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Spanish Cinema Sans Censorship: Nudity and the Family

On November 20, 1975, Francisco Franco died, and Spain took off her clothes. Censorship was not officially lifted until 1977, and the transition to a democratic government lasted seven years (Besas 185). Immediately following Franco's death, filmmakers were still weary about their new liberation. It was not until around five years later that filmmakers finally started taking chances, exploring new subjects and focusing on life in modern Spain. Finally, a new, liberated cinema began to emerge. During the oppressive Franco regime, there were strict regulations on the structure of the Catholic family. Women's most important duty to their country was to become wives and mothers. In the years that followed the lift of censorship, filmmakers burst forth with new, creative ways of regarding life in Spain. Not only were they now able to show nudity, sex, drugs and punk rock, they could also show homosexuality and a fluid form of the definition of a family. Spanish filmmakers in the early 1980's took the traditional family and queered it, showing audiences new ways of thinking about the definition of the family; one that was radically different from the conservative model imposed by Franco. After his death, Spanish filmmakers, celebrating their newfound freedom from an oppressive regime, embraced the ban on censorship and, in the process, re-imagined a new Spanish family. By way of illustration, I will be examining five films from this period: *El diputado*, by Eloy de la Iglesia, and *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, *Laberinto de pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passion*), *¿Qué he Hecho Yo Para Merecer Esto?!* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), and *Dark Habits*, all by Pedro Almodóvar.

Under Franco's Catholic regime, the role of women was very strictly dictated. "Franco's state viewed women as its indispensable partner in nation-building. It put in place institutions and promulgated laws to officiate women's duties as mothers and daughters of the fatherland" (Gomez 51). It was a woman's duty to her country to marry and produce children. The most important contribution she could make to her nation was to be a wife and mother. "With Franco, the position of women was seemingly set back centuries: if a woman wished to work in the 40s she had to obtain a certificate from her husband granting his permission" (Hopewell 113). Although this changed in the 60s, women were still seen as predominantly "home-maker and child-bearer" (Hopewell 113). These ideas were directly in line with Catholic mandates. Aurora G. Morcillo explains that, "The Francoist state followed the directives of Pope Pius XII, who publicly reiterated that procreation was the sole purpose of Christian marriage in 1951" (Morcillo 140). She continues, stating, "Religious discourse sanctified biological determinism. As mothers, women's relationship to the Francoist body politic was officially articulated around the policing of their bodies" (140). It was in these ways that wife and motherhood became key roles for women in Spain, during Franco's reign. Because of this strict adherence to Catholic directives, a traditional, Christian family was central in Franco's Spain. After his death, the Spanish were then given the freedom to re-imagine this family in new and flexible ways.

Filmmakers in the late 1970s and early 1980s identified this new freedom and fully embraced it in their work. By taking advantage of the new ban on censorship, they were able to create films that reflected a new, modern Spain that rejected the old, Catholic-centric way of life. A new set of filmmakers came to the forefront, including

Eloy de la Iglesia and Pedro Almodóvar. Part of this new modernization came in the form of the *Movida* movement. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas describe the movement as such:

The protagonists of the *Movida* movement seemed to espouse a radical apoliticism and practised a kind of ‘cultural transvestism’, trying on and casting off the range of different identities which suddenly become possible after the end of the dictatorship and which caused some commentators to regard post-Franco Spain as the ‘epitome of the postmodern, the incarnation in practice of European theory – from its multilingual, multicultural mix to its alleged toleration of drugs, pornography and homosexuality. (114)

The *Movida* movement worked as a sort of inspiration to filmmakers during this time period following Franco’s death. After years of oppression and revolt, many youth in Spain (and particularly in Madrid) turned to a kind of apolitical apathy, now that there was nothing to fight against. Films reflected this by portraying characters and situations that mixed a sort of nihilism, with a freedom from censorship. Almodóvar became a poster boy for this movement, and “in line with his generally deconstructive approach to artificial categorisations, these representations [in reference to characters in his films] are a means of subverting the traditional roles and patterns that shape patriarchal society” (Jordan 115). Almodóvar takes liberty in deconstructing all aspects society, including that of the family. “Almodóvar’s characteristic appropriation of family melodrama challenges conventional configurations of the family to replace them with unorthodox alternatives” (Jordan 115). I argue that Almodóvar is not the only filmmaker from this time period to do this, and that this queering of the family came into being as a direct response to Franco’s strict Catholic regime. In each of the following five films, I will examine how the ban on censorship allowed filmmakers to branch out and re-imagine the family in new and exciting arrangements.

