

Natalie Fritz

Cross-media Transmission Processes

Marian Figures in TODO SOBRE MI MADRE (Pedro Almodóvar, ES 1999)

ABSTRACT

This paper builds on aspects of the cultural studies perspective that understands art itself as a method of cultural analysis. This will be exemplified by focusing on how film as a cultural technique for framing and reframing the world, using its different audiovisual devices of representation, is an important contemporary *agens* in the process of transmitting religious motifs and concepts. The paper highlights how Pedro Almodóvar skillfully stimulates the audience to reflect on the polysemy and polyvalence of motifs by not only referring explicitly to iconographic traditions, but also playing with aesthetic conventions.

KEYWORDS

film as method, cross-media transmission processes, framing/reframing, polysemy/polyvalence of motives, tradition, innovation

BIOGRAPHY

Natalie Fritz has a Master's Degree in Religious Studies and is currently writing her doctoral thesis on the motif of the Holy Family in contemporary arthouse cinema. Her principal research interest is currently the field of media (especially film) and religion, involving aspects such as gender and family concepts, cross-media transmission processes, visual studies and media theory. Her latest publications include *Images Traveling through Time and Media: De-and Reconstruction of the Holy Family in contemporary Independent Cinema*, 2015. She has written a number of articles on media and religion and coedited (with C. Martig and F. Perini-Pfister) the volume *Nur für reife Erwachsene. Katholische Filmarbeit in der Schweiz*, 2011.

MEANING-MAKING PROCESSES AND THEIR RELATION TO POWER

The title TODO SOBRE MI MADRE is paradigmatic of Almodóvar's recurring reflection on social transformations as the result of transmission processes and, even more im-

portant to him, how these transformations affect the concept of the individual and its authenticity. In *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE*, Almodóvar literally creates a multi-faceted image of motherhood, on the one hand referring explicitly to an iconographic tradition of Mary, Mother of God, and on the other hand adapting these aesthetic conventions to alternative mother figures to intentionally irritate the audience. By doing this, Almodóvar shows that the specific meaning of a popular motif that is – through the process of transmission – bound to specific aesthetic conventions, is also a result of negotiations and has no exclusive character. Thus the meaning of a specific motif can only be interpreted in the wider context of its production, distribution and reception.¹

From this perspective, it is intriguing to realise how many similarities can be detected between Almodóvar's work and the work of Vera Frenkel. Like Frenkel in her work of art *THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING* (1990/91), Almodóvar resituates a religious motif in a contemporary, apparently unusual context. By meshing a dense net of cross-media references on different levels, he clearly marks the interpretative frame and emphasises the dominant reading of the motif in a particular tradition.² But, by putting into perspective alternative readings that may be subversive, Almodóvar (and Frenkel) stimulate the audience to rethink meaning-making processes in the wider context of power politics.

In this sense, art creates an opportunity to critically analyse how religious and political powers use media to establish their claim to power by allocating specific meaning to motifs that are constitutive for a society and the individuals within.³ One could say those who are able to control the production and the distribution of *images*⁴ are equally in the position to establish a dominant reading which is intended to legitimise the system as a whole and to maintain its leadership.

MULTI-FACETED MOTHERHOOD

In *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE*, Almodóvar refines his alternative concept of motherhood that he has already sketched in previous works.⁵ It is the story of Manuela, (Cecilia

- 1 Media studies scholars Rainer Winter and Sebastian Nestler (2010) refer to the importance of “reading” a film not as a hermetic product, but as a phenomenon that was created in a specific context with specific intentions for an audience, in short, as a product that interacts with society; within this process its meaning is negotiated. Evidently their approach is based on classical cultural studies considerations concerning communication processes as presented in Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding or Stuart Hall's and Paul Du Gay's theoretic model of the Circuit of Culture. This “thick reading” of films is, however, a relative new approach in the broader field of film studies.
- 2 Almodóvar was raised in La Mancha and Extremadura, rural areas in central Spain, where Catholicism permeated all aspects of life and hence Catholic imagery was omnipresent. See e.g.: Zeul, 2010. Under the influence of Franco's dictatorship, a conservative National Catholicism arose that profoundly shaped Spanish society. See: Camino 2010, 627.
- 3 See e.g. Schade/Wenk 2011, 125–132.
- 4 Here the term “image” is used in a broad sense, as a term for different kinds of visual representations, which include mental, physical (artifacts such as paintings, etchings etc.) and virtual images (film).
- 5 E. g. *TACONES LEJANOS* (ES 1991), *LA FLOR DE MI SECRETO* (ES 1995).

