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Pedro Almodovar y la Fuerza de la Mujer

1. Introduction

Hailing from Spain and with a career that has spanned over thirty years, Pedro Almodovar has become one of the most successful modern filmmakers. His films have won him many prestigious accolades including the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Film and Best Screenplay. There are many components to his films that make him unique, specifically his use of the melodrama genre and colorful cinematography. However, his use of women in leading roles is looked at as his most important mark in cinema. The award winning films *Volver* and *Hable con Ella* are phenomenal examples of writer and director Pedro Almodovar's ability at writing well rounded and powerful women, which sprouted his success in the film industry.

Pequeños Comienzos. At an early age, Almodovar became interested in film. He would actively go to the cinemas as a child, falling in love with the Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s (Ebert 2006). The aspiring filmmaker was born in a small rural town in Castile-La Mancha and lived there until his family moved to Extremadura when he was eight. In 1965 and when Almodovar was sixteen years old, he decided to leave his hometown and move to the Spanish capital of Madrid. He wanted to pursue his passion of filmmaking. Unfortunately, he lived during a time where Spain was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, a man who in 1967 closed down the National School of Cinema in Madrid (Powell 2009). Unable to study film, Almodovar spent years working different jobs while writing stories and screenplays at night. His road to success

took several years in which he faced many difficulties. In 1980, Almodovar created his first feature film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, five years after the death of Franco and the start of Spain's democracy. His themes of sexual identity, abuse, and drugs starkly contrasted the nationalist themes of the Franco period and made him one of the leaders of La Movida Madrilenia. La Movida was a “countercultural eruption in the city (Madrid) during the country’s volatile ‘transition’ to democracy” (Phelan 2020). Minority groups such as the LGBT community sprang from hiding. Music and art that had been banned during Franco flourished in an unorganized mess. Almodovar’s love for women led stories and female oriented themes caused him to gain an audience during this time. The key to him becoming a leader in not only Spanish film but film worldwide is his ability to utilize the female gender.

2. Analysis

Women are the centerpiece of Almodovar’s work, they drive the narrative. Themes such as love, passion, and sexual abuse are easily portrayed because of the director’s mastery at creating female protagonists with complex identities. It is something that is not often seen in cinema, with male leads being the most prevalent since the creation of filmmaking. Almodovar’s work goes against the grain, it is rare to see him not use female actresses as his leads. Even when he decides to use male actors for main roles, he makes sure that the women still control the story, not the men. Two Almodovar films that will be looked at intently are *Hable con Ella* and *Volver*. His filmography, starting with “transgressive and sexual comedies” would lead to “more subtler, narratively complex high melodramas” (Tot 2016). *Hable con Ella* and *Volver* are both films from the latter of his filmography and are arguably when the director was at his prime. *Hable con Ella* is a phenomenal example of Almodovar’s ability to deconstruct gender identity constraints to create well rounded unique characters. *Volver* is one of his most female driven films that

emphasises the empowerment and camaraderie of women. Both films have commonalities that are prevalent in most of Almodovar's films including the use of sexual abuse, colorful cinematography, and lingering camera shots.

Hable con Ella. Released in 2002, *Hable con Ella*, follows two Spanish men, Benigno (Javier Camara) and Marco (Dario Grandinetti), who have found each other in a similar situation. With flashbacks and nonlinear storytelling, Almodovar reveals the men's stories and how they met each other. Marco's girlfriend Lydia (Rosario Flores) is a bullfighter who has been gored and is now in a coma. Benigno is a male nurse caring for a young dance student named Alicia (Leonor Watling), who is also in a coma after a tragic car accident. Benigno saw Alicia dance from his apartment window and instantly fell in love with her. When she fell into a coma, Benigno jumped at the opportunity to be her personal caregiver, using his experience as a nurse and beautician. Marco befriends Benigno in the hospital where the two women reside. Each of the four characters serve as foils for each other with personal boundaries being either "too permeable or for others, too closed" (Yanof 610). Throughout the film, Almodovar incorporates some of his most prominent themes including love, passion, and gender fluidity.

