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## Trans Women in 20th Century Spain

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# Trans Women in 20th Century Spain

*Transgender individuals were the pioneers in pushing for visibility and safety for LGBTQIA+ individuals and demanding that they receive the basic human rights afforded to others. However, as some of these identities have quickly been integrated more frequently into social discourse and media, we have found that trans folks have been left behind. As a student of Spanish and Women and Gender Studies, I was drawn to research an area in which these disciplines overlap. The following essay explores the position of trans individuals in 20<sup>th</sup> century Spain and the presence and representations of trans women in Spanish cinema.*

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spain

Only decades ago, from 1939 to 1975, Spain underwent a strict, conservative dictatorship, led by Francisco Franco. During Franco's dictatorship, religion and politics heavily influenced discourse on gender and sexuality throughout the country and therefore shaped many decades of perceptions of gender and sexuality of Spanish citizens. Gender and sexuality were highly regulated, and behaviors including "non-normative marriages, women's infidelity, masturbation, birth control, abortion, fashion, and a growing amount of sexual freedom," were all considered unacceptable by the conservative standards of the Francoists (Winchester, 2017, p. 111). Any behavior that fell outside of the heteronormative model that ran deep through Spanish society was prohibited.

Franco's regime created and used legal methods to ensure that they could control gender and sexuality as well as force "men and women to correspond to normative

discourses,” (Winchester, 2017, p. 108). In March of 1944, Franco created the DNI (*Documento Nacional de Identidad* or National Identity Document) as a document that served to identify and control Spanish citizens. From 1944-1962, there was a “sex marker” on the document; this was just one tool used to enforce “gender order” and regulate gender and gender performance. The sex marker again appeared on the new version of the DNI in 1981 and remains there to this day. During the period where the sex marker was present on the DNI from ‘44- ‘62, it was possible to get the sex marker changed if an individual was diagnosed with gender dysphoria and undergo years of medical treatment. Many activists defending trans rights have “denounced the medicalization of transgenderism and the need of a gender dysphoria diagnosis” (Platero, 2011, p. 608). It was necessary to stop medicalizing trans identities in order to pave the way for the incorporation of trans identities and, further, positive representation into Spanish society.

Franco’s 36 year-long dictatorship left its mark on Spain. The norms and restrictions that Franco implemented would take decades to replace. Propaganda was an important tool that the dictatorship relied on. During Franco’s dictatorship, film was a popular

form of propaganda to “codify and regulate normative femininity,” as well as gender and sexuality in general (Winchester, 2017, p. 111). Decades of research shows that film has an influence on the opinions and behaviors of its audience. While in this case, films were used as a manipulative tool, we know that positive representations of minorities in films can be powerful agents for social change.

### **Representation in Film**

Positive representations of marginalized identities are incredibly important. Presence and accurate representation in mainstream media help individuals within marginalized groups to find a sense of belonging for themselves and for those that belong in the same community (Caswell et al., 2017). In a study of representation in community archives, Reina Gossett, a trans activist, explains that individuals of marginalized communities are too often faced with “historical isolation” (as cited in Caswell et al., 2017, p. 5). When there is an entire group missing from any representation in popular media, these people find no representation of themselves where many others most often look. Gossett continues, “Trans communities, our legacies and our work is so often erased,” (p. 5). Not only is

representation important for those that seek a reflection of themselves in the identities being portrayed, it is also important to those that fall outside of the represented communities. Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018) explain that “watching a positive representation of a character belonging to an outgroup may be as effective as ingroup contact in reducing viewers outgroup prejudice” and that this has “successfully reduced prejudice toward both racial and sexual minorities” (p. 37).

Scholars first developed the term *symbolic annihilation* to refer to “the absence, under-representation, maligning and trivialization of women” within media, and have since expanded this term to research and analyze the ways that many marginalized communities continue to experience this erasure or negation of their identity by different forms of mainstream media (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 8). Spanish transgender individuals face significant levels of symbolic annihilation. While narratives of trans women are often completely left out, when we do see transgender characters on screen or present in storylines, their representation leaves something to be desired—many characters of trans women are still cast to fill a stereotypical role. In the case of representation of trans characters, “In

these portrayals [of caricature and stereotype], the transgender character performs the work of a monstrous ‘Other,’ a symbolic container into which many of humanity’s fears and anxieties are deposited.” (Cavalcante, 2013, p. 88).