El diputado tells the story of Roberto, a Marxist congressman who is running for the office of Secretary General. From the beginning, the audience is told his story from the future, almost as though it is a documentary. He explains his first homosexual experiences in the military and later in prison, when he is arrested as a politician of the Communist party. In prison, he meets Nes, who later sets him up with many young boys on whom to perform homosexual acts. Roberto tells his wife, Carmen, of his homosexual escapades, and she willingly accepts them. Nes becomes involved in an underground movement against the Communists (and homosexuals) and, for money, he agrees to set Roberto up with a minor. The plot is to catch Roberto in the act with the minor, Juanito, and force him to resign. The plan goes awry when Roberto and Juanito fall in love, and Juanito becomes an extended part of Roberto and Carmen's family. The film ends in tragedy, as Juanito is murdered by the very people he had been working for, and Roberto realizes that he will lose everything when he has to expose the truth and resign from his position in the government.

In this film, Eloy de la Iglesia combines politics and homosexuality in a way that became accessible to mainstream audiences. As Alejandro Melero Salvador points out in his essay, there is an abundance of political references that were very specific to the time period, but which date it now (Salvador 98). De la Iglesia, himself, has pointed out that the plethora of current (at the time) references largely makes the movie unrelatable on this level today. However, the storyline of homosexuality is of particular importance, as this film was one of the first to broach the subject and present it to mass audiences in a way that could be easily ingested and processed. Homosexuality in Spain was illegal until 1979, and "even after [a] democratic government was installed individuals could still be

prosecuted and imprisoned as they had been before” (Salvador 88). Because of its illegality, choosing a gay main character, and one involved in the government at that, was a risky move by de la Iglesia, and we see here how he embraced the ban on censorship. De la Iglesia takes full advantage of the ban in *El diputado* by not only including homosexuality, but also copious amounts of nudity, group sex, and drugs.

One scene shows us a group of men walking around an apartment, fully naked, as an orgy-type of activity ensues. While Juanito is having fellatio performed on him by a much older man, in the background we can see two men having anal sex. The scene continues as the camera pans across the apartment, showing naked men in a variety of sexual positions. The narrative continues as two characters have a conversation in a different room, yet they never put clothes on. The entirety of the discussion is filmed while the men are still naked. Later in film, Juanito goes to a straight party and starts kissing a girl. She takes her shirt off, and they move to an upstairs bedroom to have sex. As Juanito is straddling the girl, we see him naked from the waist down, from behind. The host of the party (an older man) interrupts them, after asking another guest about Juanito. He brings a plate of coke in, and tells the girl that, “It is not for sniffing. You’re to put it there” (*Diputado*). Juanito is confused by what he is insinuating, and asks where they are supposed to put it. At this point, the couple is sitting up on the bed, and the girl is only wearing a necktie. The host puts some coke on his finger and rubs it onto her vagina. Then he turns to Juanito and says, “Now you” (*Diputado*). Juanito doesn’t let him, but this scene is an example of how far filmmakers were willing to go, now that they were not smothered by Franco’s censorship.

As mentioned above, Roberto decides to tell his wife, Carmen, about his affair with Juanito. She accepts this, but is afraid that Roberto will leave her, as, not only is Roberto sleeping with Juanito, he is in love with him. (This portrayal of love between two men was also something never shown on screen before either. It is of note that, not only did de la Iglesia show gay sex, he also showed gay love.) Because Carmen is fearful of losing Roberto, she proposes that Juanito stay with them, and the three of them can become a family. She points out that he is young enough to be their son, and they decide to introduce him to friends as a relative, “to avoid suspicion” (*Diputado*). And, so, Juanito becomes a part of their family. The audience sees a montage of the three out around Madrid, going to cafes, street vendors, museums and demonstrations. We also see Juanito in their home, as the three sit down for a traditional family dinner together in the dining room of Roberto and Carmen’s apartment. On the surface, they appear to be a conventional family of husband, wife and son.