The Fluidity of Gender. The deconstruction of gender roles play a huge part in *Hable con Ella*, and is something that Almodovar experiments with a lot in his films. The four main characters hold "complex, varied, and, in some cases, gender-bending identifications and subjectivities" (Yanof 611). Benigno is a male



Fig. 1. Pedro Almodóvar, *Hable con Ella*, 2002.

nurse, something not seen often in the work field. Lydia is a bullfighter, which is a sport that

primarily consists of men. At minute 10:00 in the film, Lydia is fighting a badly wounded bull, you are unable to distinguish if she is male or female (Yanof 620) Almodovar encapsulates the brutality of the scene with slow motion shots and slow depressing music. Alicia's character is also very interesting. With just a glance it may seem apparent that Alicia displays the common feminine stereotypes seen in most films, but with a deeper look it can be seen there is a "more balanced breadth of 'gendered' traits" (Yanof 619). Alicia is more than just a "pretty girl" but a strong human being that disregards her gender. The beauty in what Almodovar does is his ability to create normalcy in the fact that different genders can have uncommon jobs or personal traits. There is never a moment when watching the film that you feel there are oddities.

Volver. Released in 2007, *Volver* is a story about the camaraderie of women and the struggles they face together. Raimunda (Penelope Cruz) and her sister Sole (Lola Duenas) live in Madrid but take trips to their hometown of Alcanfor de las Infantas, a small village in La Mancha. The sister's parents had suspiciously died in a fire years ago, and the two daughters are still struggling with the loss. One night, Raimunda's daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo) kills her husband after he attempts to sexually abuse her. Raimunda, with the help of the other women in her neighborhood, works to keep the murder a secret and to give her daughter the best that she can. Things only get more complicated when her mother, who was thought to be dead, appears to Sole and works to make amends with her daughters. *Volver* is one of Almodovar's most women-led stories and actress Penelope Cruz received much praise for her portrayal of the strong and independent Raimunda.

The Camaraderie of Women. *Volver* is a story about women and the support they have for each other. Almodovar creates many moments in the film where the main female protagonists empower each other. A great moment occurs at minute 36:00, when Sole is embraced by several

women of the village during the funeral of her aunt. This is greatly contrasted by the silent glares the men give Sole only moments before (Kinder 6). In Madrid, Almodovar demonstrated the sisterhood of Raimunda and her neighbors in several scenes. At minute 31:44, Raimunda is in need of food so she can cook for the film crew. She asks several women for various things like desserts, dinner ingredients, and drinks. Almodovar encapsulates with these conversations the feeling of comradery that the women have for each other. It continues at hour 1:22:00, when Raimunda asks for help in burying Paco's



Fig. 2. Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver*, 2007.

body. Regardless of the request, the women will drop everything to help each other. There are many other moments as Marsha Kinder explains how “we watch them shampooing each other’s hair at Sole’s ‘illegal’ beauty shop” and how we also “witness three women teaming up to move a refrigerator” (Kinder 7). By showing the comradery of these women, Almodovar only strengthens his ability at creating genuine female stories that are unique and different from anything else in the film industry.

Sexual Abuse. Sexual abuse is a common theme in nearly all of Almodóvar’s films. It is something that *Volver*’s Raimunda and *Hable con Ella*’s Alicia share. Raimunda was sexually abused by her father leading to the birth of her daughter/sister Paula. Alicia was violated by Benigno while she was comatose, which ultimately led to her getting pregnant and waking up. Many critics have denoted Almodovar’s use of rape and sexual abuse “misogynist” and “exploitive” (D’Lugo 204). However, a closer look at the filmmakers motifs for including sexual

abuse in his films will show that there is deeper meaning. Leora Lev supports this idea when they state how Almodovar's use of rape is also a "metaphor for and technological endpoint of oppressive social, cultural, national, and class ideologies..." (D'Lugo 204). Almodovar's stories are a reflection of Spanish society, especially during the Franco period when women lacked agency and the government valued a patriarchal society. Raimunda is haunted by her terrible past and abuse from her father, but Almodovar demonstrates her feminine strength to overcome something so anti-feminine. Alicia, who was a strong and independent woman before the car accident, is left in a defenseless comatose state. In order to write great stories about women, one must acknowledge the terrible things that the female gender has gone through in a male dominated society. Almodovar is a master at incorporating these terrors, including sexually abuse, and showing the strength and ability for these women to overcome.

