to the past combines with the love of theatricality to create one of its most enduring icons, the character of exaggerated masculinity or femininity (Sontag 279-280), as well as the androgyne. Familiar figures of classic camp taste are the stylized leading ladies of the woman's film, such as Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, and the more sexually androgynous Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo. Current camp figures include soap opera divas and the androgynous Grace Jones or the outrageous Bette Midler. In Spain and abroad some of Almodóvar's «chicas», including the visually extravagant Rossy de Palma and transsexual Bibi Andersen, are popular camp stars. A reading of camp *Deseo*, then, could not avoid an analysis of Tina's complete identification with femininity—as masochistic—romantic failure, motherliness, and nurturance, confirming the polarized lines along which gender differences have been traditionally drawn, despite or perhaps because of the playful conflation of gender identifications which are performed on her body.

Underscoring the dramatic highlights of particular scenes and conflating the camp love of hyperbolic expression with the repetitions of aesthetic masochism, the musical themes of the film's soundtrack function as aural fetishes which mark the aesthetic excesses of the film's emotional rhythms. The *mise en scène* of Juan's murder—on a cliff, at night, by the sea, in the moonlight—is accentuated by its musical accompaniment, «Guarda la luna», which lyrically reiterates the elements of the sequence. Antonio's and Pablo's lovemaking is twice ironically (dis) harmonized with the trio Los Panchos's «Lo dudo». While «Ne me quittes pas» highlights Juan's last night with Pablo, it also functions as an aesthetic *leitmotif* in the film, for its camp interpretation by Ada in Pablo's melodramatic theatrical production diegetically recapitulates the intersection between the detachment of camp humor and the surplus pleasure of masochism's aesthetics. The melodramatic finale

—punctuated by suicide, fire, suspense, and the culmination of desire— is furnished a musical coda with *Bolita de Nieve's* «Déjame recordar» which serves as a metacommentary on the action, immediately transposing the film's reception into a fantasy of memory. The surplus of visual and aural pleasures generates the supersensual encounter typical of masochism (Deleuze 69), moving spectatorial desire for narrative closure into the domain of aesthetic pleasure, for traditional narrative suspense is rendered as an aesthetic experience. On the other hand, the instability of shifting sexual subjectivity in spectators and characters alike creates spectatorial desire for narrative closure and the pleasurable satisfaction of a definitive dénouement.

La ley del deseo is Almodóvar's autobiographical paean to the male body and homosexual desire (pursued with pre-AIDS sexual exuberance), and his configuration of femininity recuperates the camp, masochistic, and even feminist nostalgia for a powerful female archetype. This fantasy is an attempt to remake the symbolic order by turning loss into what Rodowick has called «an erosion of phallic values» (85) in which the film's confluence of camp and masochistic discourses is played out on the female-constructed body. Tina has suffered the gender metamorphosis demanded by the (her) father's law, while simultaneously Almodóvar's masochistic subversion of Oedipal sexuality allows the spectator the possibility of identifying with the play of gender inscribed on her body. The masquerade of femininity that Tina enacts may not point to a radical refiguring of gender roles; it does, however, demonstrate that femininity is never a fixed, essential characteristic, but rather a socially constructed, mutable representation of gender.

THE POLITICS OF THE PAST

Almodóvar's parodic and subversive homage to Hollywood-style melodrama represents the encounter between camp's proclivity to co-opt past forms and postmodernism's critical revision of those appropriations. In his recent work on camp, Andrew Ross discusses how the conflictual politics inherent in the mainstreaming of marginal groups are often camped by those very groups, in order to deflect the seriousness of the shift in power (146). Further, Ross sees camp as «liberating the objects and discourses

of the past from disdain and neglect» (149). Camp, then, works from within the structures of power in order to invest its subversion in culture's marginalia and reinvent the past. The survivor mentality imbricated in the camp sensibility creates a past that is triumphant, despite the sufferings undergone, just as Pablo celebrates and camps Tina's romantic failures in his art.

In *Deseo* masochism's aesthetic model is conflated with melodrama's «recourse to gestural, visual, and musical excess» that functions as an externalization of interior psychic process (Gledhill 30-31). While the pathology of masochism restricts itself to a private reenactment of the masochist's fantasy, melodrama, as Christine Gledhill suggests, does not work to release individual repression, but rather moves toward the public enactment of socially unacknowledged states in which the family is a means, not an end (31). The subversion of the father's law that masochism privately points to in its rewriting of the family affair, is publicly proclaimed in cinematic renditions of melodrama. *Deseo's* camp expression of closure upholds traditional values—the destructiveness of passion and the satisfying bonding in family—at the same time as it demonstrates the transitory nature of the means of expressing those values. In Almodóvar's new Spain the past's detritus—the woman's film, *boleros*, Spanish film comedies, classic camp—is revitalized and placed in the context of a transgressive social mentality. This «law of desire» underwrites postmodernism's politics of complicity and critique that both acknowledges a historical continuum and parodies patriarchal representations. Thus, Almodóvar's dictum that he makes films as if Franco had never existed¹⁴ reveals a clever disavowal of history in which the father's law, although camped and masochistically suppressed, is not entirely forgotten.

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¹⁴ See Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens* for Almodóvar's famous quote, 216.

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