

# **Embodiment and Desire:**

*All About my Mother* and Gender at the Margins

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Embodiment and Desire:  
*All About my Mother* and Gender at the Margins

Sônia Weidner Maluf

(English translation by Carolyn Williams)

*Abstract:*

*This essay presents a reading of the Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar's film All About My Mother, focusing on the transvestite character, Agrado. After drawing a comparison with other films on the subject of transgenering, I discuss notions of embodiment and the construction of the subject by placing them in the context of theories about the body in Brazilian ethnology. My purpose is to offer some elements for a reflection on the experiences at/of the margins as a way of renewing theoretical debates in feminist and gender studies. The bodily experience of 'becoming the other' dramatizes the mechanisms that are in play in the construction of difference and can be seen as an anti-hierarchical force destabilizing dominant politics of subjectivity.*

## Embodiment and Desire:

### *All About my Mother* and Gender at the Margins<sup>1</sup>

In his film ‘All About my Mother’ the Spanish film director, Pedro Almodóvar, once again eulogizes the margins<sup>2</sup>. As with almost all his other films, he shows how experiences at the margins can both reveal and transgress the mechanisms of power that are naturalized in dominant ideologies and lifestyles in contemporary Western urban societies. In this film, desire and suffering interlink and construct a plot that soon begins to dissolve some established principles concerning the body, gender and identity.

Manuela, a nurse who works in the organ donation department of a Madrid hospital, loses her only son in an accident on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Falling into a deep depression, she decides to return to Barcelona, the city she left when she was pregnant. When she arrives she meets up again with Agrado, a transvestite who is a sex worker in the prostitution area of the city, and she attempts to begin a new life without her son. She meets Sister Rosa, a nun who is involved with charity work with transvestites and sex workers and who discovers that she is HIV positive and pregnant with the child of a transvestite. Manuela also meets Huma, a theatre actress of whom her son was an ardent fan and who is linked to his death: he was run over on his

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<sup>1</sup> A version in Portuguese of this article was published in Brazil in *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol.10, n.1, 2002, as “Corporalidade e desejo: *Tudo sobre minha mãe* e o gênero nas margens”. Reproduced in English with the authorisation of *Revista Estudos Feministas*. I thank Carolyn Williams for the efficient and careful work of translating the article into English.

<sup>2</sup> Paper presented at the round table: ‘Body, Culture and Textuality’ at the International Seminar ‘Doing Gender 4’, Florianópolis, Federal University of Santa Catarina, May 2000, and at the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Brazilian Society of Cinema Studies (Socine), Florianopolis, 2000. I would like to thank my students on the Postgraduate Programme of Anthropology for their direct or indirect input into this article, and Vanessa Pedro for her thoughtful reading and comments.

birthday while he was trying to get Huma's autograph as she was leaving the theatre. Huma is the producer of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and is living her own drama with her fellow actress and lover, who is addicted to drugs. It is in Barcelona that Manuela also meets the father of her son again, another transvestite who is ill and tired. In the plot, Almodóvar continually plays with the audience's expectations and with the margins: a husband with breasts, a wife that stays with her/him, a transvestite father, a nun who is pregnant by the same transvestite. But what is most surprising is the naturalness with which scandal and transgression appear, and how they themselves become objects of attraction and even identification for the audience.

There are many possible readings of *All About my Mother*. Mine will be limited to one of the characters, Agrado, and to certain aspects that seem to me to provide elements for a debate on gender and embodiment. These are: the question of hiding one's body and a public embodiment, the relationship between desire and nature or the nature of desire and gender at the margins.

