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QUESTIONING TWO CANONICAL CONCEPTS OF “SELF” AND “AUTHENTICITY” IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR’S FILM ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER

Keywords: organ transplant; anonymity; xenophobia; authenticity; identity

Abstract: In scientific times, such as ours, we refuse to think that any elixir could postpone our death or secure our immortality; yet, we desperately seek an alternative. Robert T. Eberwein contends that our dreams have a phasic nature and that through them we step into “the D (desynchronized) state” of our minds (17). Dreams, as well as profound reveries, disclose the unfathomable structure of our sentient dimensions. Many of the arguments of this essay revolve around the “D state,” where the mind and body are not in binary opposition, but ex-tend from what we usually take to be their delineated contours. By proposing for analysis reflections on Pedro Almodóvar’s film *All about My Mother* (1999), I argue that, like dreams and desires--whose linearity, logic and coherence are rarely contested--sketching in imagination an immortal, immaterial body is attainable. The body experiences an effervescent folding, pouring itself into the future while keeping/storing the echoed versions of its former embodiments. According to Almodóvar, the dream of immortality could mean going out of one’s original embodiment to live in another human being’s body via organ transplant (along with the ethical implications involved in this medical procedure). The dream of immortality may thus mean losing one’s limited physicality in what appears to be an embrace with the unpredictable other.

To Mari, my sister, who is authentic

At a certain point in the body’s entropic movement, subjectivity drains away, beyond a point where it can be recaptured by technical intervention (Waldby 162)

In the end there is no end: totality is not achievable.
(Cubitt 365)

Preamble

If there were a magical potion that could secure our immortality, would we take it? If there were a method, exercise, or technique that could keep intact (unaltered) our past experience while not interrupting our development would we use it? A long time ago, the alchemists ardently believed that the elixir vitae could “prolong human life indefinitely” (Berman 77). In scientific times, such as ours, we refuse to think that any elixir could postpone our death or secure our immortality; yet, we desperately seek an alternative. Robert T. Eberwein contends that our dreams have a phasic nature and that through them we step into “the D (desynchronized) state” of our minds (17). Dreams, as well as profound reveries, disclose the unfathomable structure of our sentient dimensions. Many of the arguments of this essay revolve around the “D state,” where the mind and body are not in binary opposition, but ex-tend from what we usually take to be their delineated contours. For Morris Berman, “[t]he subject/object distinction of modern science, the mind/body dichotomy of Descartes, and the conscious/unconscious distinction of Freud, are all aspects of the same paradigm; they all involve an attempt to know what cannot, in principle,

be known” (148). Here I am less interested in the cognitive, often misleading nature of our Cartesian reasoning, but in how we could dive experimentally into the deepest waters of our psyche. Like dreams and desires--whose linearity, logic and coherence are rarely contested--sketching in imagination an immortal, immaterial body is attainable by using as example reflections on Pedro Almodóvar’s film *All about My Mother* (1999).

[II]

In an interview with Peter Canning, Gilles Deleuze asserts that “The concept of the image in the present only applies to mediocre or commercial images. [...] The present is not at all a natural given of the image” (372). This is explained by the fact that cinema is characterized by a montage of flashbacks, creating the illusion of an extended present in which no one makes an effort to reel back anything since the past is already closely attached to the present. Deleuze has also argued that the human brain requires an interval in order to meditate upon an event’s significance. Therefore, because our brains need a short delay to grasp the significance of events, the brains do not belong exclusively to the present either. In *All about My Mother*, Almodóvar proposes the opposite by anchoring the story and its characters in what seems to be an engulfing present. For those who cannot hold their disbelief in suspension, or seek in a film only its superficial, entertaining pleasures, this film is impossible to watch. I had some difficulties myself because of its chaotically entangled scenario. To understand this type of scenario which does not seem to have any coherence and/or explanation, it helps to offer a scientific background. As Jane Bennett argues, “In chaos theory, a particle’s motion is said to have a strange attractor if the path of its transits is always unpredictable” (17). Almodóvar’s film could be defined as an amalgam of kinetic brilliance (everything moves really fast, practically without stop) and an unpredictable, vertigo-like series of events.

