Performing Gender: The Construction of Gender Identity in Post-Francoist Spanish Film as seen in Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother

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Honors Thesis
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Précis

Gender, the social construction of biological differences, often produces very limiting ideas of how one should act according to his/her sex. These roles, prescribed solely by societal assumptions, restrict individual expression of identity. Gender issues are greatly intriguing to me and any arena in which I can analyze their impacts is exhilarating. After studying abroad in Barcelona, and seeing first-hand the culture of a freshly democratic nation I became interested in how gender fits into the new social identity. I wanted to be able to apply my passion for gender studies with my Foreign Languages and Cultures degree by creating a research question including these areas of study. In my thesis I examine how gender identity was artistically represented and subsequently created in Pedro Almodóvar’s Post-Francoist film, All About My Mother. Almodóvar proposes that genders, rather than being prescribed roles, are performed, which undermines the essentialist view about gender roles that ruled Spain during Francoism.

While many critics have mentioned Almodóvar’s gender-bending themes in his vast cannon of works, there is considerably less scholarship on the fluidity of gender representation in his films—the different degrees of gender identity that are displayed by his characters. As for the use of metafiction, self-reflective fiction, as a deconstructive medium it is far less examined. Combining the concepts of theater, as an examination of reality, and gender performance with metafiction is something that has seldom been analyzed, especially in Almodóvar’s internationally renowned All About My Mother.

In order to accurately understand the significance of Almodóvar’s film, it is crucial to understand the social and political context of Spain during Franco’s regime and after the dictatorship. Spain had a very monolithic identity under Franco, one in which men and women were wedded to their biblically assigned roles of provider and homemaker, respectively. These
fixed identities were very oppressive. After Franco’s death and during the transition to democracy, artists and intellectuals began playing with the idea of creating a new, fictional identity, one that through the medium of fiction became a way to understand and analyze reality.

I conducted bibliographical research to answer my thesis question. Resorting to Richard Hornby’s and Henry Sayre’s ideas about theatricalness and Judith Butler’s theories about the performative nature of gender roles to analyze the film, All About My Mother. My sources consisted mostly of this film, its criticism and the theoretical background. This includes specialized articles, Ph.D. dissertations, and books in English and Spanish. These materials are the body of knowledge that currently exists about the film. Taking this traditional approach, I critically analyzed All About My Mother with my own insight.

This thesis has expanded upon some previous research on All About My Mother but even further analyzes the partnership between metafiction and the creation of reality and gender roles. The research question could even be expanded to include other Almodóvar films, other director’s films or other literature realized during the post-transition to democracy. While it was not just this one film that helped to alter the culture of the country, this film along with works by other artists challenged Spain’s political culture and enabled the nation to accept a more fluid approach to gender roles and identity.

Through my research, I found that Spain was able to develop a different approach to gender roles and identity by resorting to fiction like Almodóvar’s film. My findings, on fiction as a mode to construct reality, could be applied in reference to the art that is being produced currently as a way to understand changes in society and culture.
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Introduction

The societal expectations of gender are extremely defined, limiting women and men to certain expected qualities, actions, and roles. Gender roles evolve very slowly, taking generations to change. During the Spanish transition to democracy (1973-1993) a newly liberated society began trying to create a national identity. After 36 years of Franco’s dictatorship, many cultural things were redefined in this new context of freedom. Among these changes, the idea of gender and a woman’s role in Spanish society.

Francoism dominated Spanish culture for over three decades. Francisco Franco became Spain’s self-appointed dictator at the end of the grueling three-year Civil War that left the country desperate for any political structure. The war-torn nation received political reformation in the form of an oppressive leader that re-established and extended the predetermined legacies of the Spanish government with the Catholic Church.

Under Franco’s regime, Spain had a monolithic identity where any kind of diversity was restricted. The distinct languages that define the autonomous nations, like Catalan and Euskadi, were banned. Any non-official ideology was considered aberrant and there was only one interpretation of sexuality and one idea of a true family model. The family unit became a political constituent in 1967 when Franco granted the father, as leader of the family, the right to vote (Walker 273). This movement integrated the interests of the nation and the family into one political belief system (274). A family consisted of the dominating male father, domestic submissive female mother, and the malleable obedient children.

It was not until after Franco’s death in 1975 and the subsequent demise of his dictatorship that these notions began transforming and leading to a whole new identity for Spain itself. The end of Franco’s Spain was highlighted by la movida (the Madrid Movement). This underground
sociocultural movement in the city of Madrid took place in the first ten years after Franco's death, from the late 1970s to the mid 80s (Toribio 276). The Madrid Movement created a new individuality for the country and its autonomous provinces. This movement coincided and mirrored the art and avant-garde attitudes of the punk rock wave in other western nations (275). Artists and intellectuals began re-defining gender roles and lifestyles in their works, especially in the medium of theater.

Art provides a critical look at social and political oppression, giving varying perspectives to restrictive ideas like binary gender norms. As Oscar Wilde famously stated, "Life imitates art." This is particularly applicable to performance. Theater, as a work of fiction, creates its own realm of reality. This genre is live-action and in the present tense forcing the viewer to examine his/her own feelings about the characters, subject matter and cultural implications. Theater, as an artistic manifestation, examines life—politically, socially and culturally.

In my thesis I will be focusing on the representation of gender in Spanish film after the emergence of democracy using the film Todo sobre mi madre (All About My Mother) by Pedro Almodóvar. I will demonstrate how gender identity was artistically represented and subsequently created in this Post-Francoist film. Almodóvar proposes that genders, rather than being fixed identities, are performed roles. This undermines the essentialist view of sex roles that riddled Spain's history especially during the 36-year fascist dictatorship.

Although this film was written and produced in Post-Franco Spain, it deals with gender identity issues during the long transition to democracy. I will understand the transition to democracy to include the years 1973-1993, as defined by Teresa Vilarós in her book, El mono del desencanto (The Monkey of Disenchantment). The title refers to the withdrawal from Francoism, the monkey on the back of Spain. The use of monkey in this way is not a term coined
by Teresa Vilarós. Monkey, in Spanish is the saying used for a drug withdrawal or alcohol-hangover. Vilarós separates the transition into two stages, the first stage is from 1973-1982, the second from 1982-1993. The transition to democracy is marked with several important dates that affected Spain’s development. The first stage begins with the assassination of Luis Carrero Blanco on December 23, 1973 and the weakening of Franco’s regime (2).

