

# Women on the Verge. Carnivalization, the Grotesque and the Construction of Female Characters in Almodóvar's Movies

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the work of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical analysis. The objective is to discuss the presence of this analysis in the construction of Almodovarian characters who transgressively break with manichaeism, characteristic of Hollywood style, thus creating a more complex character.

Key words: Carnivalization, female expression, grotesque, female universe, transgression.

## Resumen

Este estudio se enfoca en el trabajo del cineasta español Pedro Almodóvar en el contexto del análisis dialógico de Mijail Bajtín. Este trabajo tiene como objetivo discutir la presencia de este análisis en la construcción de los personajes de Almodóvar, quienes rompen transgresivamente con el maniqueísmo característico del estilo de Hollywood, creando un carácter más complejo en su construcción.

Palabras clave: Carnavalización, expresión femenina, grotesco, universo femenino, transgresión.

When one thinks about carnivalization, what comes to mind at first is the simplistic idea that reduces it to the Brazilian carnival, with half naked brown-skinned women, heavily decorated floats and special effects, feathered costumes and shiny sequins, and happy people parading down a long avenue to the beat of samba. You can also evoke the past and recall the masked people dancing to the sound of traditional carnival songs learned from the radio and sung at block parties, at clubs or at country festivals. In a present and local reality, you can even think of people gathering together inside a roped area around a *trio elétrico* (huge sound truck), propelled by the rhythm of *Axé Music* (a Brazilian style of music).

Certainly, such elements make up the Brazilian Carnival; however, one must consider that there are other possibilities to understand the carnivalization phenomenon, beyond this reductive notion.

Regarding that, the views of Russian Mikhail Bakhtin are particularly meaningful. According to Lechte (20), although Bakhtin has a comprehensive oeuvre of published work, he is best known in the West for his concepts of carnivalization and the grotesque, derived from his essay about Rabelais and Dostoyevsky, as well as the concepts of dialogism and polyphony.

Among his vast works, two books are worth highlighting as fundamental to the research presented here: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and Folk Culture and of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: the context of François Rabelais*. In the first work, Bakhtin develops his concept of the polyphonic novel and carnivalization in literature by doing an unusual and in-depth analysis of Dostoyevsky's work. In the second one, Bakhtin takes five texts by the French writer François Rabelais as objects of study, focusing especially on *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and conducting a detailed thematic and language analysis. In that work, he deepens the concept of carnivalization and reflects on two other major concepts: polyphony and dialogism. In his study on Rabelais, his work mainly focuses on the representation of folk culture, in which carnivalization is most evident. The carnivalesque is language filled with symbols and allegories that demonstrates the divergence between official and unofficial speech, specifically it pinpoints the breaking of socially institutionalized standards.

This aspect of breaking social and cultural standards through language is particularly relevant to the work of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. Studying Almodóvar's works, as Carlos and Guimarães (14) point out, is indispensable, as it is critical to understanding the different images cinema has projected of the female figure.

Nevertheless, according to Carlos and Guimarães (16), it is worth mentioning that Spanish cinema was state-controlled during the years of the Francoist dictatorship, which did not allow the free creation of a film industry. However, a movement against state-controlled cinema arose and developed subtle anti-regime propaganda. This cinema, insurgent in Spain, had a really interesting feature: the women occupied a unique and individual role, and were not used exclusively as an object to tell a story.

Carlos and Guimarães (15, 17) argue that after the fall of the Franco regime, Spanish cinema was characterized by great liberation in terms of the themes it focused on. In the 1980s, Pedro Almodóvar rose to prominence with movies such as *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), and *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982). The first one tackles themes considered "women's issues" (Carlos and Guimarães 15, 17), sexual violation, drug use, and crises of human existence, while the second one focuses on controversial issues like homosexuality and nymphomania. Thus, it is clear that the female universe inspired him from the beginning of his career.