Roth), a nurse whose beloved son Esteban (Eloy Azorín) is tragically run over in front of her. She then tries to find her ex-husband, father of Esteban, to inform him about the accident. On her search, she makes friends with Rosa (Penélope Cruz), a young, pregnant and HIV-positive nun. Manuela decides to stand by Rosa and when Rosa dies during the delivery, Manuela adopts the baby boy and names him, as Rosa wished, Esteban. Almodóvar interprets the state of being a mother not as exclusive biological but rather social. It may be one aspect of an individual's identity but, because in Almodóvar's world gender is in a Butlerian sense⁶ a performative act, tightly connected to culturally differing, normative discourses, it is not bound to a particular sex or gender but expresses itself by the way a person acts. In this sense, motherhood is freed from obviously natural constraints and can be understood as an expression of a specific behaviour. Mercedes Camino describes this approach to motherhood as follows: "[...] in *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE* blood is consciously superseded by the bonds created through contact and solidarity, with the final 'Dedicatoria' suggesting that maternity needs not be restricted to the bonds of physical motherhood."⁷

To explain his idea of motherhood, Almodóvar introduces Manuela and her son Esteban sitting in front of the TV eating and chatting. Their dialogue highlights the significant aspects of the Almodóvarian motherhood concept:

Manuela: Please, eat. You have to put on some weight. You never know if you have to walk the streets to support me.

Esteban: For that I need no extra kilos but a big dick.

Manuela: Who taught you to talk like this?

Esteban: You asked.

Manuela: That was a joke!

Esteban: And you?

Manuela: What?

Esteban: Would you be able to prostitute yourself for me?

Manuela: I have already done almost everything possible for you.⁸

The will to do everything for another person, this absolute devotion, grace and charity that are perceptible here, is visually reinforced by the explicit link to the iconography of the *ideal mother*, the Mother of God, who is often associated with the aforementioned attributes.⁹ Almodóvar adapts the iconographic style to play with the audience's expectations. A woman cradling a child is on first glance identified as a mother (see fig. 1).

6 Judith Butler understands sex and gender as discursive acts. Categories like "male" or "female" are thus social constructions that refer to specific normative concepts of power. By "doing" gender, acting in a socially accepted "female" or "male" way, the individual seeks to construct a coherent identity. See Butler 1991.

7 Camino 2010, 632.

8 *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE*, 00:03:24–00:03:52, translated by author.

9 See e.g. Belting 2004 or Rubin 2009.



Fig. 1: The woman on the right is not what she seems to be (TODO SOBRE MI MADRE, 00:10:43).

In the narrative context, however, it becomes clear that this woman, Nina, is an actress playing Stella Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' drama *A Streetcar named Desire*.¹⁰ So, she is neither the mother of the baby doll (!) on stage nor a mother as Nina. As an actress, Nina is able to switch professionally between different identities. Even though she seems to act convincingly, it is just a theatrical role. One could say that Almodóvar uses Nina to demonstrate that, like the Catholic Mother Mary, she is just the subject of projection related to specific social discourses and cultural contexts. The association with motherhood functions primarily on an aesthetic level, because every recipient tries to make sense of a specific representation by reverting to a particular cultural background knowledge,¹¹ which here is intentionally directed by Almodóvar towards Marian iconography. During the development of the story line this intention becomes even more explicit and Almodóvar works in a scene where a purported Chagall painting showing *The Madonna of the Village* can be recognised (fig. 2).