Carrero Blanco was named the Prime Minister of Spain in June 1973 (122). It was believed he was appointed to continue Franco’s oppressive rule as he essentially controlled the country in Franco’s declining years. Carrero Blanco’s assassination was the beginning of the end of the fascist government in Spain. Franco had not selected another ideological predecessor and thus he himself began the transition to democracy by appointing his successor to be Juan Carlos I. Franco’s death on November 20, 1975 is a very pertinent date in the transition. Juan Carlos I became King of Spain and Head of State and oversaw the beginning of the democracy. However, the transition was disrupted in 1981 when Antonio Tejero attempted a coup on the new government. Then in 1982 there were the General Elections, which elected a socialist democracy with Prime Minister Felipe González.

The second stage of the transition begins with the more stable democracy of 1982 and is book-ended with the creation of the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. During this time, Barcelona held the 1992 Olympic Games establishing and cementing Spain’s development as a new nation. That same year Madrid was appointed the Cultural Capital of Europe and the Universal Exposition was held in Seville (3).

With this social, culture and political background in mind, I analyzed the work chosen for this research by resorting to Richard Hornby’s and Henry Sayre’s ideas about theatricalness and Judith Butler’s theories about gender as performance. Under this label, “theatrical” I understand
it to be as Richard Hornby describes it in his book *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*—as an operative system, a means of survival and a way to create identity for oneself. *All About My Mother* is theatrical because it uses metadrama, in all its forms, to present and interpret culture and gender roles. In the same way that Hornby views drama, Judith Butler views gender identities as theatrical because she sees them as cultural norms that are being performed. In this way, these books will provide the theoretical framework for my thesis.

*All About My Mother* has “theatrical” characteristics—fiction, acting, sets and stage. The film provides an especially interesting look at gender roles and how they are fabricated because of this performative texture. I chose Almodóvar as the focus of my thesis because he proposes in many of his films that sexual identity is performance. His characters resort to performance to identify the notion of gender, which means that gender is a role in the same way as a theatrical part. This idea will be explained further in the body of my thesis.

While many critics see fiction as a medium that removes people from reality, in my thesis I challenge this notion and contend that fiction is a tool to examine the creation of reality and identities. In *All About My Mother*, rather than performance separating people from life, it helps the characters to understand and relate to the construction of the extra-literary world.

**Gender Roles During Francoism**

In order to appropriately understand *All About My Mother*, it is necessary to highlight the social and political framework from which it transpired. During the Francoist regime (1936-1975), women were not seen as individuals but rather as possessions belonging to their fathers and husbands (Jones 312). Under Franco, birth control was banned and adultery was only a crime for women, punished with a prison sentence. Women were bribed with awards to marry,
produce children and stay at home (Jones 312), not unlike Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Young women’s lives were essentially planned out for them as cogs in the Francoist ideological machine. They were taught that marriage and sexual innocence were the highest goals to which a woman could aspire. The female dress code was strict further illustrating the social confines of gender. Girdles and tightly pulled back hairdos signified purity (Jones 313). Along with these rules, there was only one definition of the Spanish family.

The family unit was viewed as an extension of the national political structure, a hierarchy where the husband was in complete control. Women and men were forced into these government mandated gender norms. The women’s realm was the home, attentively raising children and submissively obeying the husband. The home became a nucleus for all Francoist dictates. Men were to work, provide for their family and make all decisions. In this sense, women were treated as legal minors. When they got married, their rights were passed on from their father to their husband (Jones 312). This set view of family, gender and motherhood was valued as among Spain’s highest virtues.

Under Franco’s rule motherhood was inextricably linked to femininity. Women were only seen as complete once they became mothers, raising more children for fascism. This is exemplified in a description published in 1957 in *El ciervo*, (The Stag), a monthly cultural review: “One achieves motherhood through suffering just as one achieves eternal life through renunciation…Motherhood is continual martyrdom. […] Only the woman who can train herself for motherhood is a complete woman” (Carmen Martín Gaite, as cited by Jones 312). This description shows the close connection between the Catholic Church and Franco’s regime and how the government was legislating ethics. A good woman was a mother, devout and holy defending tradition and religion.
The advent of media communications allowed Franco's propaganda to be widely diffused (Jones 313). Articles such as the one mentioned above promoted traditional religious norms. The ideologies shown on broadcast news, in magazines and in the educational system defined and imposed these ideals on women. They were unquestioned and accepted as the sole way men and women could act within the only prescribed perspective of family. After Franco's death and during the Madrid Movement, the themes that had been previously censored from the mainstream discourse such as drug abuse, incest and homosexuality were now being reintroduced and examined through free speech and the media. While Almodóvar's films are art and not propaganda he has a very explicit agenda, using cinema to spread his new ideas for Spain. In this way Almodóvar is undermining Francoist ideology in the very medium that they were dispersed—the media.

**Transitioning Politics, Identities, and Art**

After Franco's death in 1975, during the Spanish transition to democracy, these aforementioned exigent concepts of gender and family were reformed along with the political structure. The separation of church and state was written into the 1978 constitution. At least in the legislature gender roles were quickly transformed although there are still societal implications from Franco's rule (Marsh 54). This newfound freedom saw Spain struggling to create a new identity, an identity far from Franco's dictatorship in the long cultural and political transition.

As mentioned previously, according to Vilarós the transition to democracy was divided into two stages. After the first explosion of freedom during the first stage of the transition, there was a more stable democratic situation in Spain defining the second stage. The second stage of
the transition, between 1982-1993, encapsulates the beginnings of the socialist democracy when Felipe González became the prime minister of Spain (3). Immediately after Franco’s death Spanish people were interested in politics, but after a few years of the long and compromising process of establishing a democracy and constitution they began to get disinterested. The Madrid Movement, a socio-cultural explosion, was like compensation for the disappointing political reformation (Allinson 3) and captured the minds of the people.