According to Carlos and Guimarães, he is "one of the few movie directors who knows and understands a woman like the back of his hand" (18), exploring each and every detail of the physical and psychological aspects of the female universe in his productions. Housewives, turbulent marital relations, ultramodern young women, songs, pictures, striking colors, windows, outlandish camera movements, Madrid's urban landscape, *kitschy* environments, friendship between women, homosexuality, transsexuality, drug use, etc., were among the themes tackled by his great muses. They are characters that depict the alternative Madrid, driven by desire and morally harassed by traditional values. This means that his characters represent people marginalized by the repressive social morality. All of that made Almodóvar a controversial filmmaker, adored by some and loathed by others. It is, however, with *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) that

Almodóvar starts to make female-centered movies. Clear examples include the movies *High Heels* (1991), *Kika*, (1993), *The Flower of my Secret* (1995), *All about my Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), *Volver* (2006), *Broken Embraces* (2009).

As Carlos and Guimarães (58) point out, this known passion and reverence for women has followed him ever since, due to his extremely close connections with his mother, two sisters, and the women from the small village where he used to live. They were interesting figures, full of stories, friendliness, and unusual characteristics. “The strong women who struggle to survive are the ones, at the same time, tragic and funny, these women who are in all my movies, all come from my childhood.” (Almodóvar *apud* Carlos and Guimarães 60).

Another trademark of Almodóvar’s movies are the characters who express themselves as feminine, such as transgender characters, who, although they are not women in the strictest sense of the term, go beyond their biological sex and identify with the opposite sex, by acquiring secondary characteristics such as female body shapes, clothes, wigs, make-up, gestures, etc., to express their psychological characteristics. Works like *High Heels* (1991), *All about my Mother* (1999), and *Bad Education* (2004) are meaningful examples of that aspect: narratives with a male homoaffective-oriented plot are also common, where relationship conflicts are very pronounced. *Law of Desire* (1987) and *Bad Education* (2004) illustrate this feature of Almodóvar’s films very well.

Almodóvar’s women are represented in exaggerated, or even ludicrous ways the way of thinking and acting like women, making up a stereotype of each one of the aspects of the female universe represented by them. In other words, some aspects of the female characters appear exaggeratedly and intentionally marked, in order to get people’s attention and questioning social values. With such an array of behaviors, Almodóvar builds his fictional universe, gathering together complex feelings in order to place them under the camera, which works as a catalyst, empowering them to become the axis on which his narratives revolve.

Thus, this investigation seeks to comprehend how the categories made by Bakhtin, particularly carnivalization and the grotesque, represents a break with and interrogation of, standards socially regarded as correct, as presented in the works of the filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, with special attention given to female characters, and to those that express themselves as female. The paper title makes a direct

allusion to the movie *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), regarded by scholars as a milestone in Almodóvar's female-centric filmography. The choice of the word *verge* is due to the striking characteristics of his characters, who endure extreme situations, going over the edge into the absurd and the unwonted.

### **Carnivalization and the grotesque: ridicule as a way of expression and contestation**

In regards to folk culture, Bakhtin (*Problemas* 45) points out that laughter is a crucial component, as opposed to an austere tone, and it is markedly ecclesial, typical of the Middle Ages, like a folk emancipation in which everyday life is allegorically reconfigured, and has its most intense manifestation in Carnival. As Sodr e and Paiva point out:

The sphere of sensitive shapes connected to folk culture, especially in its carnivalesque manifestations is where Bakhtin finds the Renaissance grotesque images. In the carnival esthesia, the residues of the ancient eastern mythologies are expressed kept in the religious liturgies from the Middle Age, such residues are set in the population's festive parodic imaginary. But mainly he communal laughter is expressed, evoking a joyful heterogeneity which is supposed to be present in the folk spaces from the Middle Ages, on the fringe of ecclesiastical austerity. In the carnivalesque body, with its metamorphoses and inventions, Bakhtin finds the possibility of a not merely reactive critique of bodily isolationism of modern culture. (39)