During one scene, however, we get a peek into the queered side of this family. After dinner, the “family” retires to the living room for drinks and music. Juanito pulls out some marijuana, and the three begin to smoke, as well. As the evening wears on, Carmen asks Juanito if he likes her, and then asks him to kiss her. Juanito looks at Roberto, instead of answering her, and Carmen points out that he is asking Roberto’s permission. They start kissing, and move to the floor, where they begin to roll around. Roberto gets up from his chair and stands over them for a moment. Then, he joins in, and the audience is shown a shot of the three of them kissing each other at once, as if we are on the floor with them. We see here how the family is queered, as well as how the Oedipal structure is put into play, within a homosexual context. Stephen Tropiano

describes it in this way: “A homosexual variation of the Spanish oedipal narrative focuses on the relationship between the son and his surrogate father, who is both a desirable and threatening figure” (Tropiano 161). Not only does de la Iglesia queer the family, he also manipulates the traditional Oedipal narrative, and introduces the theme of classic Greek pederasty into the film. Tropiano asserts that in *El diputado*, “homosexual relationships mirror the Greek model of pederasty, as the respective roles each partner assumes are defined in terms of economic and political differences” (163). These roles are mirrored in the film, as Roberto is not only much older than Juanito, he is in a different class, as he has more money and is a politician. When Carmen first meets Juanito, she and Roberto discuss what he is like and how he differs from what Carmen’s expectations were. Roberto states that she must be surprised, as he is not a “Greek nymph” (*Diputado*). And early on, the first time that Juanito visits Roberto’s secret apartment, Juanito is wearing a t-shirt that says “Athens, Greece” across the front. These are small details that seem to admit self-consciousness at playing into the Oedipal and Greek pederasty models. By using these models in his film, de la Iglesia takes the classic nuclear family and queers it. Although the film does not have a happy ending, the audience sees that all three characters are happiest when they come together and live life as a “family.”

In Pedro Almodóvar’s first full-length film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, we are told the story of three very different Spanish women who become friends, and who, eventually, form a type of family. Pepi is a wealthy heiress who grows pot on her balcony and had been planning on selling her virginity, in order to become independent of her parents, before being raped by Luci’s husband. Luci, an oppressed housewife, is a secret masochist, who married a police officer in the hopes of being

roughed up by him. Her hopes have been dashed, until she meets Bom, the sixteen-year-old pop-punk star. Bom treats Luci as her slave, and the two women begin a lesbian relationship. The film follows the sex- and drug-fueled escapades of the three friends as they attempt to enact revenge on the men in their lives who have wronged them, and as they carouse the underground world of Almodóvar's imagination, which involves bearded women, homosexuality, drugs, and sex parties. The film ends with Luci getting beaten by her husband to the point that she is hospitalized, which ends up turning her on. Bom is horrified that she has lost Luci to her abusive husband, and Pepi and Bom agree to live together and start a new life.

Pepi, Luci, Bom was a very low-budget production, and this fact was apparent while viewing it. The viewer sees none of the precision, clever camera angles and pacing that is so beautiful in later Almodóvar productions. What is of interest in this particular film, though, is Almodóvar's uninhabited use of sex, drugs, pop music, and sexuality. The opening scene involves a rape, but only after Pepi offers her "morsel" to the cop investigating her pot plants on her balcony. On Bom and Luci's first meeting, Bom urinates on Luci to show her domination, which turns Luci on. The three women attend a party where there is a contest to measure the lengths and widths of all the men's penises, and the winner gets to do "whatever he wants with whomever he wants" (*Pepi*). There are extended scenes that show Bom's band playing, as she sings:

I love you because you're dirty. A pig, a whore and a delight. You're the worst that's come out of Murcia. And you're completely at my disposal...I put my finger up your ass. I make you go down on me. I beat you up from time to me. The terrorists have nothing on you. (*Pepi*)

These examples illustrate how Almodóvar forged ahead in the world of Spanish film, by fully embracing the lifting of censorship. The film is a story that showcases the youthful

and nihilist attitudes of a new generation that was only interested in free sex and free drugs.