The film starts with a close-up of glucose bags mounted on IVs in a hospital’s Intensive Unit Center. The patient, whose identity remains anonymous, dies. Manuela, a nurse and one of the major characters of this film, leaves the intensive care room and rapidly enters another. There, she picks up the phone and dials the number of an Organ Donor Organization, telling the receptionist that the hospital may be able to offer a transplant. Immediately after this opening frame, we see Manuela again, this time at home with her son, Estéban, ready to watch a movie starring Bette Davis. The clip shows an actress bored and annoyed with her fans, whom she believes to be vandals, uneducated and trivial. The clip subtly bridges the narrative in Almodóvar’s film. Estéban is a young man, passionate about the arts-- film, theater and writing. For his upcoming birthday he requests from his mother three gifts.

The first is to observe her in a simulated seminar session dealing with a bereaved woman who tries to learn how to cope with the loss of her beloved. This session is part of her training to become a better liaison between those who lose a beloved and those who may benefit from organ transplant. The scene is brief, precipitate and without closure, like everything else that has happened so far in the film. Almodóvar accumulates detail after detail in his film’s narrative until it reaches a stasis, after which it will continue an uninterrupted avalanche into the theme of present/presence.

As a second gift, Estéban goes with his mother to see his favorite actress, Huma Rojo, performing the role of Blanche in Tennessee William’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. After the performance, mother and son wait in the rain for Huma to request an autograph from her. While waiting, Estéban asks for his third gift: he wants to know everything about his father. Because Huma gets into a taxi so rapidly, she does not sign the autograph for Estéban. He starts running after the taxi and gets hit by a car. This is the moment that becomes the stasis of the film and constitutes a kind of minimal reference frame between the temporal segments of “before” and “after.” The next frame depicts Manuela waiting for the doctors to confirm her worst fear, that Estéban is dead. She also finds out that her son’s heart is not yet dead; would she be willing to let it live or die? In an entry written on the eve of his death, as a marginal note to a photo Manuela showed to Estéban from her youth, the latter wrote in his diary that he wanted to know everything about the missing half of the photo. This desire incites Manuela to start searching for Estéban’s father and thus reattach the missing half to a heart that continues to live in different persons (in his mother because of the filial liaison and in the anonymous patient because of the heart transplant).

Estéban's last wish is about discovering the mysteries lurking in the controversial concept of absent presence that keeps haunting us. According to the director, the concept of absence has been misinterpreted: whatever/whoever is not present is not necessarily completely absent as long as we cannot stop thinking about it/him/her.

After this long and intricate enumeration of ideas and events, we may be able to better understand why Almodóvar wrote such an uncanny scenario: Manuela loses her son in a car accident; trying to honor her last promise to him, after Estéban's death she starts searching for his father. In her search, she reconnects with Agrado, an old-time friend; manages to find a temporary job as an assistant of Huma; and meets Sister Rosa, who has AIDS and is pregnant. (Manuela discovers that Lola is also the father of Rosa's son.) According to the director, "This atypical family [and scenario] evokes [...] the variety of families that are possible in these times. If there is something that characterizes the end of the 20th century it is the rupture of the traditional family: now you can form families with other members, other ties, other biological relations that need to be respected" (D'Lugo 102-103). In this scenario, there is also Agrado's unforgettable episode where s/he professes belief in the authenticity of a perfect/y dreamed body. Describing the parallel between films and dreams, Eberwein notes that the former "[a]ppear to us in a way that activates the regressive experience of watching dreams on our psychic dream screens. The actual screen in the theater functions as a psychic prosthesis of our dream screen" (192). It is important to emphasize that in this film no one is nostalgic about the past, and consequently no one has time or even desire to dream indefinitely, live a dreamy life, or refuse his/her authenticity and existence.

Furthermore, because in this film there are either biologically born women or transvestites (half impersonating women) - including Estéban's father, Lola--I propose a rereading of the legend of the Minotaur which may provide some insight into this film's too chaotically presented ideas. Luce Irigaray notes,

The labyrinth, whose path was known to Ariadne, for example, would thus be that of the lips. This mystery of the female lips, the way which they open to give birth to the universe, and touch together to permit the secret of perceiving and generating the world. (qtd. in Lorraine 32)

It seems that in *All about My Mother*, the women are caught in the maze, too, suffocating themselves and the Minotaur, searching frantically for the thread that will liberate them. The director finds a satisfactory solution to this problem only after Manuela has honored her dead son's wish. This is the moment that seems to release the *last Minotaur* from the labyrinth (which stands as a symbol for our inhibitions, as explained later), and offer some kind of closure to the film.