### **Hidden bodies x public embodiment**

Agrado, the main transvestite character of the film, likes to talk about her body. "All I have that is real are my feelings and the litres of silicone that weigh a ton." When she takes the stage to substitute her act for a play that cannot be staged, she entertains, fascinates and seduces the men and women in the audience by telling her life history – which becomes a speech about her body. She jokes about how much she is worth based on the quantity of

silicone injected into her breasts, her buttocks and other parts of her body, and on the surgery she has put herself through:

They have cancelled the show. Those who wish to ask for a refund can do so. But for those who have nothing else to do and are already here in the theatre, it's a shame for you to leave. If you stay, I'll entertain you with the history of my life. Goodbye, I'm really sorry [to those departing]. If you get bored, snore like this: RRRRR. I will understand, and it won't hurt my feelings. Sincerely. I'm called Agrado, because my whole life I have always tried to please others. Apart from being agreeable, I am very authentic. Look at my body. Made to perfection. Almond eyes: 80 thousand. Nose: 200 thousand. Such a waste, because in after a fight I ended up like this [she shows the bend in her nose]. I know that it gives me character, but if I'd known, I wouldn't have bothered. To continue. Breasts: two, because I'm no monster. Seventy thousand each, but I've had my money's worth. Silicone... – Where? (Shouts a man from the stalls). Lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and buttocks. A litre costs 100 thousand. You calculate, because I've lost count. Jaw reduction, 75 thousand. Total laser depilation, because woman also originated from the monkey, the same or more than man. Sixty thousand per session. Depends on the hair of each person. Usually two or four sessions. But if you're a flamenco diva, you'll need more. As I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic, my dear. And, one shouldn't skimp in these matters, because the more you resemble your dreams, the more authentic you are.

Men and women who work with the theatre's suppliers are fascinated by her penis. One of the actresses asks to see it, while caressing her breasts. One of the actors asks her to give him a blowjob. She is indignant and replies to the

insult: “All the company is obsessed with my dick. As if it were the only one... In the street do they ask you to give them a blowjob just because you have a dick?” But she ends up relenting, if only to show that she is open-minded and sensitive to these things.

Paula Marino has analyzed now classical films that deal with the topic of transvestism<sup>3</sup>. These include *La Cage aux Folles* (Mike Nichols, 1995), *Madame Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus 1993), *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983), *Victor or Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982), and *Tootsie* (Sidney Pollack, 1982). She characterizes as one of the central common elements of these films the concealment of the ‘identity’ of the transvestite character and the limitations to knowing about true identity”.<sup>4</sup> There was a concern to conceal “the shapes and forms of the body that could reveal him as a member of the opposite sex”.<sup>5</sup> A recent film that could be included in this line of concealment is *Boys Don’t Cry* (by Kimberly Pierce, 1999), based on a true story, which occurred in a small town in the southern United States. The film is the story of a young woman who dresses as a man, has male friends and dates other young women. The discovery of her ‘true identity’ (which happens, of course, when her body is discovered, literally – when her clothes are ripped off her) has a tragic outcome: in an extremely violent scene, two male friends rape her.

*All About my Mother* is a little different from these films that focus on the tension between concealment and discovery (and which are based on another tension: one is either a man or a woman, and the proof is in the anatomical,

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<sup>3</sup> MARINO, 1997. I thank Anna Paula Vencato for the reference to this article.

<sup>4</sup> MARINO, 1997, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> MARINO, 1997, p.2.

substantive and objectified body). Unlike the vast majority of these classic transvestite characters, the lead transvestite character in *All About my Mother*, Agrado, does not seek concealment. She doesn't pretend to be a woman. Her public affirmation is carried out by exhibiting her body exactly for what it is: a body that has been transformed, manufactured, that appears and affirms itself as a manufactured body, not a substantive, objectified body but embodiment, a vehicle and meaning of experience. The authenticity of this body, according to Agrado's own discourse, her 'nature', is part of the process that manufactured it. When she says that what she has that is most authentic is the silicone, Agrado is revealing that the 'authentic' in her is exactly that which is the product of her creation, the intervention of her desire, of her own agency.