In addition to these scenes of sex, drugs and punk rock, we also see the relationships between the women flourish. Prior to Luci returning to her abusive husband at the film's end, the three women become close friends and encourage, support and take care of one another. Luci and Bom become romantically involved, and, even though Bom treats Luci poorly, because she's a masochist, the two women care deeply for one another. Bom admits to Pepi how much she truly loves Luci, and it hurts her that Luci returns to her husband. After leaving a nightclub, and Luci disappears, Bom goes home with Pepi, who makes them a late-night meal. As the two women are cooking together, they discuss how good of friends they are, despite their differences. Bom also asks Pepi how she is going to end the movie that she is working on writing. Pepi says, "You and Luci get married – in white. I have the cop's baby. You visit me at the hospital, and I give you the baby so you'll be a proper family" (*Pepi*). In Pepi's example, the proper family is two women who get married and raise the bastard child who is the result of a rape. At the very end of the film, Pepi and Bom visit Luci in the hospital, and Bom is distraught at finding out that Luci is going back to her husband. As Pepi and Bom leave the hospital, Bom tells Pepi that she doesn't know what she is going to do with her life. Pepi tells her that she ought to come live with her. "I'm a girl living alone. I need someone to protect me. With your boxing ability, you could be my bodyguard" (*Pepi*). The film ends on this scene of the two girls agreeing to live together and take care of one another. The two women form a new family unit that does not involve the white dress, a patriarch, or a baby.

Laberinto de pasiones, also directed by Almodóvar, is a convoluted story that follows the trajectory of many marginalized characters through a ludicrous narrative. At the heart of the story, a gay, Islamic prince is in hiding in Spain, while an Arab terrorist group is hunting him down, and an ex-Islamic empress is attempting to attain the prince's sperm, in order to create royal children. In addition to this storyline, there is the story of Sexilia, a nymphomaniac who cannot stand sunlight because of a childhood trauma, and Queti, the daughter of a dry cleaner, who has to endure being tied up and raped by her father, because he constantly confuses her with his wife, who ran away years before. The absurd story ends with the empress being impregnated with the royal sperm, the Islamic prince and the nymphomaniac falling in love and running away together, and Queti undergoing plastic surgery to become Sexilia. Now that the real Sexilia has run off with the prince, Queti (the new Sexilia) takes over Sexilia's life, which includes sleeping with Sexilia's actual father, even though he still thinks she is his daughter.

This absurd, and almost plotless, film also includes a sadistic transvestite porn star and copious amounts of drug use. Again, as in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, there are extended scenes that include pop-rock-punk bands performing, often in drag. One song's lyrics are:

Coke tones you up. Heroin hooks you. Grass gets you high. Bustaid relaxes you. Dexedrine blows your mind. Sosegon hallucinates. Opium knocks you out. Angel dust is a bust. (*Laberinto*)

Not only do we see extensive drug use throughout the film, we also get to see songs performed, dedicated to the glory of drugs. Sex also plays a major role in the film, and, in fact, the opening credits are a series of close-up shots of men's crotches and butts. These men are clothed, but, by not showing the entire man, the viewer is immediately accosted with highly sexualized images, directly at the start of the movie. There is also much more

nudity in this film than Almodóvar's last, and we see Sexilia having a threesome with two other men, as well as a full frontal shot of Johnny, the Islamic prince, as he comes out of the bathroom after having sex with the empress. The portrayal of drugs, sex, transvestites and youth, once again, show us Almodóvar's release of all sexual and social constraints in new Spanish cinema.