One of the most important aspects of the transition was the Madrid Movement. Beginning in the late 1970s, the Madrid Movement allowed the Spanish people to explore their new freedom, freedom that they finally felt after 36 years of dictatorship. Art, painting, theater, film, novels and architecture marked this cultural revolution: “The Madrid Movement … captures restless spirit and conscious poetry” (Vilaros 26, my translation). Intellectuals were trying to redefine Spain and create a new identity independent of Franco—“The Spanish intelligentsia not only would not shut up, but chatted more than ever” (33, my translation).

The progress of political thought during the transition corresponds with the literature of that era. At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 70s, many writers dealt with the topic of disenchantment because of the failed leftist utopia (27). This socialist ideal helped the Spanish people survive through Franco’s regime. At the end of the Civil War, despite Francoist victory, there was the residue of an idea, of a “more or less Marxist utopia” that was like an “addictive drug” for the Spanish people living with Franco (27). Vilarós believes that after Franco's death this Utopian thinking died as well. People began thinking in more post-modern terms as individuals and in a more minimalist way as a society. They began to look at small communities and rejected any philosophical, sociological or political attempt to understand history as a
universal (27). According to Vilarós, the year 1975 was just the beginning of the disenchantment and apathy of the transition. Throughout the first stage of the transition from 1973-1982, many novelists and poets wrote about a rebirth and a new future, devoid of the past. However, Vilarós asserts that like quitting any addictive drug there is a period of withdrawal reflected in the meaning of the word monkey in her book’s title. The political culture in Spain was so repressed that coming off of Franco was a long and dwindling process (30). The generation of the Madrid Movement aided this withdrawal from reactionary lifestyles. There was an increase in recreational drug use (due to the legislative changes affecting drug availability) and adventurous sexuality (Toribio 275). Spain was now experiencing things, playing with new identities and creating itself.

During the transition and throughout the Madrid Movement Spain became de-politicized. Writers were trying to create a new identity for Spain apart from Franco’s dictatorship. These intellectuals refused to be framed by the shadow of Francoism; they were not marked permanently and chose not to address the past but rather enjoy the new government and its social benefits (Toribio 276). Further, this meant that the youth and the artists associated with the Madrid Movement refused “to serve as a mouthpiece for any political discourse … induced by desencanto (apathy) and nihilism” (Toribio 281). Spanish artists discarded political categories of self-definition and resorted to fiction. Like the characters created by Spanish novelists, dramatists and filmmakers, the characters in All About My Mother do not resort to politics but to a fictional framework in order to re-imagine a society and culture independent of Franco.

Although Almodóvar avoided talking about Franco and his dictatorship in the majority of his films he is very culturally and socially critical. He may not mention Franco directly in All About My Mother but his portrayal of gender and family undermine the very definitions and
institutions that were established during the Francoist regime. Almodóvar chose to circumvent Franco in this way, to not have him limit the new Spanish identity, one that is free from oppression. *All About My Mother* was created 24 years after Franco’s death and six years after the end of the democratic transition. This demonstrates that the concept of gender remains a quagmire in Spain and that people are still dealing with gender related issues.

**The Woman’s Director**

Above all, Pedro Almodóvar makes films concerning women. These films and the director himself have become a symbol of the New Spain, a Franco-free Spain where women and men transcend the politically and religiously prescribed gender roles. Almodóvar is as much a cultural icon as the Guernica, the bull, and the Spanish machismo that he subtly mentions and discards.

Looking at Almodóvar’s past, the influences on his art are apparent. Pedro Almodóvar was born in the middle of the 20th century in the province of La Mancha-Castile in Spain (Allinson 7). He attended Catholic School in this very traditional province. Almodóvar was a product of his working class family, moving to the capital, Madrid, at age 16 to begin a string of menial jobs before gaining steady employment at a telephone company. This job allowed him to eventually buy his first video camera, a Super-8. In the early 70s Almodóvar became enthralled with experimental cinema and started making his own short films. After Franco’s death in 1975 and the subsequent demise of his dictatorship, Almodóvar was involved in numerous aspects of underground popular culture like comics, journalism and rock bands. Because of this involvement he became a crucial figure in the Madrid Movement.
Through Almodóvar’s cultural contributions, the most well known being cinema, he has become labeled as a ‘woman’s director’ (Maddison 265). This term refers to the way he presents women in a very positive light. Coined in the middle of the 20th century, the Hollywood label refers to certain directors associated with “female-identified melodrama and latent homosexuality” (265). Lesley Heins Walker writes: “More than any other Spanish director, Pedro Almodóvar makes films about women” (274). In many of his films he deals with topics like gender, homosexuality and the representation of women and the roles they play as mothers.

All About My Mother is a film about a woman and a mother, Manuela. She has raised her son, Esteban, an aspiring writer, alone in Madrid where she works as a nurse coordinating organ donations. On his seventeenth birthday Manuela takes Esteban to see Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire (1947). After the show, Manuela and Esteban wait in the rain to get the autograph of Huma Rojo, the actress who plays Blanche Dubois. Huma and her lover Nina Cruz, the drug-addicted actress who plays Stella Dubois, leave the theater and immediately get in a car. The actresses’ car leaves and Esteban runs after it and gets hit and killed by another vehicle. Manuela devastated by the death of her only son, returns to Barcelona to tell Esteban’s father, a
transsexual named Lola (formerly Esteban) about their son. Instead of finding Lola right away, she reunites with la Agrado, an old friend and transsexual prostitute. During her time in Barcelona she goes to see *A Streetcar Named Desire* again, befriends the alcoholic lesbian Huma, and begins working for her. Through la Agrado she meets Sister Rosa, a nun impregnated by the AIDS-afflicted Lola, and Manuela becomes her personal nurse during the pregnancy. Through these relationships Manuela creates her own non-traditional family with la Agrado, Sister Rosa, and Huma.