This concept as expressed by Bakhtin raises the possibility of approximating the concept of carnivalization, as a phenomenon of popular expression. In carnivalization, as Bakhtin sees it, one can identify elements from carnival rites of the Medieval Period and from the Renaissance, in which people would take to the streets, in parades, celebrating the freedom of expression (at least on these occasions), and the transgression of the established order (mainly the religious one). During the festivities, laughter, joy and happiness, would prevail. These activities were expressly prohibited by the Church, because they represented

depraved, impure feelings worthy of eternal condemnation. Another aspect of carnival rites are the circumstances of denudation and masking; the act of putting on a mask means to take on another personality or to hide, while taking off the mask would mean to expose oneself or to exhibit oneself. As Bakhtin finds,

the core of this culture, that is, carnival is not whatsoever a merely artistic form of theatrical show and, overall, it does not enter the art domain. It is between the borders of art and life. In fact, it is life itself presented with elements typical of performance. (*A cultura* 6)

Carnival dates back to the pagan festivities of pre-Christian Europe, in which people would celebrate nature's cycle of rebirth during the spring equinox. According to Bakhtin (*A cultura* 22), for millennia, since the beginnings of human civilization, the perception and awareness of time has undergone considerable changes. In the beginning, time was seen as a juxtaposition of the beginning and the ending of a natural development: winter/spring, death/birth, constitutive parts of a vital cycle. "The succession of seasons, the sowing, the conception, the death and growth are components of this productive life. The implicit notion of time in those very ancient images is the notion of cyclic time of natural and biological life." (Bakhtin, *A cultura* 22). The feeling that would send out a signal of equality between the successive seasons, with the natural consequences of the biological cycle, is broadened and deepened, and starts to comprehend the happenings of human sociability. This means that social life attempts to reproduce the temporal events of the cycles of nature. Thus, the feeling of historical temporality is established. Amid this process, the festive ritual acquires an important role marking time, be it cosmic-natural, biological, or historical temporality.

The carnivalesque feast represents a world upside-down, in which the barriers between the rich and the poor collapse, where desires mix the dichotomies of the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the vulgar; an opportunity to live beyond good and evil.

Bakhtin goes from analyzing carnival as a popular feast to clarifying the concept of carnivalization, and the specificities of carnivalized literature. According to him,

carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It is an escape from the usual official way of life, 'world inside out'. (*Problemas* 122-123)

As Bakhtin signals (*Problemas* 125), carnival theater is one of private life, of that which is common to all human beings, the place in which one does not obey regulations, where everything is allowed, even the grotesque, the eccentric, the profane, the obscene; everything that is against the official order. Thus, he demonstrates that the carnivalesque characters, markedly characterized by extravagance, are allegorical, and represent determined types. They become what they really are, or what they want to be, since they make use of mimicry, transvestism and masking.

Bakhtin (*Problemas* 123) asserts that carnivalization "allows the concealed aspects of human nature, in a concrete and sensory way, to be revealed or expressed." Thus, carnivalization blends a series of metamorphoses, mimicries, transvestisms, humor, fancies and inventiveness and, amid all these aspects, the ritual in which those changes and transformations live is apparent.

One can affirm that carnivalization gathers together such a polysemy, in that it characterizes it in a striking way, like a collective and polyphonic sphere, given its constitutive heterogeneity, which combines extravagance and simplicity, exotic and everyday settings, folk and erudite aspects, amalgamating a considerable variety of styles, and blending people from different social and ethnic backgrounds and age groups. This is a synthesis of the carnivalesque worldview.