When she takes the stage, she also presents herself as a transvestite who is different from others. She comes from the underground world of the sex workers' area of Barcelona to the stage – from her own space in the world of transsexuals, to another type of transgender experience: drag queens.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, Agrado hates drag queens: “Drag queens are finishing us off. I can't stand them, they're all disgusting. They confused transvestism with the circus. What a nightmare”. In this moment, she also defines what a woman is: “Her hair, fingernails, and mouth to give blowjobs and gossip”.

Outlining transvestism in this way, *All About my Mother* follows another line, that of films such as *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* or even a film such as *In a Year of Thirteen Moons*, by Rainer Fassbinder (1978), which tells the

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<sup>6</sup> Concerning the different forms of cross-dressing and their relationship with public spaces, see Sonia Maluf, 1999.

story of a transsexual who, before having surgery, was married to a woman and has a daughter. These are a line of films about transgressing the borders of gender marked not by desire for an appearance (to seem to be the opposite of what she doesn't want to be), but by a desire to appear, a desire for evidence of a constructed embodiment. Also, unlike films about concealment, Agrado's transvestism does not have an ending. There is no revelation, because there is nothing to reveal. There is no hidden identity, motivated by circumstances external to the subject (to get a specific job, develop a career, etc). Agrado does not transform herself to hide a previous and authentic identity or to show another false but pretending to be a true identity. When she gets up on stage, she presents the fabricated nature of her body. By breaking with the opposition of what is false and what is true, she also breaks with another essentialist opposition: nature and anti-nature<sup>7</sup>.

### **Desire as Nature**

It is as a result of the transformations carried out on her body, and particularly her discourse about that body, which only comes into existence as a body that is talked about, that Agrado appears as a subject.

Agrado's irony about her authenticity based on silicone fulfills the same function as the parable that runs through the film *The Crying Game*, by the Irish director Neil Jordan. This film relates the story of an ex-militant of the

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<sup>7</sup> There are many political implications of thinking of the body as embodiment, process and experience, or *being-in-the-world*. This question came up in a discussion with my students concerning the text by Thomas CSORDAS (1994) which talks about the essentialized concept of the body that is present in different forms of ethnic and sexual, etc, violence and extermination. In *Boys Don't Cry*, it is through the rape that the two youths, in a scene of homophobic violence, reduce the character to its ultimate condition – that marked by an essentialized body - to its condition as a woman.

Irish Republican Army who falls in love with the girlfriend of an American soldier who is taken hostage by the IRA and ends up dying in an attempt to escape his captors. The detail is that the girlfriend, “the perfect example of femininity”, as Maria Rita Kehl writes of the film<sup>8</sup>, is a transvestite. During the film a parable is related in different moments by two male protagonists. The story of a scorpion that wants to cross a river and asks a frog to carry him. Initially the frog refuses, believing that the scorpion will attack her. But the scorpion gives his word that he will never attack her, since if he did so he would drown together with the frog. The result is that half way across, the frog feels a sting and, in desperation, asks the scorpion why he has done this if he too is going to drown with her. The scorpion replies: it is in my nature. As Maria Rita Kehl analyzes in her article, by talking about an unavoidable nature, about which nothing can be done, the two lovers in *The Crying Game* are not talking about an anatomical nature, but one which is to do with knowledge and desire. In the case of Dil, to know herself to be a woman. In the case of Agrado, as I understand it, to know herself as a transvestite. Nature is not in the body, but in desire, for Dil, or in the desire written on the body, silicone, for Agrado.

More than a terrain existing *a priori* on which the transformation was carried out, the transformed body presents itself as the space for reterritorializing these subjects at the margins. On the one hand, something is achieved that is in the order of a desire that appears to be already given (to be as near to what she dreamed for herself, as Agrado says). On the other hand, the process of transformation, of becoming another, is that which constitutes, or gives embodiment to that desire and to the subject of that desire. The body is, in

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<sup>8</sup> KEHL, 1996.

this experience, desire and object at the same time. He ceases to be a previously given substance (the realm of nature), on which he will inscribe that which is in the order of culture. He presents himself as embodiment or corporeality, or in other words, as an experience which includes affect, feelings, *habitus*, as Thomas Csordas points out in his discussion of embodiment<sup>9</sup>.