The representations in film and other mass media can sway the opinions of their audience. As Aveyard & Moran (2013) explain, film audiences have roles “as both agents and consumers of change” (p. 8). Not only is film valuable for entertainment, film often “generates dialogue, sparks policy change, and/or activates communities around key social issues” (Kaul, 2014, p. 140). In their 2014 research, Gazzola and Morrison found that their participants “frequently cited film and television as sources for their negative stereotypes about trans women” (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018, p. 37). They also found that “negative or otherwise stereotypical portrayals of minority characters can reinforce negative biases and attitudes in viewers,” (p. 37). Other research cited by Solomon & Kurtz-Costes (2018) illustrates the importance that films portray accurate representations of marginalized identities, rather than resorting to the same set of stereotypes that are often associated with a particular minority group.

## Almodóvar's Cinema

Filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar has directed over 20 films (“Category: Films directed by Pedro Almodóvar”, 2018). He is widely renown for his unconventional stories of gender and sexuality. Specifically, he highlights stories of women and transgender characters through “bold and unapologetic portrayals of non-normative desires and identities” (Waldron & Murray, 2014, pp. 68-69). Although Almodóvar has denied that his work plays on any direct connections to the dictatorship, I agree with Lev’s (2013) assertion that “his cinema did engage with the dictator’s legacy in brilliant, subversive ways” (p. 204). In an interview, Almodóvar said:

In the '80s, when my movies were particularly rich in gay and transgender characters, it was something that hadn't appeared in Spanish movies before. I made a point to include these characters, because they were part of my life. I tried to treat them with the same naturalness that I would bring to a housewife or any other character. I wasn't talking about their problems, or The Transgender Problem — I was saying that they exist, and their lives are as legitimate as any other (Thomas, 2016, para. 10).

Despite his reputation as a director that brings these marginalized

communities to the big screen, in a 546-page collection of research and analysis of Almodóvar’s films done by various scholars, the word *transgender* is used only one time. This sentence states, “Queer, transvestite, and transgender characters are common in Almodóvar’s films” (Tan, 2013, p. 461). Despite the many analyses and references to Almodóvar pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality, and his significant inclusion of topics on gender and sexuality throughout his films, there is only this single reference to transgender characters. The frequent appearances of trans actors and actresses in Almodóvar’s films as well as the multiple storylines of trans characters are missing from scholarship about Almodóvar’s work. In the scholarship of some of his films that include transgender characters, the focus is not on the trans representation. Instead, the focus has been the body, drag, eroticism, and others (Waldron & Murray, 2014; Urios-Aparisi, 2010; Acevedo-Munoz, 2003; Cervantes, 2014; Lange-Churion, 2016).

### **Cuesta mucho ser autentica, señora**

In Almodóvar’s *Todo sobre mi madre* [*All About My Mother*] (1999), two of the characters that lead the storyline from start to finish are trans women. The film was well received internationally. Some

of its awards include the award for Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival and the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, to name just a few. The characters of Agrado (Antonia San Juan) and Lola (Toni Cantó) are the focus of this analysis. Neither of the actors cast for these roles identify as trans.

While both the roles of Agrado and Lola are imperative to the story, Agrado has significantly more screen time and serves as a close friend to protagonist, Manuela (Cecilia Roth). Agrado is first introduced when Manuela finds her while Agrado is working as a prostitute in Barcelona. The characters are reunited when Manuela helps Agrado out of a bad situation, while Agrado is getting hit by who appears to be a long-time client of hers. After Manuela ‘saves’ Agrado, they go to a pharmacy, which turns out to be closed, for supplies to clean up Agrado’s wounds. The pharmacist doesn’t seem willing to help them. Agrado remarks, “Come on, we’re not going to eat you,” and Manuela takes over the conversation to ease the pharmacist’s nerves. The pharmacist is clearly uncomfortable by their interaction with Agrado; this is the first scene in which we see uneasiness expressed towards a trans character.