Laberinto de pasiones is one of the first films we see that actually allows a man and woman to end up together, happily. Of course, the couple in question, Sexilia and Johnny, are not an average man and woman. Sexilia is a recovered sex addict, who has a terrible relationship with her father, and runs away with the Islamic prince, Johnny, in order to escape her life in Madrid. Johnny, prior to Sexilia, has only slept with men, but decides that he is in love with her. The film ends with the two flying to his homeland in order to start a new life together. Despite the fact that Sexilia leaves, she and Queti also become a sort of family during the film. Queti hates her life, living with her father, and tells Sexilia that she would trade lives with anyone in order to escape it. The two women become close, and Sexilia introduces Queti to her band and circle of friends. Since Sexilia is leaving with Johnny, she agrees to let Queti take over her life in Spain. She pays for Queti to have plastic surgery to look exactly like Sexilia, and once Sexilia leaves, Queti does, in fact, take over Sexilia's life. The audience is left, at the film's end, with Queti (disguised as Sexilia) in bed with Sexilia's father. Both are extremely happy and in love. Queti now has a new family and an improved life. Almodóvar directly rejects the idea of the traditional family, and, instead, creates a new definition of what it means to be a family.

Almodóvar's *¿Qué he Hecho Yo Para Merecer Esto?!* (*What Have I Done To Deserve This?!*) is the story of a dysfunctional family living in a cramped apartment in Madrid. The film's main protagonist is Gloria, a housewife and cleaning lady who is addicted to prescription painkillers. The film follows her struggles as she attempts to deal with her family, which include: her abusive husband, Antonio, a cab driver, who has a knack for forging handwriting, her two young sons, Toni, who sells drugs, and Miguel, who is openly sleeping with his friend's father, and her mother-in-law, an eccentric old lady who dotes on her son, collects large sticks in the park and locks up bottles of mineral water to keep from the rest of the family. Gloria cleans houses for a variety of people, including a writer and his wife, who attempt to employ Antonio who can forge Hitler's handwriting, so that they can fabricate a faux memoir to make money. One night, Gloria, tired of getting emotionally and physically abused by her husband, hits him over the head with a hambone, and kills him. The movie ends with Toni and the grandmother moving to a village in the country, and Miguel, who had moved in with a pedophilic dentist, moving back into his mother's house to take care of her.

The first scene of the film shows a man in a locker room shower at a martial arts studio, where Gloria is cleaning. The audience sees his completely naked body, and much of Gloria, as they have sex in the shower. Later, we meet Gloria's neighbor and friend, Cristal, who is a prostitute working out of her apartment. The audience sees many scenes of her getting intimate with her clients, and, in a particularly funny scene, Gloria is invited to watch. Gloria is shown sitting on the edge of the bed, next to Cristal and her client having sex, looking bored and playing with her newly purchased curling iron. Once again, Almodóvar combines humor and sex in this rather dark comedy. He is continuing

to push the envelope by openly dealing with homosexuality, prostitution, nudity, sex, and drugs. Here, though, as opposed to his earlier films, we begin to see a more subtle and sensitive look at the life of this repressed housewife. There are some beautiful shots of the apartment complex and of the Madrid streets, and throughout the film we're given peculiar views of being inside, looking out. Almodóvar put the viewer inside objects, as we look out at the characters, such as when Gloria is loading the washing machine, or when Cristal is looking for her ID in her closet. The audience is inside these small spaces, looking out. These shots, in combination with Gloria's cramped apartment and the closeness of the entire building, give the feeling of claustrophobia and suffocation, which mirrors Gloria's life. We see her confined to the role of wife and mother, with only short reprieves, which come in the form of popping prescription pills or sniffing glue.

Throughout the film, the audience is shown the strong relationship between Gloria and Cristal. At one point, Gloria describes Cristal as "being like a sister" (*What Have I Done*). Despite the fact that Cristal is a prostitute, Gloria still views her as her best friend. She is more than a neighbor; she is part of Gloria's family. We also see Gloria relating to another neighbor's child, Vanessa. After accidentally killing her husband, Gloria goes to her apartment to find Cristal, and ends up talking to Vanessa, whose mother has just beaten her. Vanessa asks Gloria if she'll adopt her. Gloria replies, "I'm not such a good mother either" (*What Have I Done*). To this, Vanessa responds, "Well, I'll adopt you" (*What Have I Done*). Gloria almost smiles, for the first time in the film, and we see how a queered family may be better than the traditional one that Gloria was living in. The movie ends with one son, Toni, a teenager, going off to the countryside with his grandmother to live. The grandson and grandmother are good friends throughout the film, and we see