Moreover, of all these complicated characters whose identity is at a borderline, Agrado plays a quintessential role. She describes herself, saying: "They call me La Agrado [Spanish for "Amiable/Approachable"] because all I want to do is make life agreeable for others. Besides agreeable, I am also very authentic." Almodóvar proposes a subtle analysis; on the one hand, there are practically no men in his film. Even those who are present speak only short lines that do not contribute significantly to the film's narrative. As Marvin D'Lugo notes, "In the intricate weave of surrogate and refigured identities within the family, patriarchy is resemanticized, principally through Lola, the man who would be a woman, the woman who is the father of both Estébans" (102). On the other hand, the idea of the organ transplant presented briefly during the opening frame of the film functions as a means through which the director analyzes the current concept of being authentic. When Agrado claims that s/he is "very authentic" and proceeds to detail it, we find out about her/his several cosmetic surgeries (As a prostitute, s/he needs to have an "authentic" body, without which s/he would be out of the meat market). She concludes her monologue by saying that "A woman is more authentic the more she resembles what she dreams herself to be." Almodóvar rewrites some existential/ontological theorems; we do not have a body, nor do we belong to a body, nor do we live a body, as much as we dream to a body which approaches authenticity the moment it gets closer to our internal fantasies.

Having said this, let us return to a moment in the film that is presented only briefly, the organ transplant. Because this film is about living, the director takes the liberty to accept/be tolerant toward all

forms of living: Agrado has had several cosmetic surgeries (which could be interpreted as external or epidermal transplants); a long time ago, Lola decided to be a woman in a man's body; Sister Rosa has sinned and had sexual intercourse resulting in her current pregnancy; sick and desperate patients wait to receive organ transplants; and Manuela convinces herself to continue her life if only she honors her son's last wish. Almodóvar asks us not only to accept family ties created outside of the traditional pattern, but also to educate and diversify our rather limited views on tolerance. If we have difficulties accepting other people's personal lifestyles (and here is a parenthetical observation on his own homosexuality, too), a lesson given by anatomy always serves as a good example. More explicitly, in order to survive, a body that is under surgery and receives an "alien" organ must exhibit a considerate amount of tolerance. Renée C. Fox argues that

Incorporated and assimilated into its scientific lexicon are notions of the tolerance,' 'acceptance,' and 'rejection' of transplanted tissues and organs; the capacity of the body of a recipient to 'recognize' tissues and organs that are 'foreign' to it, and to distinguish 'self' from 'nonself' [...] and the 'chimeras' of genetically different groups of donor and recipient cells that are formed. (236)

The gift of the organ transplant comes either at the cost of impairing another individual's organism, or after one's demise. Through this brief scene, Almodóvar questions the authenticity of the human body. Could a body that has received an organ transplant still be considered unmistakably personal? Greek mythology considered a chimera (and chimera-like creatures) a hybrid animal (having the body of a goat, the head of a lion, and the tail of a serpent). As Suzanne Anker and Dorothy Nelkin contend, "Chimeras once populated the literature, mythology, and art of ancient Greece. They were dangerous, formidable, and powerful beasts, representing fantastic yet uncivilized and chaotic forces in nature that confronted mankind" (107). For Almodóvar, one cannot be authentic unless one is simultaneously chimerical and tolerant. Consequently, there is no universality in authenticity (and probably no universality whatsoever). Authenticity is another way of individualization and self-acceptance, but again, if we have difficulties accepting the others' uniqueness, a perfect example could be taken from the chemical language that exists between the *non-human* entities of aphids and plants: "[i]n response to an overabundance of aphids on their leaves, [they] call ladybugs to their rescue by means of a language of chemical scents. Such behavior turns out to be but one of the many ways in which plants make their mark on the world, and it suggests that even plants possess a kind of agency" (Bennett 170). This film's tribute to presence/present is a necessary reaction to adapting the myth of authenticity, which, bluntly put it, is *all about being true to oneself*.

Furthermore, this film is probably his greatest achievement in the trilogy dedicated to delicate situations and/or medical conditions (the two other films are *Women on a Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Talk to Her*). In all three, he puts us in an extreme situation where we have to observe characters having bouts of nervous breakdowns (with no much hopeful remedy), being in a coma (where the caregiver is completely eliminated at the end) or debating over the ethical aspects of organ transplants. In *All about My Mother*, it seems that he wants to re-write the "laws" established underneath xenophobia--the compulsive fear of the foreigner--by using a very subtle analogy of the organ transplant. When facing a life-or-death situation, a patient does not have time to question the identity or the status of the donor because *all* s/he wants is to be saved. Even more poignantly, I contend, he places this xenophobia in a medical context of the stillborn child and of adults in persistent vegetative state. More explicitly, Elizabeth Hallan, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth believe that in those two unfortunate cases, the