In the case of Agrado- and of other trans – and her speech about herself (which is necessarily a speech about her embodied experience), the body only exists as experience. What would be the defining object or substance (the irreducible body) appears dislocated in her speech, but the subjects that live with her insist on it. They want to see her penis. The silicone, which for these subjects would be the object that is effectively dislocated, appears in Agrado's speech as her nature, the most authentic aspect of her. She begins her speech saying she is going to tell her life history. And this history is told through her body, or more specifically, through her embodied experience. The transvestite institutes a new *bildung*: a *bildung* of the body – through which and in which a new person is constructed.

### **Gender at the Margins**

In this film, the way Almodóvar approaches topics such as the body and gender provides us with the means to reconsider these concepts based on the phenomenon of transgender which is located at the margins.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the body as embodiment, see CSORDAS, 1994. For a discussion of the concept of corporeality, see also Anthony SEEGER, Roberto DA MATTA and Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1979.

The transgender experience is one of the topics that have led to a renovation of reflections, concepts and theory in the field of feminist and gender studies. This is because – in its different forms of manifestation – it has revealed aspects of gender that for a long time had remained relegated to its theoretical construction or its cultural variations. The most important aspects of the reflection on transgender experience are connected with the artificial and constructed nature of gender and gender differences, or in other words, its cultural, social and political construction<sup>10</sup>.

Experience at the margins has also enabled a reflection of the concept of the body beyond anatomy. I believe that there could be a particularly rich dialogue between the reflection about these ‘non-canonical forms’ of gender in modern Western societies and anthropological studies of ideas about the body in other cultures; the meeting of cultural and cosmological experiences that I believe are at the margins with cultural and cosmological forms provide other theories of gender and the body (beyond the essentialist binary<sup>11</sup> of anatomical difference). This is what I will attempt to do in an exploratory way in the second half of this article.

There is another parable, which became famous in anthropology. Towards the end of his research with the Kanak, in Melanesia, between 1920 and 1930, the protestant missionary anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt

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<sup>10</sup> There is nothing new in this affirmation of the transgendered experience revealing the instability of gender – and of the very concept. Esther Newton (cited in Judith Butler 1990) tries to show the ‘double inversion’ of *drag*, that while affirming an ‘exterior’ feminine appearance and an ‘internal’ masculine essence, also symbolizes the opposite: an external masculine appearance (the body) and a feminine essence (her I). For BUTLER, (1990), imitating a gender, a drag queen reveals the imitative structure of gender – as well as its contingency (p.175).

<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that all binaries are essentialist. I am referring to the lack of analysis of the concept of the body that in many academic studies in the field of gender is reduced to a given entity, based on which differences are symbolized – differences which are also considered given.

mentioned to the Kanak's chief that the long stay with the Western missionaries had taught the Kanak that they had a soul. The chief replied to the missionary: "No, we already knew we had a soul, you taught us that we had a body".<sup>12</sup> Until the missionaries and other Westerners had arrived, the Kanak had no word for the body<sup>13</sup>. With the Western missionaries they learned the idea that they had an individual, unique and delimited body (with defined borders – or margins), which opened the way for what Leenhardt called the process of individuation. When the Kanak realize they have a body the possibility appears for individuation, the fixing of an I (I have a body). It is in this moment, according to Leenhardt, that they have the possibility to free themselves from the network of relations of traditional Melanesian society, where a person is nobody outside a relational position previously inscribed by society.