Assuming that carnivalization is marked by the state of world as inside out, Bakhtin (*Problemas* 126) demonstrates that binaries gain ground in an open-air theatre in which all hierarchic ranks are suspended: the plebs turn into the elite, dressed in fancy costumes; genders are inverted, as men dress up as women and vice-versa; abundance is celebrated, with excesses of joy, sparkle, ornaments, music, dances, masks, etc., as opposed to daily scarcity. All that is private happens in the public sphere during the pageants and processions that take over the streets and squares. Bakhtin still affirms: "It is about a specific manifestation of the car-

nivalesque category of eccentricity, of violation of what is common and generally accepted. It is life deviated from its natural course” (*Problemas* 126).

Considering the fact that carnivalization is characterized by the celebration of laughter and the comical, in this aspect, parody is the element which most approaches it, since it subverts the pre-established order through derision and a mockery of reality. From this one can infer that carnivalization is related to the “the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter” (Bakhtin, *A cultura* 73). Thus, parody comprehends this universe of inversion, of incongruence, of desacralization and profanation typical of carnivalized literature (and, by extension, of works of art).

The carnivalesque is understood, therefore, as the breaking of taboos and pre-conceptions, as well as the liberation of libidinal urges, instincts and desires, which, were usually censored by the official culture. The interdicted gives way to transgression, and the sacralization of profane elements is complete. According to Bakhtin (*A cultura* 77), it is the “grotesque realism”, proper to carnivalization, which enables the articulation of material and bodily life, in which images of the body, and of the satisfaction of fleshly desires (of food, drink and sex) have a prominent place.

As Discini (58) argues, the general significance of what is understood today as grotesque has remained, for a long time, as a subclass of the comical, the crude, the low, the burlesque, or even bad taste. A broad and general meaning was applied to the term for what is commonly understood as aberrant, fabulous, deranged, macabre, caricatural and the like. Its many senses and multiple references have been dealt with in different ways, seeking comprehension and the place of this aesthetic expression is rich in possible meanings which are hard to conceptualize.

Bakhtin (*A cultura* 80) notes that the word *grotesque* was borrowed from Italian *la grottesca* and *grottesco*, derived from *grotta*, which in English is translated as *grotto*. These terms were coined to designate a specific type of ornament found in the late 15th century in excavations done in Rome, in the underground of the Baths of Titus, in the *Domus Aurea*, and in other regions near Italy. An ancient ornament was found, unknown until then, which had no specific identity. In it one could see the free, unwonted and fantastic interplay of forms which were difficult to distinguish, as they were interwoven and in a constant process of transforma-



tion. The edges between the forms overlapped, and one cannot see the usual static presentation of reality, indicating that the forms are unfinished and everything is in motion and morphing. The term 'grotesque' started to express "transmutation of certain forms into others, in the ever incompleting character of being" (Bakhtin *apud* Discini 58).

As Sodré and Paiva observe,

what is common in the perception of grotesque is degradation (called bathos, in classical rhetoric), operated by an unwonted and exasperated combination of heterogeneous elements, with frequent reference to flagrant displacement of meaning, absurd situations, animality, lower body parts, feces and waste – for that, it is regarded as a phenomenon of disharmony of taste or *disgusto* as the Italians prefer – which exists throughout ages and undergoes several cultural conformations, evoking an equal standard of reactions: laughter, horror, fright, revulsion. (17)

Contrary to the aesthetic perfection which, since Classical Antiquity, preaches the predominance of the beautiful over the ugly, taking beauty, at times, as a sign of goodness, and ugliness of wickedness, the grotesque is characterized by being eminently human. As such, it shows the most basic natural human needs, such as food, drink, sex, and sensory pleasure in a general way. Such needs are almost always denied or vilified by institutions in power, especially the religious ones, in relation to spiritual needs.