[s]ocial identity becomes unclear in the sense that the binary relationship of differentiation between 'life' and 'death' has been destabilized. [...] More recent practices such as cuddling, dressing, naming, photographing and providing a funeral for the stillborn body now invest it with a social identity as 'daughter' or 'son.' Conversely, the brain dead body, which has a 'life-like' appearance, displays signs which effectively sustain a pre-existing set of social relations. For relatives, therefore, the brain dead individual's previous social identity persists into the present. (71-2)

Because cinema has been having an enormous impact on people of different backgrounds and education, Almodóvar's film intends to make us aware of our unjustified fear of the other, as well as of our obsession to secure our body's authenticity. The organ transplant, even though is presented only briefly, represents in fact the main concern proposed by this film. If a body in crisis accepts an organ transplant after minimal, if at all, checkup, then shouldn't we learn how to moderate our xenophobia? Also, through the organ transplant scene, Almodóvar informs us that the demised body's internal architecture succumbs gradually to death; or, as Deborah Lupton notes, "What is the status of a person's organs which have been taken from a body pronounced to be dead and transplanted into a living person's body? [...] In medical discourses relating to the viability of the human body organs and tissue for transplantation or other medical use, tissue may be described as 'dead,' 'double dead' or 'triple dead'" (51).

Drawing the moral conclusions of this film as it has been proposed by the *anonymous* patient's body's acceptance of the organ transplant, in subtext, Almodóvar reminds us that it is the mind (echoing the institutionalized discourses)--and not the body--that has created extreme notions such as "abnormal," "teras," "xenos," "abject," etc. In return, the body is tested to see if it accepts/rejects these notions, copying at a smaller scale the process involved in an organ transplant. Finally, the organ transplant, which could be also decoded as the metaphor of liminality (placing the body at the threshold between life or death), is a reminder that modern medicine has a long time ago moved away from Galenic anatomical practices, where the body was generally left intact, considering it to be a sacred entity. On the other hand, modern medicine practices autopsies in its attempt to examine more closely the affected tissues and suggest remedies for future patients, as well as try organ transplants to save the lives of living persons.

[III]

As stated in the beginning of this essay, during sleep we experience the D (desynchronized) phase. Coincidentally, D also brings to mind Desire, unlimited and unfulfilled, Uroboros-like Desire. Our inner bodily sensations--the proprioception dimension of our sentient being-- have their unique way of perceiving time and space as they are guided by stimuli from within. To express our ideas, we rely heavily on metaphorical constructions. By the same token, because our bodies are the fluid metaphors par excellence, discovering their final referent/embodiment is similar to our perception of the horizon, whose lips are constantly misleading and receding. The body experiences an effervescent folding, pouring itself into the future while keeping/storing the echoed versions of its former embodiments.

Almodóvar's tribute to (non-)authenticity may finally be seen as a possible answer to our dream of immortality. According to this artist, the dream of immortality could mean going out of one's original embodiment to live in another human being's body via organ transplant. By so doing, it appears that the dream of immortality means losing oneself in an embrace with the unpredictable other.

As inferred from the analysis of Almodóvar's film, the two canonical concepts of "self" and "authenticity" would need to undergo a semantic transformation to fit into our contemporary definition of being. One's self's authenticity is a repository of one's desires and frustrations as retrieved from the inextinguishable well of the collective unconscious as well as institutionalized discourses. One's self becomes authentic if one loses it several times during one's lifetime, and thus periodically allowing it to reinvent itself. Therefore, one's self is never truly anchored in its essence; instead, it embraces its manifold manifestations of its mini-episodes of identity-seeking. In other words, we are engaged into a process of adding and subtracting moments to and from our lives, each with its presumed uniqueness, without realizing the repeatability of our gestures, the recurrence of our habits, and the desire to authenticate and give a precise meaning (definition) to our relationships and identity. According to Sean Cubitt, "The concept of nonidentity reveals zero's quality of internal difference. Zero is a relation rather than a (no)thing because it is always a relation of nonidentity with itself. Zero acts, rather than is because of this instability. And it acts in relation to the cardinal numbers (1, 2, 3)" (33). Continuing this line of reasoning, if zero defines its identity through the presence of the other cardinals, then zero possesses this remarkable quality of being in perpetually re-constructing identity. In this light, authenticity becomes

zero, always letting imprint on its volatile fabric our *and* others' responses to a mercurial life; and self becomes those cardinal numbers, 1, 2, 3 until infinity.

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