**Motherly Love**

Without a doubt, *All About My Mother* is all about motherhood. In “Self-Interview 1984” published along with *Patty Diphusa and Other Works*, Almodóvar remarks to himself about his specialization in directing women and how it is one of the qualities he is known for. He replies: “There’s a strange feeling of reciprocity between us. I tend to awaken maternal feelings in women, and women tend to awaken my own maternal feelings. That’s why we understand each other so well on the set” (Almodóvar 102, trans. Kirk Anderson). Almodóvar recognizes that maternal feelings and motherhood are not restricted to women. More than any other role motherhood is displayed as something executed by choice and action. At the end of the film Almodóvar’s dedication indicates that motherhood is acting: “To all actresses who have played actresses. To all women who act. To men who act and become women. To all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother.”

Motherhood is a role played throughout the entire movie by many of the characters. Motherhood is represented as an ever-changing mode for examining identity. The film is, in fact, about Manuela. Manuela essentially becomes every character’s mother, nurturing, caring and
chastising her untraditional brood. As mentioned before, during Franco’s dictatorship a woman’s primary role was mother. The inclusion of this new view of motherhood as a chosen role is Almodóvar’s way of commenting on the sexually ambivalent creation of identity. Manuela is a biological mother with a very close and loving relationship to her son Esteban. However, after his death and her relocation to Barcelona she “mothers” la Agrado when she is beaten by a client, medicating her wounds and cooking her breakfast. Manuela cares for Sister Rosa, allowing Rosa to live in her apartment after a discussion about parental responsibility. It is necessary to recall a specific part of the film, after a hospital visit for Rosa’s pregnancy, when Manuela chastises Rosa, “Listen Rosa you have no right to ask me to be your mother. You’ve already gotten one, even if you don’t like her. We can’t choose our parents, they are who they are.” Surprisingly, Manuela goes completely against this statement and takes care of Rosa during her difficult pregnancy insinuating that, regardless of legal or biological responsibility, anyone can take on a maternal role. Subsequently, after the birth of Rosa’s baby Esteban (named for Manuela’s son and the baby’s father) and Rosa’s death, Manuela raises him as her own son in Madrid. When Manuela becomes Huma’s assistant she helps Huma and Nina in very maternal ways, as complex as dealing with their substance abuse and as mundane as fetching their dinner. In summary, Manuela embraces the role of mother.

Huma draws on Manuela’s motherly instincts to create her own maternal identity. Huma feels motherly affection toward Manuela’s Esteban because she feels guilty about his death, as if she could have prevented it. She gives Manuela her autograph for Esteban when they meet in Barcelona because she genuinely cares about Manuela, her new friend, and Esteban. Huma keeps the late Esteban’s picture in her dressing room. When Huma plays the part of a mother in a
tribute play to Federico García Lorca at the end of the film, her expressions and actions are
drawn from Manuela’s experience and Huma’s own motherly affection towards Esteban.

The other characters are seen in motherly roles in their relationships. Rosa’s mother is
taking care of Rosa’s Alzheimer’s stricken father and cannot fulfill her role to Rosa. As a hobby,
Rosa’s mother forges Chagall’s painting, “The Madonna of the Village,” a work related to
motherhood, signifying that she is not a real mother to Rosa (Navarro-Daniels). She even tells
Manuela that she never embraced Rosa, “I don’t know what I did wrong with Rosa. Ever since
she was born she’s been like an alien.” This line supports Almodóvar’s belief that despite blood-
based relationships some people are more maternal than others.

Motherhood in All About My Mother is a performed and chosen role assumed by the
characters in spite of biological apparatus. As mentioned earlier, Almodóvar dedicates this film
“to all the people who want to be mothers” undermining previous ideologies and reassigning the
motherhood role in Spain’s new identity. Motherhood is not something dictated by external
forces. Motherhood, like gender, is an ever-shifting role.

Metafiction as Deconstruction

Motherly roles and other gender-bending themes are greatly seen through the use of
metafiction in All About My Mother. Metafiction is essentially fiction that draws on the
fictionality of itself. In her book, Metafiction, Patricia Waugh describes these types of writings
as ones that use self-reflectivity to give notice to themselves as a cultural tool to question the
connection of fiction and reality (2). Metafictional texts, “not only examine the fundamental
structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the
literary fictional text” (2). Metafiction is essentially self-conscious in order to produce questions
about the subtle barrier between fiction and reality. One metafictional device that Almodóvar employs is intertextuality, which means that he brings references to literature, drama, architecture, music and paintings, among other artistic genres, to examine this connection.

Richard Hornby writes about the self-reflection of drama in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, “We should not view drama as reflecting life, but rather as operating on it” (17). In this way theater is a tool to interpret the extra-literary world. He then defines four ways to relate drama to reality:

1. A play does not reflect life; instead it reflects itself
2. At the same time, it relates to other plays as a system.
3. This system, in turn, intersects with other systems of literature, nonliterary performance, other art forms (both high and low), and culture generally.
   
   Culture, as it centers on drama in this way, I shall refer to as the
   
   “drama/culture complex.”

4. It is through the drama/culture complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life. (17)

With this outline of performance, it is necessary to understand drama as systematically including cultural references to create itself and play off of reality. Almodóvar consciously uses intertextual references in *All About My Mother* to examine gender in Spanish Post-Franco society.

Hornby further delineates the five manifestations of metadrama in his book. They include the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role playing within the role, literary and real life references, and self-reference (32). The play within the play “is both reflective and expressive about society’s deep cynicism about life … [it] reminds us that the play we are
watching is also an illusion, despite its vividness and excitement; by extension, the world in which we live, which also seems to be so vivid, in the end is a sham” (45). The ceremony within the play functions in a similar form. Ceremonies, in general, help people to understand the world and themselves. Theater is used to examine these performed ceremonies, the “cultural phenomenon” that punctuates performance in human nature (55). Role playing within the role questions identity and shows the nature of the role itself (72). The assumed role is often closer to a person’s real desires than his/her persona in daily life. Through acting, the character achieves his/her true identity. Literary and real life reference is employed to play with the idea of reality within drama (100). Self-reference is the capstone to metadramatic works. The play that is aware of its own fictionality and refers to itself, “always has the effect of drastically realigning the audience’s perceptions of the drama, forcing them to examine consciously the assumptions that lie behind and control their response to the world of the play” (117). Self-reference, in this way can challenge the viewer’s own perspective of the world. These variations tend to be interconnected with each other and operate together. When a play within a play is being presented it often also incorporates role-playing with costumes or masks. These variations of metadrama support the idea of performativity in daily life, in the way that identities are constructed and performed. Almodóvar employs all of these metadramatic manifestations in All About My Mother.