Sodré and Paiva also mention that

beauty is, since the ancient Greek, either the expression of symmetry or of conciliation between opposites or a tension especially held between opposite things [...] The ugly (traditionally identified as 'bad' as well as the beauty as regarded as 'good') in turn is not simply the opposite of the beauty because it also constitutes itself in an object to which is attributed a positive aesthetic quality. That is, if we remove a positive trait from the beauty, trait which constitutes it as such, (for example, the proportion or harmony) we do not automatically produce the ugly. This last quality has its specific way of being; it requires a particular production, which is not the sheer negative of the beauty. (17, 19)

One of the goals of the study proposed here is to demonstrate the humanity in the grotesque and the animal in human beings, very far from the high standards of Christian ascetic ideals. Investigating it, by learning and unveiling its constitutive elements, is to study and comprehend the human being, without disguise and stripped of values imposed by social institutions. As Bakhtin advocates (*A cultura* 39), the grotesque was not comprehended nor appreciated up to its value, neither did it find a place in the aesthetic system.

Grotesque is, properly, the spontaneous sensibilities of a way of life. It is something that continuously threatens any representation (written, visual) or behaviour marked by excessive idealization. By ridiculousness or by strangeness, it can make collapse everything the idea elevates too high. (Sodré and Paiva 39)

According to Sodré and Paiva, Pedro Almodóvar goes in this direction. His first movies, though devoid of aesthetic refinement, “with a chaotic and, sometimes, coarse narrative” (100), characterized by a transgressive excess and a corrosive humor which targets the socially established hypocrisy in an ultra-moralist and backward Spain, which would culturally revive from the ashes of the Francoist Fascism.

It is worth recalling that carnivalization, to Bakhtin (*A cultura, Problemas*), is a literary category, hence, one can infer that all carnivalization is carnival, or presents elements which are typical of the carnivalesque phenomenon, but not all carnival can be regarded as carnivalized, in the aesthetic sense of the term. That means carnival, as it is conceived nowadays, can carry some vestiges of the ancient festive phenomenon, but, it has certainly undergone enormous changes in terms of conceptions or even in the way it is held.

Furthermore, the study of Bakhtin allows us to comprehend, in a more accurate way, the sense of carnivalization, both as a literary genre and as a folk cultural phenomenon. Safeguarding the specificities of time and place, from the literary analysis that Bakhtin does, one can find in other forms of art, cinema for instance, some characteristics which identify it as a cultural manifestation loaded with eccentricities, allegories, and diverse social representations, specific to a given time, people or place.

### **Almodóvar's Women and the Boldness to be**

According to Carlos and Guimarães (23), after the great success of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), Almodóvar became known for his sensibility for portraying women. However, even before this feature film, the director was already associated with strong female characters like the nymphomaniac *Sexilia*, from *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982).

That said, however, it would not make sense to speak of Almodóvar without speaking of his fetish actresses, often launched into the international circuit after they appear in his movies. The Spaniard was the one to introduce important names to the world, such as: Penélope Cruz, Cármen Maura, Blanca Portillo, Victoria Abril and Rossy de Palma, who “reached a high threshold on the European circuit thanks to the characters they played in Almodovar’s productions” (Carlos and Guimarães 23). They, to different degrees, represent the director’s true fetishes: “the woman’s strength, motherhood, the multicolored and universal Spain, the traditions, the striking colors and the overwhelming passions” (23).

In Almodóvar, the woman’s multiple facets compete to provide a new view on females, never taken as the weaker sex, but as the stronger one, in a sense which questions the normality of what it is like to be a woman. It is important not to forget the connection to the homosexual and transvestite world which the filmmaker creates. This will be a reason for this new perspective about the female figure where she has a prominent role comparing women’s social difficulties; specially in groups of different sexual orientations and identifications. Thus, the woman’s ultimate power arises and the male figure becomes dependent on her (Carlos and Guimarães 23).

His oeuvre is filled with unconventional characters and shocking themes like incest, rape, homosexuality and transsexuality and frequently, he has more female characters than males. Although Almodóvar has given interviews saying his views on males is not as bad as it seems, in most of his movies, he builds male characters who are morally fallible, corrupt, criminal, perverted, kidnappers, rapists or just figures with little importance in stories filled with and dominated by women. For instance, Victor in *Live Flesh* (1987), Benigno, in *Talk to Her* (2002), Paco, in *Volver*

(2006) and Robert, in *The Skin I Live in* (2011). His movies with a female lead tend to focus more on humor and comedy like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), whereas the ones starring men tend to be gloomier like his latest movie *The Skin I Live in* (2011) (Carlos and Guimarães 26).