Apart from the possible positive or negative elements of the process of individuation of the Kanak people, Leenhardt's parable provides us with an interesting element for a discussion of the phenomenon of transgender and the very concept of gender. Not all cultures have a concept for the body. That is, not only are the body and bodies cultural constructions<sup>14</sup>, but also the very concept of the body is a cultural and historical construction. These thoughts are interesting because, in the hegemonic concepts of modern cultures, the body appears to be natural to us. Very often, even in debates within the field of gender studies, the body appears as an irreducible term or factor.

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<sup>12</sup> LEENHARDT, 1947. p.263.

<sup>13</sup> CSORDAS (1994) cites this passage by Leenhardt anticipating issues that have only recently been worked on by anthropology.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel MAUSS (1974 [1936]) predicts this problem of the relationship between the body and culture in his discussion of 'bodily techniques'.

The irreducible nature of the body leads us to think of sex as an object (penis or vagina). This is the frustration of Teena Brandon, in *Boys Don't Cry*, transformed into Brandon Teena, but who will never completely be Brandon, since, according to the film critic Paulo Cesar de Souza<sup>15</sup>, “medicine is incapable of producing or transplanting a functioning penis” . I emphasize “functioning” (meaning to have an erection, to penetrate). To have a penis never ceases to be Brandon/Teena’s dream.

It is interesting to think of the transvestite’s body in terms of the notion of individualization. Not exactly individuation, as discussed by Leenhardt in relation to the Kanak people: the establishing of the contours of a person who is singular, original, different from others, and with the right to his or her own name. The individualization of the transvestite subject, expressed in Agrado’s speech, occurs in terms of the realization of her own desire and by inscribing that desire on a body, in other words, to transfigure this desire into embodiment. A transvestite’s desire is to become someone else, but what Agrado highlights in her discourse is more the process of becoming than the final product of the change. By naming the silicone (rather than simply the breast), she is naming the process, the movement inscribed on the body.

For Maria Rita Kehl, citing an article by the Brazilian critic and film maker Arnaldo Jabor, the transvestite represents the more than perfect woman (she represents the ideal of masculine desire). In Agrado things are located in other terms: her silicone is the more than perfect desire, in which her ‘true nature’ is expressed. Silicone represents the process, agency, the action of the subject in relation to what is seen as structurally given.

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<sup>15</sup> See SOUZA, 2000.

Another point worth considering is related to the fact that the main part, or at least the most visible part, of this possibility to transform gender in modern urban cultures happens in terms of masculine-feminine. Various meanings have already been given to this observation and I would like to introduce other elements. The question here is the process of ‘becoming *the* other’. I use the article ‘the’ as I am thinking of the dualist character given to the category ‘gender’: one has to be either one or the other (at most one could attempt to unify the terms: one *and* the other, as Elisabeth Badinter proposes; but the dualism remains, at least on a metaphysical level). Here once again the comparisons with other cultural and cosmological forms – particularly the South American Amerindian societies – appear to be fruitful.

The trans phenomenon is reminiscent of recent studies of the Amerindian perspectivism, based on the possibility of continuous transformation found in the cosmologies of Indigenous Brazilian societies<sup>16</sup>. In these cultures, anything can potentially be transformed into anything (spirits into human beings, human beings into animals, animals into humans, etc). According to these cosmologies, things are not what they seem, that is, bodies are clothes that can be put on, taken off and substituted for other clothes (other bodies).<sup>17</sup> According to this idea, even admitting the interpretive nuances in relation to the relative or absolute weight of the opposition, the metamorphoses always happen in a polarized, prey-predator way, in which the destiny of the prey (on being caught) is to become the predator (the soul of the wild pig hunted by the Juruna ends up living in the souls of the

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<sup>16</sup> My thoughts on this were inspired by articles by Tania LIMA, 1996, and VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1996, and by the doctoral thesis by Elsje LAGROU, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Or more precisely, “clothes are bodies” (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1996, p.133), to avoid slipping into the topic of appearance and essence. The author considers that the question is not to “take on a bodily appearance” as fixed and false, and the spiritual ‘essence’ as alive and true” (idem).