them share their lives with one another. Toni saves up his money from selling drugs to take his grandmother back to her old village, where he wants to work off the land. As the two depart on the bus, Toni says goodbye to his mother and tells her to stop taking pills, because they are bad for her, and gives her some money. Instead of the mother giving advice and support to her son, in this situation, we have the son helping the mother cope with life. When she returns home, she roams through the small apartment, which seems spacious now that it is empty, and we get the feeling that she is feeling lonely and distraught. This is when her youngest son, Miguel comes home. He is probably only ten or eleven years old, but he tells her that he's there to stay, because "This house needs a man" (*What Have I Done*). She is elated that he's back and hugs him tight, telling him that she has missed him immensely. Even though he is her son, and a young boy, he feels that it is his duty to comfort and protect her. She is happy with this arrangement, and, again, we see how a non-traditional family structure works better than the conventional one enforced by Franco.

The last movie that I looked to in order to illustrate this connection between censorship and the queered family was *Entre tinieblas (Dark Habits)*, by Almodóvar. The main character, Yolanda, is a singer and drug dealer, who receives some bad heroin. She is unaware that it is tainted, and gives some to her abusive boyfriend. He dies, and it becomes known that the bad heroin came from her. She remembers being visited by some nuns at one of her performances who were big fans, and she escapes to their convent to hide. Once inside, we learn that several of the sisters are drug addicts. The convent operates as a place for lost and misdirected young women to retreat to, in order to be

rehabilitated. However, we also learn that the head nun is a lesbian, and often has relationships with many of the young women that end up there.

While there is less nudity and sex in this particular Almodóvar film, there is an inordinate amount of drug use, as well as slapping Catholicism in the face. Mother Superior is addicted to heroin, as well as coke, and there are multiple scenes of her shooting up and snorting, all while donning her habit. Yolanda also does any drugs that Mother Superior will get for her and will gladly accept her heroin and coke, all while resisting her sexual advances. Sister Manure takes acid, and whenever we're shown a scene through her eyes, colors and motions on screen are muddled, as though we are hallucinating with her. Sister Rat writes smut novels under a pen name, and the priest smokes hash. Despite the fact that there is less nudity and sex, Almodóvar still makes his point by setting this story in a convent. Not only is he showing homosexuality and rampant drug use, he is showing nuns doing it. Under Franco's Catholic regime, this would have been impossible. *Dark Habits* is a direct reaction to the years of forced Catholicism Spain was made to endure.

As with the other films we've looked at, the movie ends with a queered version of the family. At its conclusion, one of the sisters confesses to the priest that she is in love with him. He responds, telling her that he too is in love with her. Their confessions of love are interrupted by Sister Damned, who brings her pet tiger into the church. When asked what she is doing with the tiger in the church, she tells them that she wants the two of them to look after him, because she is leaving for another convent. She tells them that they must look after the tiger, and that they will be a family. The priest and nun who are in love accept looking after him, and the sister says that they will treat him like a son.

Meanwhile, Yolanda has decided that she is ready to leave the convent as well, since it is closing anyways. The Marquise, who used to be the convent's benefactor, offers her home to both Yolanda and Sister Rat. Both the nun and Yolanda have helped the Marquise find out information about her dead daughter, and the three women grow close over the course of the movie. She tells them that she is living there alone and owes them both so much, and that they can live there forever. Here, again, we see how a queered family becomes the end result, allowing the characters to finally be happy and live outside the conventions of normative society.

Throughout these films, and many others following Franco's death, we see how the freedom to probe into new subjects and themes, without the fear of censors, resulted in a re-imagined family. By having the freedom to show and say whatever they wanted to, Spanish filmmakers were able to rebel against the strict social and cultural restrictions put in place by Franco. A new definition of family was created, and Spanish cinema was finally able to portray a modern Spanish lifestyle, showing all the homosexuality, drugs and punk rock that was included in it. Women no longer had to be portrayed as mothers and wives only, and filmmakers, particularly Almodóvar, were now at liberty to voice dissatisfaction with these restricted roles. These filmmakers showed audiences that men didn't have to love women only, women didn't have to love men only, men didn't have to dress as men, drugs could be used by anyone and everyone, families don't always involve a mother, father and 2.5 children, and, above all, nothing is sacred.

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