Almodovar's Aesthetic. Fancy

furniture, warm colors, and pop art all accurately describe the aesthetic of Almodóvar's work. The Spanish filmmaker "creates an environment of humor and high drama, making his work unique and attractive" (Fandorific 00:00-02:00). Having a uniform color



Fig. 3. Pedro Almodóvar, *Hable con Ella*, 2002.

scheme allows the filmmaker to completely focus on the story and its characters. In *Hable con Ella*, the majority of the story occurs in the clinic, El Bosque, where Alicia and Lydia are cared for. Instead of filling the hospital rooms with bleak and depressing whites and grays, he decides to paint the walls a warm yellow color. In doing so, Almodovar allows the clinic to not feel like a

place of illness, but rather the character's home. In *Volver*, the color red is used throughout the entire film. Whether it is the clothing of Raimunda or the blood from Paco's dead body, red is everywhere and is used with purpose. Almodovar's themes of passion and love are evoked through the use of the warm color. The women of *Volver* love and support each other, even when they face difficult times. Without this use of warm colors to convey his stories, Almodovar would struggle to find an aesthetic that matches with the strong female characters he presents on screen.

Utilizing Lingering Camera Shots. Almodovar is very meticulous with his framing and the composition of his shots. In both *Hable con Ella* and *Volver*, close-ups and lingering camera shots are used in order to add to the overall story and development of characters. In *Hable con Ella*, there are many scenes where Almodovar uses this technique in order for the audience to fully process what is happening on the screen. In the beginning of the film at minute 3:50, Benigno is introduced cleaning and massaging Alicia's comatose body. With lingering camera shots and closeups, the director expresses the helplessness of Alicia. She is at the mercy of Benigno and the other nurses. There is symbolism in the fact that both Alicia and Lydia are helpless and could not make their own decisions. This loss of agency reminds us of the Franco period and the lack of women's rights. Another important moment in the film occurs at minute 22:30, with the slow and elaborate dressing of Lydia into her bullfighting uniform. There is a sense of calmness before a storm with Almodovar's silent filled close-ups of the gold and red machismo suit. Lydia's body is "slender, muscular, and androgynous" (Yanof 619), another example of Almodovar's fluidity of gender and showing the strength of Lydia as a human being and not a female in a male's sport. A critical point in *Volver* uses the same directing techniques. At minute 20:50, Raimunda is cleaning up the murder of her husband Paco in the kitchen. There

is a beautiful close-up shot of Raimunda “sopping up Paco’s bright blood with lacy white paper towels” (Kinder 7). Her movements are elegant as she meticulously cleans up the body of her dead husband. Throughout the scene, Almodovar utilizes parallel shots from Raimunda in the kitchen earlier in the film to convey the idea that she is just cleaning up another mess. The type of camera shots Almodovar uses in scenes of *Hable con Ella* and *Volver* greatly pair as well as add to the unique and well-rounded female characters that the director creates in his films.

3. Conclusions

Every great director has given to the film industry something that was never seen before. Pedro Almodovar has given the world his stylish melodramas and the women characters he brings to life. It is not hard to argue that the Spanish filmmaker loves using the female gender in his films. In almost all of his movies the lead roles are strong women like Penelope Cruz and Rosario Flores. His writing and direction in *Volver* and *Hable con Ella* are prime examples of the director's ability at putting women as the focus point of his films. He uses thematic methods like gender fluidity, comradery of women, and sexual abuse to convey his ideas and strengthen his characters. Through his unique aesthetic and meticulous camera shots, Almodovar also adds to the tone and mood of his worlds. He sticks to what he knows best, and that is telling the beautiful stories of Raimunda, Alicia, and many others.

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