Here again, the aesthetic realisation makes the logical link to motherhood. But within the context one understands how skilfully Almodóvar plays with aesthetic conventions and the dominant readings associated with them. The Chagall *Madonna* is a fake made by a mother who does not act very motherly at all, threatening her daughter Rosa, the nun, not to leave for El Salvador but to stay for her father's sake. The forgery in this context can be read as a reflection on authenticity and its relation to identity concepts and in a wider sense again on meaning-making processes.¹² Almo-

10 *A Streetcar Named Desire* itself is a drama about family, identity and authenticity.

11 See Schade/Wenk 2011, 120–128.

12 If we understand authenticity from a cultural studies perspective as the result of allocations evoked by a particular way of acting, whether we perceive an identity in its performance as authentic or

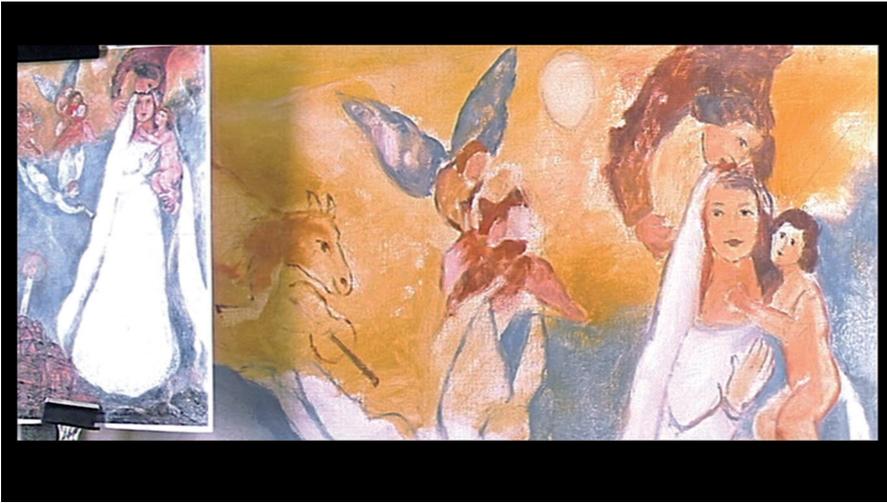


Fig. 2: The forgery of *The Madonna of the Village* (Marc Chagall, 1938–42) serves as a metaphor for a decontextualised interpretation (TODO SOBRE MI MADRE, 00:33:44).

dóvar throws light on the fact that the dominant reading does not automatically have to be the right one, it is just one of many possibilities. In the end, meaning depends on the context a specific motif is shown in.

CONCLUSION

Approaching the society and the world critically by means of film or art is indeed a technique for framing the world as it is and for reframing it by questioning dominant readings and revealing alternatives. By referring to different realisations of a motif in diverse media, Almodóvar demonstrates that the meaning of a particular aesthetic representation strategy depends on the media's typical qualities and is not fixed, but a result of constant negotiation during a specific transmission process. He thus critically analyses meaning-making processes and simultaneously justifies his concept of a multifaceted motherhood adaptable to everyone: if the qualities like absolute devotion, grace or charity are attributed to the ideal mother Mary, consequently, every person who behaves in this way becomes a mother. The references to the aesthetic conventions serve Almodóvar by emphasising that identity and authenticity are, like meaning, fluid constructions in a constantly changing setting. Or as La Agrado, the film's transsexual supporting actress explains, showing her diverse plastic surgery

not depends on the context. The more people perceive one's acting to be authentic, the more the individual believes in its truth. Concerning the relationship between individual identity and authenticity see e.g. Taylor 1991, also Butler 1991.

modifications: “[...] Because you are more authentic, the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.”¹³

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13 “...porque una es más auténtica cuanto más se parece a lo que ha soñado de sí misma.” *La Agrado in TODO SOBRE MI MADRE*, 01:15:17–01:15:20.