In his long filmography, it is evident that his preference for female characters is one of the most striking features. The women of Almodóvar are characters who overflow with emotion. They are complete women who he makes a point of portraying as very real and not as objects, something rarely seen in Hollywood movies. Influenced, on screen, by Carole Lombard, Shirley MacLaine, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey and Katharine Hepburn, throughout the years, Pedro Almodóvar was also inspired by real-life women, like his mother, Francesca Caballero, who he was very close to and had great admiration for and, later on, by the women from the small town where he lived in La Mancha, later portrayed in his movie *Volver* (2006). Afterwards, he saw in actresses like Cármen Maura, Victoria Abril and Penélope Cruz the personification of his muses. The director worships them as strong, peculiar, intense and dazzling women (Carlos and Guimarães 27).

By growing up surrounded by so many women, the director developed a unique comprehension of the female soul and his movies usually show women who are strong, full of life, but also human, vulnerable, who make mistakes and then get on with life, like, for example, Manuela, the mother who lost her child in *All about my Mother* (1999) and Raimunda, the daughter who reencounters her mother in *Volver* (2006). Whether they are mothers, housewives, modern, conservative, homosexuals, transsexuals or whatever, Almodovar's muses are a little of everything, living a melodramatic storyline. (Carlos and Guimarães 29).

Carlos and Guimarães (20-27) mention that it was in *What have I done to Deserve this?* (1984) that Almodóvar made his debut in melodrama. With the story of a housewife exploited by her family, the movie shows narrative solidity and impressive acting, without forgoing his usual thought-provoking elements. With the movie *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), the director returns to comedies full of nonsense, now unveiling a sharper aesthetic sense and talent for dialogues. This movie becomes a landmark in his career and he is consecrated by international critics. Sequentially, *Tie me up! Tie me down!* (1990), *High Heels* (1991) and *Kika* (1993) come out, consolidating "Almodóvar's way to make films"

(Carlos; Guimarães 27). However, what you can notice in his films is that the reoccurrence of themes and the features of this “style” become clichés, signaling the depletion of a formula. When Almodóvar’s career seemed to be going downhill, he re-invented himself, turning, again, to melodrama and replaced the excesses of previous movies with a more sober and restrained narrative by making *The Flower of my Secret* (1995). *Live Flesh* (1997), with a male lead and a police narrative and the internationally acclaimed works *All about my Mother* (1999) and *Talk to Her* (2002) ensue, both based on a melodramatic narrative (Carlos and Guimarães 29).

In a general way, melodrama offers opportunities and themes related to the aesthetic category of grotesque. The melodramatic genre, as it is known, is a frequent pretext for those situations marked by cultural clichés, already established and worn-out significances destined to provoke easy emotions, what is usually called cheesiness, tackiness, bad taste, *kitsch*, etc. It is actually about an unevenness between the liking momentarily valued by the social elites and the liking of the folk classes still influenced by antiquated aesthetic standards. It is a breeding ground for the flourishing of grotesque manifestations. (Sodré and Paiva 99-100)

According to Carlos and Guimarães (23, 27), Almodóvar privileges bodies that are heterogeneous and diverge from the standard physical shapes of Hollywood actresses, even though he admires them. As an example, it is worth mentioning the actresses Chus Lampreave, Rosário Flores, Antónia San Juan (who played the role of a transvestite in *All about my Mother*) and the transsexual actress Bibi Anderson.

In reference to the question of the grotesque, the actress Rossy de Palma (figure 1) is a good example of this fact. She has an angular face and a curved and crooked nose, typical of the cubist paintings of the Pablo Picasso.