Sometimes critics think that highly metafictional works tend to forget the extra-textual world and create their own narcissistic universe. However, this is not the case. Rather than being detached from the world, metafiction shows how characters use fiction to help them understand their pasts and relate to reality. Fiction is a resource to relate to the extra-textual world, to be able to understand something or someone in this complicated web of life. The characters in All About
My Mother have creative roles like actress and writer, which underline the inventiveness in manifesting and performing identity.

All About My Mother has many characters that are writers, actors and artists that creatively depict and understand their realities. The very act of creating for these characters allows them to formulate their own identities apart from the traditional viewpoints of Spanish culture. Esteban, Manuela’s son, is a writer and throughout the film his voice is narrating from his journal after his death. In one instance his voice narrates about the special look that boys who live only with their mother’s have: “[… more serious than normal like an intellectual or writer. In my case it’s normal because I am a writer.” After Esteban’s death when Manuela is looking at his empty room, Esteban narrates that his father is the missing part of his life. This refers to the half picture (from which his father has been removed) that Manuela showed him when he asked about her acting experience (Sofair 43). In the beginning of the film while Esteban and Manuela are watching Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s All About Eve (1950), Esteban remarks how the title of the movie is translated incorrectly into Spanish, as Eve Unveiled rather than All About Eve. Esteban then makes a note in his journal with the first word being “Todo” (All) insinuating he is writing down the title of the film itself. In that same evening Esteban tells Manuela he is going to write a story about her for a writing competition. Esteban has created a role for his mother in his journal, simultaneously writing the title of the script that Manuela is “acting” according to what Esteban wrote thinking of her.

The notion that the film is actually the realization of Esteban’s idea for his mother is apparent in a thought Esteban has right before his death. Esteban is waiting for his mother in a café across from the theater where they are going to go see A Streetcar Named Desire. He is writing in his notebook and he sees Manuela across the street standing in front of the large
picture advertisement of Huma dressed as Blanche Dubois for the play. Esteban gets an idea and comes running out of the café to cross the street and almost gets hit by a car, a foreshadowing of his death to come. Although it is not implicit in the film it is apparent in the script that Esteban sees Manuela as Eve Harrington becoming close with Huma as Margot Channing like the characters in the film All About Eve (Navarro-Daniels).

![Manuela and Esteban waiting for Huma’s Autograph](http://www.mnlg.com/jfs/archive_P/2000/jfsPics/allabout.html)

**Fig. 2** Manuela and Esteban waiting for Huma’s Autograph

This assignment of the screenwriter role to Esteban links the teenage Esteban with Almodóvar himself, “The effect of this juxtaposition is to encourage us to identify Almodóvar with Esteban- or rather to identify the boy with a younger Almodóvar, an Almodóvar without accomplishments, with for example only a project for a piece of writing to be called, Todo sobre mi madre…” (Bersani and Dutoit 77). With this link Esteban is coded as a homosexual like Almodóvar, devoted to his mother, and an aficionado of such gay cultural icons like Truman Capote and Bette Davis (Maddison 266).
Esteban’s narration is not the only example of the film’s own self-reference. The organ donation sequence at the beginning is a part that blurs the line between reality and fiction inside this fictional work. The film has three organ donation scenes within the first 15 minutes. The film begins with Manuela making arrangements for an organ donation. The visuals are medical machines and Manuela making phone calls about the organ. The second organ donation scene is when Esteban asks to see his mother act in one of the organ donation seminars for his birthday. In this scene Manuela is speaking with two doctors. In the dramatization she plays the role of a woman who found out that her husband is dead and the doctors question her about the possibility of organ donation. The frame is focused on Manuela who is acting in a separate room. The camera then moves to Esteban who is writing and watching the presentation that is being broadcast on a television screen in another room where medical professionals are watching it. This further examines the fictionality of the film with the inclusion of the scene within a scene, where the characters are aware of the performance. This scene is similar to the beginning of Almodóvar’s 1995 film, The Flower of My Secret (La flor de mi secreto). In this film there is an organ donation simulation near the beginning. However, in All About My Mother the performed organ donation scene is juxtaposed by real life examples. In this way, the third organ donation scene is after Esteban’s death when the same two doctors from the dramatization come out of the ICU to tell Manuela about Esteban and ask her about donating his organs. After this, the sequence is complete when a scene shows a middle-aged and his wife being paged by the hospital about an available organ. He is the recipient of Esteban’s heart.

Almodóvar’s inclusion of this elaborate organ donation sequence is not merely by chance; it is a commentary on the assimilation of many roles. Someone can assume an organ, like the older man who received Esteban’s heart, just like another role. However, an organ is
biological, like sexuality, but it can be adapted to fit other people and situations, like gender. The way in which Almodóvar depicts organ donation and assimilation is a symbol to understand gender. In the same way an organ can give life, an assumed gender can help to create a character. An organ, in this essence, is another representation of gender performance, a role assumed and executed.

**Repetition in Performance**

The organ donation sequence sets the precedent for the transition and fluidity of the film. The three organ donation scenes are contrasted with the dramatization, showing that life is performative in nature. The sequence is "the first variation on multiple cases of mobile or shifting identities" (Bersani and Dutoit 98). The beginning of the film with the liquefied credits among the medical visuals really sets the stage for the evaporation of reality, "liquefaction can be contained but it is inherently a loss of boundaries, a flowing out of frames" (Bersani and Dutoit 101). With this approach there is also a departure from the identities that are constructed and controlled in reality.