Juruna; the Juruna killed during a pig hunt becomes a pig)<sup>18</sup>. To be caught signifies being engulfed by the predator – and by his point of view – and it is in the position of the predator that the subject position is located. In the case of the Amerindian perspectivism, the prey and the predator are not fixed positions, they are contingent and changeable; they are categories of perspectives, as are human, animal or soul. What defines humanity – and in this sense the subject position- is the point of view.

Prey and predator could be substituted by the terms ‘engulfed’ and ‘engulfer’, in the sense that it is a hierarchical dualism in which one of the terms always ends up engulfing the other – in the case of gender culture, the term ‘engulfer’ has invariably been the masculine.<sup>19</sup> Maintaining the differences, and giving a heuristic meaning to the prey-predator image, we could consider that, in modern Western societies, the masculine is the predator and the feminine is the prey. In a dualist culture, whose hegemonic idea of gender is of two opposing poles, the masculine is universal and the feminine is specific. The masculine is the absence of gender, (the engulfing of difference in the universal subject); the feminine is the gender (the term that marks difference, where specificity appears).

Elsje Lagrou, analyzing the case of the Kaxinauá (a Pano group from the Amazon) – an extremely dualist culture – points out that the dualism of the Kaxinauá and other Pano groups is not an essentialist dualism, with fixed

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<sup>18</sup> Tania S. Lima particularly addresses this consideration of the central nature of the relationship prey-predator in her analysis of the Juruna, a Tupi population from the Xingu.

<sup>19</sup> For a gender analysis based on the hierarchic dualism ‘engulfed-engulfer’ from Louis Dumont, see Monika MOISSEFF, 1987, and Maria Luiza HEILBORN, 1993 and 1998.

and previously determined terms<sup>20</sup>, But it does concern what she calls a ‘topographic dualism’, that is, the terms are linked to a certain contingent positionality and they are never symmetrical, although always hierarchical. However, she questions the idea of the subject always locating itself in the position of the predator. She believes that among the Kaxinauá there is another basic opposition in the group’s dualism, an opposition between myself and the other (us and the enemy) – while “both positions possess the qualities of agency and subjectivity”.<sup>21</sup> Alterity does not mean a lack of humanity or subjectivity, but “unintelligibility and different ways of perceiving and seeing things, in relational but never essential or substantial way”.<sup>22</sup> Thus to understand the other’s point of view does not mean a loss of subject position.

Comparatively, with the phenomenon of transgender there is an inversion of the dynamic in the relation predator-prey: the ‘predator’ becomes the ‘prey’. The person who is structurally located in the subject position seeks to reconstruct herself contingently as a subject, no longer in a structurally fixed position but in the unstable experience of transformation – of ‘becoming’ as a movement without a final fixed position. Agrado’s feminine breasts are not the most authentic part of her, but the lived experience of metamorphosis, inscribed on her breasts, the embodied subjectivity which is constructed by this movement towards the other.<sup>23</sup> By locating himself from the point of view of the person who is structurally and politically located as the other, as

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<sup>20</sup> LAGROU, 1998

<sup>21</sup> LAGROU, 1998, p.39.

<sup>22</sup> LAGROU, 1998, p.39.

<sup>23</sup> The psychoanalyst Joel BIRMAN (2000) also addresses this ‘dimension of alterity’ found in Almodovar’s film, in this case taken from the point of view of the reflections on fraternity established by and among feminine characters in the film.

a non-subject, the trans dislocates the subject position from a structurally fixed place. The embodied experience of 'becoming the other', while dramatizing the mechanisms for constructing difference, is also an anti-hierarchic undertaking which destabilizes the dominant politics of subjectivity. Thinking about these experiences at the margins can help us rethink the concept of gender, its limitations and possibilities, both analytically and politically.

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