Still on the question of the grotesque, the character of Andrea Scarface (figure 2), played by the actress Victoria Abril is noteworthy, she is the director and host of a gory news broadcast entitled *The Worst of the Day* (El Peor del Día) in the film *Kika*. The enemy of Kika, Andrea Scarface, lives for hunting down violent news stories about deaths, rapes, drug trafficking, sexual abuse of children, etc. Her costume, which displays her breasts and the blood running down her sil-



Figure 1. Actress Rossy de Palma  
Available on: <https://goo.gl/rfsFAJ>



Figure 2. Character Andrea Scarface

houette, was designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier, giving it the look of a character from a burlesque horror movie, similar what Madonna wore, in the 90's, and today corresponds to the performances and figure of Lady Gaga.

The more outspoken an actress's performance is, or unusual, or angular her face is, the greater the likelihood that she will appear in his movies. All the actresses and characters out of the norm represent something of Almodóvar himself. Their performances mimic not only a kind of woman in a constant state of ebullition, but also the director's own expression of self. Carlos and Guimarães (54) say that, at the beginning of her career, the actress Cármem Maura functioned as the director's female alter ego, playing occasional sex scenes, like in *What have I done to Deserve this?* (1984) or crossing sexuality limits, as the transsexual in *Law of Desire* (1987). Everything nature did not allow Almodóvar to do, Cármem Maura performed through cinema.

Carlos and Guimarães (27) points out that the weakened body is one of the most recurring themes in the works of filmmakers who use melodrama. This is also a recurring feature in Almodóvar's movies. A good example is seen in the movies *Talk to Her* (2002) and *All about my Mother* (1999). Both talk about weakened women who are in show business and play roles as the stellar performers, thus they are in the center of the action. The colors are invested with consistent



Figura 3. Extreme colorful scenarios and costumes

narrative powers, resembling, strongly, how they are used in classic Hollywood melodramas.

With respect to the phenomenon of carnivalization described by Bakhtin, exaggeration is visible in both how the characters are portrayed and in their costumes and the scenery (figure 3) which are marked by strong and vibrant colors.

Almodóvar's films are marked by exaggeration which is revealed both in the aesthetics as well as in the plot. The Spanish director's scenes are usually classified as *kitsch*, with colorful costumes and scenery full of references to *pop art*. The visual extravagance brings an aspect of parody and carnivalization which is combined with the grotesque humor of the filmmaker.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Almodóvar's films is that they are visual, vibrant and full of colors. The director always makes sure that the wall-papers, cupboards, furniture and clothes shown in the scene are very colorful. All the lights, colors, scenery and costumes represent elements in his filmic narrative. Almodóvar's films mainly draw attention to the use of the color red. "Red is a very significant color. In Spain, it represents hate, love, fire and blood. In Japan, it is the

color of those condemned to death. Therefore, it can be concluded that red is a color that personalizes humanity”, affirms Almodovar (Carlos and Guimaraes 62).

As Sodr e and Paiva point out (100), in more recent and more aesthetically refined movies like *Live Flesh* (1997), *All about my Mother* (1999) and *The Flower of my Secret* (1995), Almod var, from melodrama, deconstructs, little by little, the conventional armor of human relations. *All about my Mother*, for instance, is a story of a mother whose son dies after being struck by an automobile and she goes to look for his father to break the fatal news to him. Today, the father is Lola, a well known transvestite, but at the same time, sexually active with women, one of these women is a nun who got AIDS from him and is pregnant.

As Sodr e and Paiva argue (101), the movie keeps a cheesy ethos, marked by unwonted and morally deviant situations, which are very similar to the style of Nelson Rodrigues (a famous Brazilian writer), and it confirms, aesthetically, the filmmaker’s grotesque critical line, as he produces the disturbing consciousness of identity mutation in the contemporary world and of the doubt regarding statute of social pathology. In this way, Almod var’s films bring to the consciousness of the people who assist it to the pathological social situation in which they are inserted. With the movie, Almod var makes us wonder: who is really sick, the cases regarded as deviant or the social values which tend not to respect differences? Judging from his movies, in Almod var, the pathological derives more from the Christian-Jewish bourgeois morality than from deviations regarded as aberrant.