The film includes many instances of repetition that underline the concept of performativity. Henry Sayre defines performance as: "a specific action or set of actions—dramatic, musical, athletic, and so on—which occurs on a given occasion, in a particular place. An artistic performance—as opposed, for instance, to an athlete’s performance or a student’s performance on an examination—is further defined by its status as the single occurrence of a repeatable and preexistent text or score" (90). Comparably, Judith Butler defines gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). In *All About My Mother* many themes, objects and words are
repeated, but never in the same way (Bersani and Dutoit 110). Thus Manuela, Huma and Nina are all women who play actresses, further examining the repetition of assumed roles. This also reminds the viewer that actresses are playing these actresses (111). Cecilia Roth plays Manuela who has played Stella Dubois. Repetition is reminding the audience that the film is being performed:

In Almodóvar’s work, repetition, far from certifying the reality of what is repeated, undermines the very category of the real (at the very least, as a category to which the imaginary might be confidently opposed) The relationship between the imaginary and the real will be one of exchange not of opposition. (Bersani and Dutoit 100)

Similarly, Richard Hornby writes about how theater cannot be defined as a polarization of reality, like many other nouns that exist simply by being the opposite of another. He uses the example of men and women, and the limiting nature of their roles always being defined in relation to one another as polar opposites. These differences are not directly divided. Instead of these words signifying the biological differences, they have social meaning in relation to one another. Drama should be seen as an implement for understanding reality not as a black and white fiction defined solely as the opposite of non-fiction. Hornby writes that plays do not have a limited definition, “no plays, however ‘realistic,’ reflect life directly; all plays however ‘unrealistic,’ are semilogical devices for categorizing and measuring life directly” (14). Plays are utensils to understand life by incorporating repetition as performance.

The most common repeated things in the film occur in threes: the three scenes of organ donation, the three Estebans (Lola, Manuela’s son, and Rosa’s baby), three different performances of A Streetcar Named Desire. The number three has always had folkloric and
biblical resonance. In this way, Rosa, Manuela, and baby Esteban can be seen as a new Holy Family; a lesbian holy family that conceives a child that miraculously neutralizes HIV. The Holy Family, *(La Sagrada Familia)*, the modernist church by Antoni Gaudí, is shown in the film to emphasize this notion (Smith 193). The pictured façade of the building and its inclusion is alluding to the importance of family in Spanish culture, both the traditional family unit and the non-traditional family unit. Also, the name Manuela is the feminine version of Manuel, taken from the Hebrew name Emmanuel, another name for God. Perhaps this biblical allusion is providing a religious reference to motherhood. Instead of the woman being the lowly housewife without political representation, she is in a sense, God, the creator and sustainer of life. However, in Almodóvar’s Spain, unlike Franco’s, motherhood is not dictated by religion. Regardless of biological links, family is something that can be found and created through human relationships. The leading women in the film, Manuela, Rosa, Huma and la Agradó are a new, extended family.

**Intertextual Relationships: *A Streetcar Named Desire***

The recreation of non-traditional familial roles is exemplified in the film’s over-arching allusion to *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. Like Williams, Almodóvar is playing with the “gender dissent” subculture and by using this play creating his new interpretation (Maddison 266). The use of intertextuality is employed in all major literary and art works giving text meaning in relation to other texts. Julia Kristeva defines the notion of intertextuality: “… any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37). Almodóvar’s genre mixes these intertextual elements to
create a new unique meaning to his own work. Mark Allinson explains in *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar:*

In particular the interaction of his films with other texts is one of the most engaging “deconstructive” features. Almodóvar’s film world is full of references to the media, film, television, popular culture and music. Almodóvar’s corpus dates entirely from an age we can classify as postmodern or post-structuralist. It should come as no surprise, then, that his films clearly demonstrate the notion that the discourse or voice of the author is just one of many codes operating in cinema. (123)

According to Jacques Derrida: “deconstruction consists in an analysis which overturns […] metaphysical foundations” (Adamson 296). By deconstruction Almodóvar undermines and systematically breaks down hegemonic positions about religion and the role of women in Spanish society. Almodóvar uses intertextual references, metafictional properties that examine the creation of reality as if it were mere fiction. *All About My Mother* is a work of metafiction, using other works as intertexts to deconstruct views of women and family. Intertextual references create a whole new meaning for the film itself. In this sense, the film text is not only reconstructing a separate identity but a whole new understanding of the intertextual themes, a new concept of gender, women and family.

Through the use of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *All About My Mother* Almodóvar transforms and reinterprets Tennessee William’s ideas of women and family (Navarro-Daniels). This play parallels important times in Manuela’s life, when she played Stella and Lola (formerly Esteban) played Stanley Kowalski. Manuela became pregnant with their son, Esteban and, like Stella, left the baby’s father (Sofair 44). However, it could be said that *All About My Mother*
begins where *A Streetcar Named Desire* ends (Navarro-Daniels). In this manner, it is uncertain what becomes of Stella after she leaves Kowalski, but what happened to Manuela is clear, she raised her son alone in Madrid. After seeing *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Esteban, it is apparent that Manuela relates to Stella’s character:

ESTEBAN. Nina Cruz really moved you.

MANUELA. No, not her. Stella.

This dialogue also reinforces the importance and acknowledgement of role playing within any role. The character of Manuela performs many roles, as nurse, actress and mother. She has creatively constructed her identity through these roles. In this same way, Almodóvar examines the identities of his characters within their different roles. According to Allinson:

Almodóvar’s work testifies to the performativity of human behaviour. To perform means to act, display certain skills, or even to dissimulate or pretend. The films are intrinsically performative in that they involve action simulated for the camera lens. Even where the action can be regarded as authentic, not simulated (as in the case of inserted performances which are merely recorded by camera), the mode is still one of performativity, as actors (people who *do* things) know they have an audience. Almodóvar’s characters are constantly dissimulating, taking on roles, false identities and shamelessly lying. (210)

This is seen prominently in the beginning of the film when Esteban and Manuela are watching *All About Eve*. In this scene he asks her if she would ever be an actress and she replies, “It was hard enough becoming a nurse.” This quotation explains that to Manuela being a woman and a nurse is as performative as being an actress. The processes of creating fiction and creating
life and identity, including gender roles, are complementary. One creates his/her own life by making decisions and choosing a career just like he/she chooses what gender to perform. When la Agrado and Manuela (dressed as a prostitute) go to the nuns who help transvestites and prostitutes get jobs, la Agrado promotes Manuela for a job as a nurse and a cook, two very traditionally feminine roles. After this at Rosa's parents' house, Rosa's mother actually doubts Manuela's ability to cook and be a nurse, perhaps a comment on the traditional view of undermining the worth/capability of women. However, Manuela is very capable and through these roles she continually understands and redefines her life. The way in which Manuela lives her life and copes with trauma is inextricably linked to her creative performances, especially as Stella Dúbios.