Lola is the second trans woman who appears in the film and is mentioned various times throughout. Lola is the

father of the two children of the story. Lola is not well thought of, and she has been unkind in the past. One of the first references to Lola is the audience finding out that she has AIDS, which she has given to Sister Rosa (Penélope Cruz) in a relationship that lead to Sister Rosa’s pregnancy. Manuela has known Lola for at least twenty years. When Lola first appears on screen towards the end of the film, Manuela tells her, “You aren’t a human being, Lola. You’re an epidemic,” (Almodóvar, 1999, 1:23:42). Manuela tells Lola this because she thinks that Lola is unreliable, comes in and out of other’s lives with no regard for their well-being, and is generally a selfish woman.

When Agrado takes the stage to give her speech about authenticity, the audience is presented with one of the most remarkable scenes to appear in any movie. Agrado comes to the stage to provide entertainment for a theater crowd whose show had to be cancelled and promises to share the story of her life. She explains, “They call me ‘La Agrado’ because throughout my entire life I’ve just tried to make life pleasant for everyone else. In addition to being *agradable* (nice), I am also very authentic. Look at this body...” She continues by explaining how much the surgeries have cost her for each change to her physical

appearance. “It’s expensive to be authentic, and in these things, one shouldn’t be stingy because one is more authentic the more they look like what they’ve dreamt for themselves.” (Almodóvar, 1999, 1:16:28, my translation).

Agrado’s speech is groundbreaking because she sets a stage for authenticity within oneself. She tells the audience—in the seats of the theater in which they film the scene as well as the audience viewing the film from any location—that the most important thing one can do for themselves is find who they truly are and don’t stop until you achieve your own authenticity. Her line “*Cuesta mucho ser autentica señora*” (*It’s expensive to be authentic*) refers, at first glance, to her operations. But the honesty in this speech proves that the cost is not only financial. There are emotional and physical costs that Agrado’s character, as well as many trans individuals, face in their day to day lives. Portraying Agrado and Lola in film and including trans characters in cinema is an important step in defiance of the social standards of gender and sexuality, especially the traditional standards which gained strength during Franco’s dictatorship.

If Almodóvar felt like this scene was important enough to include, and the dialogue be given by a character of a

trans woman, why aren’t the actresses that play these characters trans as well? Bringing the stories of transgender characters to the screen is a huge step forward for trans representation in Spanish cinema. It is imperative to be selective in the stories that these characters portray as well as the actors cast in the roles. Doing otherwise will enable the perpetuation of stereotypes of transgender individuals or alienate them further from representation they are missing in the first place. *All About My Mother* would not be the film it is without the powerful, trans women that shape the story. It is a shame that Lola and Agrado sometimes fall into the stereotypical presentations of transgender women in film. As Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018) explain, some of the stereotypes that trans characters are limited to are “sex workers and victims of violent attacks” as well as “objects of disgust to cisgender protagonists” (p. 37). In the very first scene that Agrado is featured in, she is being violently attacked while working as a prostitute. In a scene shortly after, although the pharmacist isn’t a protagonist, he is clearly made uncomfortable from Agrado’s presence. Almodóvar falls back on these stereotypes in the very first scenes that Agrado appears on screen. Almodóvar’s direction was

revolutionary in its subject matter and concepts for storylines, but unfortunately the execution kept trans women in a limiting box of stereotypical characteristics and behaviors.

The lack of trans actors in the film is also disappointing. On American movies that continue to cast cis actors in the roles of trans characters, Logan Ashley (2019) explains that “in their effort to humanize trans people, [films] only end up reinforcing the same stereotypes about transgender people that transphobes have pushed for decades” (para. 8). It is harmful to continue to cast cisgender actors in the roles of trans characters because it reinforces “the implicit stereotype that trans women are not really women” and instead that they “are really cisgender men pretending to be women” (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018, p. 37). Negation of trans identities undermines the necessity for trans

individuals to be treated respectfully and to be referred to correctly to match their identity—in film and in life.

### Closing Thoughts

*All About My Mother* was released in 1999. Almodóvar continues to produce films, and many of the story lines include LGBTQ characters. Transgender women now live in Spanish cinema outside of Almodóvar’s films, but that does not mean that the representation is sufficient, and especially does not mean that the battle for positive and plentiful representation has been won. On trans global cinema, Jacques (2018) writes

For now, trans actors still aren’t cast in those roles, partly because producers feel there aren’t any qualified to play them. But trans people are seldom given other parts (and if they are, don’t get nominated for awards for their “brave” portrayals of cisgender characters) so the problem persists (para. 9).

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