According to Melo (238-239), the Spanish filmmaker worships, in his writing and films, the eccentric attitudes of Hollywood stars from the 30s through the 60s. Within publications targeted at a female audience, Almod var found inspiration in sentimental counseling services from magazines, romantic photo-stories, romantic soap operas and fashion magazines. It can be mentioned porno photo-story and comic. However, the female catharsis reaches a cl max in the bolero lyrics. These pain-filled songs synthesize, from a sociological perspective, “the affectivity of lower classes, the passionate realism, the crude naturalism and the exaggerated sentiments of melodrama and of women’s world” (Garc a de Le n and Maldonado *apud* Melo 239). To Melo



Almodóvar's characters most of the time, overcome the neurotic urban context in which they live. They do not care about the contempt society holds them in, as they recognize they are more authentic when they deal with problems, passions and desires. (239)

Melo (258, 266) further points out that these characters, oppressed by the urban context, are amoral and revolutionary. Almodóvar sponsors the alliance between heterosexuals and homosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals and other unconventional androgynous forms, all of those who are at the margin of society, aiming to "normalize" what is regarded as aberrant and "naturalize" reality.

## Conclusions

In classical antiquity, mainly Greek culture, beauty was indicated by the expression of symmetry, harmony, truth, and kindness; combining the aesthetic form and ethics, and transforming it into an ideal. Ugliness, in turn, was identified with the bad and perverse. The grotesque, beyond beauty and ugliness, is the possibility to comprehend that aesthetic forms exist which span the centuries and provoke the most diverse perceptions in mankind, evoking varied types of sensation and behavior.

The studies on carnivalization and that of the grotesque, performed by Mikhail Bakhtin point to the possibility of investigating that other forms of perceiving reality in the arts in general exist (sculpture, painting, literature, architecture, dance, theatre, cinema, graphic art) and to relativize the concept of beauty involving these same arts.

Moreover, in a perspective pointed out by Bakhtin, to investigate the grotesque is to examine reality itself. Where mankind, in a lucid experience, acquires an awareness of life by removing the many veils that cover it, deconstructing it, and exhibiting its diverse contradictions.

In the specific case of the film by the director Pedro Almodóvar, as mentioned before, the style of the characters results from their personal experiences, from the observation of reality, and the diverse influences of popular culture. The diverse

accounts of women, transvestites, homosexuals, and suffering imposed by chauvinism, the conflicts between worldly life and religious life, and the bitterness of the widespread criticism of women's positions in a consumer society are the place where his female characters and *feminine expression* move.

Almodóvar typifies his characters as victims of passion and believes that as wounded people, primarily in their romantic relationships, they react actively to life's difficulties. In his work, the female characters represent this possibility of self-overcoming. Almodovar's film gives to its characters an autonomy that is motivated by the blind obedience to their desires. Desire tears the veil that separates the masculine from the feminine, re-defining its characters as well as going against the established social and moral orders and questioning diverse values.

In the history of film, in general, feminine characters have been almost always stereotyped through the use of clichés. Almovódar's work, however, does not usually reproduce these clichés, but instead he uses them to critique society showing women in diverse, established relationships: daughter, mother, wife, lover, worker, etc. Therefore, the grotesque is a critical element utilized by Almodóvar to paint a picture of women in contemporary Spanish society and to report the various forms of oppression that they suffer.

The studies that analyze the cinematographic work of Pedro Almodóvar from the theoretical concepts developed by Mikhail Bakhtin are still incipient. To interweave these two positions is a stimulating task. This article had the primary objective of being an introductory investigation of this relationship.

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