Fig 3. Manuela in front of the poster for A Streetcar...

When Manuela performs the part of Stella Dúbios again after 20 years, when Nina is influenced by drugs and cannot show up to a performance, her onstage sobs are very similar to those that resound on the street where Esteban lay dying. She is in fact playing herself in the role of Stella, drawing from her own experiences to create that identity. Henry Sayre sustains the
difference between acting and performance is that “performers maintain their own identities” (96). Performers incorporate daily life concerns into their performances. This can be said about Manuela in this particular scene. Richard Hornby writes about role-playing within the role as helping the character establish his/her own identity, “theater teaches us the skill of identifying with others rather than objectifying them—to recognize the humanity they have in common with us ...” (71). After this performance, when Manuela is explaining to Nina and Huma how she knew the lines she says, “A Streetcar Named Desire has marked my life.” The inclusion of this play reminds the viewer that she is creating her own destiny: “Acting here seems to have a kind of creative power, its ‘as if...’ sometimes making real a part of what is simulated. However, its effect is as uncontrollable and ambiguous as the reality of which it becomes a part” (Sofair 45).

In the way that Manuela identifies with Stella, Huma relates to Blanche Dubois in her everyday life. She is similar to Blanche in her destructive relationship with drug-addled Nina. The first time Manuela and Huma actually meet after a performance in Barcelona, Manuela drives Huma to find Nina and stop her from buying drugs. During this scene, Huma adapts Blanche’s famous line to her situation saying, “Thank you. Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” This assimilation emphasizes the creativity in the act of living, how Huma exists by fictionalizing her own real life.

Huma’s created personality and name are other examples of her life as a performance. Author Marcia L. Wells explains fiction as a tool: “Fiction allows us to become master of our own fate by transforming reality and creating a new one more to our liking” (202). By Huma choosing this name herself it allows her to link her life to the world of cinema.

HUMA. I started smoking because of Bette Davis. To imitate her. At 18, I was smoking like a chimney. That’s why I called myself Huma.
MANUELA. Huma is a very pretty name.

HUMA. Smoke is all there’s been in my life.

MANUELA. You’ve had success too.

HUMA. Success has got no taste or smell. And when you get used to it, it’s as if it didn’t exist.

The name, Huma (*smoke*), shows how she can emulate roles, and create herself through the manifestation and repetition of her performances “she is smoke a series of performances, emanations without substance or distinctiveness” (Sofair 45). Through her desire to be an actress like Bette Davis, she creates herself through her repetition of acts, like smoking a cigarette or the continuous billowing smoke from a chimney.

![Fig. 4 Huma Rojo in costume as Blanche Dubois](http://www.mnlg.com/jfs/archive_P/2000/jfsPics/allabout.html)

The name of la Agrado has a similar function for her created persona. La Agrado, meaning “agreeable,” chooses this name because she wants to be so and confirms it in its assumption. La Agrado, the transsexual prostitute, suggests and reaffirms Almodóvar’s beliefs that gender is something fluid, unlike Franco’s unyielding concept of gender roles. She is
continuously performing in her roles as a woman, a friend and a sister (Maddison 270). She has a penis, but it only represents her own construction of woman, one that transcends biological apparatus. La Agrado does not like drag queens because she feels they glamorize femininity, in high heels and make-up. Rather, la Agrado sees gender as something constructed and performed. La Agrado had a former traditionally masculine occupation as truck driver before she received breast implants and became a prostitute because, "femininity is not the sole realm of women" (Maddison 271) in the same way that penises are not the sole realm of men. La Agrado performs her own monologue on gender authenticity one evening when Huma and Nina cannot present the play. To her, no matter how much her body cost, and may be considered false, she is authentic because she is acting out her dreams: “Well, as I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic, mamá. And one can’t be stingy with these things because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.” In this way, la Agrado is performing her gender and her true self. As previously mentioned, when la Agrado and Manuela seek jobs from the nuns they talk about assuming roles and dressing the part:

LA AGRADO. Nothing like a Chanel to make you look respectable.

MANUELA. You look it. Don’t I look a bit like a slut in this suit?

LA AGRADO. All the better. These nuns only help whores and transvestites.

MANUELA. Is that a real Chanel?

LA AGRADO. No! How could I buy a real Chanel with all the hunger in the world? All I have that’s real are my feelings and these pints of silicone that weigh a ton.
This dialogue signifies that in order to play a role, and be authentic while doing it, one must look and feel the part, regardless of the “reality.” La Agrado is trying to look respectable while Manuela is worried because she does not want to look promiscuous. The Chanel suit is not real but if it looks real, and makes la Agrado feel better than it might as well be, just like her performed femininity. Butler writes that gender is a construction of imaginary constructions: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (174). La Agrado’s gender is her identity that she utilizes as easily as a stage prop, costume or silicone breast.

La Agrado identifies herself as a female in her actions and language. When she is speaking with Manuela about Lola she says, “I’ve been like a sister to her. We got our tits together,” to explain their close relationship and the shock of Lola’s betrayal and burglary. Biologically la Agrado is a man but anyone can assume a feminine role like sister if they choose to. Even Rosa and Manuela tell Huma they are sisters and pretend when they are at the hospital,
while Rosa is getting a pregnancy check-up. These characters are assuming the roles they want to have, whether it is becoming a woman, a mother or a sister.

Continuing with the *A Streetcar Named Desire* role assignment, it is possible to say that Lola is Almodóvar’s gender dissident Kowalski. She is manly, identifies with male roles but chooses to be a transsexual, “Lola’s got the worst of a man and the worst of a woman” Manuela asserts. In the scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Manuela is playing Stella, Kowalski is explaining how he took Stella down from a pedestal and taught her to be happy in accepting a different socio-economic status. This scene is a direct link to how Lola helped Manuela accept her transsexuality during their marriage, in that despite representing her gender differently, Lola was still the same person and Manuela learned to be happy with her husband’s transsexuality. However, like Kowalski, Lola did not stop being “macho” and insensitive. During the scene at the hospital while Manuela and Rosa are waiting for Rosa’s pregnancy check-up, Manuela indirectly tells Rosa about her past with Lola (then Esteban) by attributing the story to a friend. She explains how her friend got married and her husband got breast implants that were bigger than her own. This story is in itself performativity. Manuela is acting once more by choosing to tell the story from another perspective. She describes Lola’s feminine physical alterations with uncertainty but adds, “apart from the tits the husband hadn’t changed that much so she ended up accepting him.” Manuela then goes on to say that women are all “a little bit lesbian” and Rosa does not dispute this fact because of her sexual relationship with Lola. Both Manuela’s and Rosa’s relationships with Lola can be considered “a ‘lesbian’ coupling (woman and transsexual)” (Maddision 271). Lola was still extremely machista and forbid her wife from wearing bikinis or mini-skirts even though she herself wore a bikini. Manuela then poses the question, “How could someone act so macho with a pair of tits like that?” According to Butler, every person performs
his or her own gender, so the question is not necessarily a gender performance but which form it will take. For Lola, she is a male but her gender performance takes the form of a woman. She is transsexual but she refers to herself in male pronouns. When she sees Rosa’s Esteban, her own son, she comforts the baby by saying, “Daddy’s here.” Lola is a male and identifies as such, but she just prefers for her gender appearance to be feminine.

Transforming All About Eve and Music for Chameleons

In the same way that Lola transforms gender definitions, Manuela transforms the textual meaning of All About Eve. In context of the film, a new work, Manuela is not a traitor like Eve Harrington in Mankiewicz’s film. She creates a new identity as a new Stella and a new Eve. All About My Mother directly refers to this movie in its title and plot development. Almodóvar’s version pays homage to the Mankiewicz film. All About Eve is a classic Hollywood movie with Bette Davis. It is about an obsessive fan that wants to take over the life of her favorite actress and leading lady. The scene that is shown from All About Eve is when Margot Channing (Bette Davis) is condemning autograph fiends and fans as “juvenile delinquents” and “coyotes.” As previously mentioned, Huma tries to imitate Bette Davis, so one can assume Huma feels the same way about giving autographs. Almodóvar transforms this scene because Esteban is not an autograph fiend he wants Huma’s autograph because he is a big fan and Huma realizes this after she meets Manuela.

Like All About Eve, in Almodóvar’s film Manuela gets the chance to play the part of Stella when Nina is too high on drugs to perform. After this, Nina accuses Manuela of being like Eve Harrington memorizing the part so she could get some recognition, but Nina is wrong. Manuela knew the part from her own past performance and she is very loyal to Huma. Manuela
in this way exchanges betrayal for loyalty. As Stephen Maddison notices, the cultural
construction of gender has different ideas of solidarity. Men are supportive of other men, even if
their behavior is below moral standards. Women, however, are very severe when judging other
women’s moral behavior. Almodóvar has created a society for women, where they are
supportive and loyal to each other. In addition it is interesting to note Nina is the one that is
unfaithful to Huma, leaving her for a man.

The inclusion of Truman Capote’s *Music for Chameleons* (1950) transforms motherhood
and comments on sexual identity. This book is a collection of fiction and non-fiction short
stories, in which Capote confesses his youthful desire to be a girl. Capote’s open homosexuality
hints at Esteban’s own sexual preference. Also, Capote’s confession and Almodóvar’s
subsequent inclusion of this text further underlies the fluidity of the performed gender. The
excerpt that Manuela reads as a bedtime story, when prompted by Esteban, is the preface: “When
God hands you a gift he also hands you a whip; and the whip is intended solely for self-
flagellation.” According to Paul Julian Smith’s article, “Silicone and Sentiments” on *All About
My Mother*: “Creation and procreation (cinema and motherhood) are thus implacable masters,
God-given gifts that become self-inflicted scourges” (Smith 193). With this excerpt Almodóvar
is again linking motherhood with a creative role.

The inclusion of metafiction in *All About My Mother* enables Almodóvar to
systematically disavow the roles and values imposed by Franco. He uses intertextual references
to examine the societal implications of media, and subsequently his film. As Hornby asserts,
“unquestionably, society does use such performances in trying to understand the world and how
to behave in it” (23). *All About My Mother* can be used as a tool to examine the creation of a
new Post-Franco Spanish identity.
A Creative Gender Identity

As we have seen through this thesis, fictional creation of gender and identity in Post-Franco Spain helped the country re-invent a new identity. By proposing that character’s identities are created through fictional works, a majority of Post-Francoist film helped Spanish people and Spain create their own identity by resorting to fiction. In this way, film helped the Spanish people approach their identities in a different light, enabling them to creatively survive the past and thrive in the future. Examining fiction as a way to interpret reality could be used as a tool to understand all society and culture. Looking at art produced after a war or an oppressive political structure can help to understand the nation’s coping tactics or collective thoughts on certain issues. This sort of analysis can be very useful, examining deeper social, cultural and political implications through art.

As I sustained in my thesis, many critics have viewed fiction as a medium that detaches them from life, in a separate and unique universe. However, fiction like All About My Mother helps to explore the extra-textual world. Many characters created by art in Post-Franco Spain accentuate the creativity in the very act of existing. This creative act is not something dictated but rather something the individual chooses and creates for his/herself.

The characters in All About My Mother see the invention of their identities as something that is creatively constructed. Manuela, Esteban, Huma, la Agrado and Rosa link their own lives with their creative roles. There is fictionality and performance in everyday life. Fiction is how people relate to the world, each other and thus endure difficult times. Fiction is not separate from the extra-textual world; it is a device to understand it. These characters understand themselves and create their gender identities by using art as the beginning of their explorations of life.
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