Che vuoi? Enjoying the perverse symptom in the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar

Nancy Blake

University of Illinois

One critic proposed a new title for Pedro Almodóvar’s latest film: «All About My Father». As a matter of fact however, it is really the absence of the Name of the Father, or the paternal metaphor which poses a problem in The Bad Education, a film which invites us to revisit the masterful successes of its predecessors All About My Mother, and Talk to Her for the themes they have in common such as the overpowering need to master the creation of one’s own identity, or the decision to believe what one knows to be false («I know very well, but still…” (Mannoni, 1969)), and of course, the fantasy called «falling in love».

Most viewers agree that this time Almodóvar’s efforts have been less successful, even if the critics run through their hyperboles to describe his absolute mastery of his medium: all of the actors are splendid, the music is sublime, the images even better, the intertextuality is a joy for the cinema lover. This is a metafilm, a film about cinema, or
rather about what is involved in the practice of playing a part, all very interesting, and yet…

In fact it would be difficult, perhaps impossible to love any of the characters in *The Bad Education*, unlike the masterpieces *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*. Almodóvar agrees when says that today his work is becoming “more and more serious, and perhaps more and more sad”. I will announce my main point by saying that the reason for the relative unease with which the film has been greeted is the progress Almodóvar has been making in his analysis of the structure of perversion. For no one likes a pervert and now is the time to try to understand why.

The film opens on a filmmaker, a director, with his assistant, reading the tabloids in search of a subject for his next film. We know that Almodóvar’s last film *Talk to Her*, a film which earned him an Oscar, had its origin in a news item concerning a night watchman in a morgue who raped a beautiful corpse, and thus succeeded in resurrecting the dead woman. *Talk to Her* is a beautiful film, a moving film, but it is also, to begin with, a film about necrophilia.

In *The Bad Education*, Almodóvar’s filmmaker is experiencing a dry period and looking to the tabloids for ideas. During one of these newspaper reading sessions, Enrique, the director, discovers the story of a woman who jumped into a pool filled with crocodiles in a zoo and who embraced the crocodile which came to devour her. The spectator sees the director deeply moved by the anecdote which he judges a fine subject for a film. Interestingly enough, it is the story of the childhood of his friend Ignacio and of his rape by their literature professor Father Manuel which will be filmed in place of the story of the woman who loved crocodiles. It would seem that there is some relationship
between the two tales, but in *The Bad Education*, who is the woman and who is the crocodile?

In the following analysis, I want to consider the thorny problem posed by perversion following one of its models according to Freud, fetishism, and questioning the relationship between fetishism and transvestism, which is the model of perversion most often presented in Almodovar’s cinema, and lastly, examining the difference between transvestism and transsexualism—a difference which should allow us to better define the distinction between perversion and psychosis.¹

The plot of *The Bad Education* is complicated and we will not have time today to follow all of its twists and turns, but I note to begin with a rather revealing parallel between the relationship of the desiring subject, whether it be, in the present of the narration, the filmmaker Enrique Goded (a taller and much more slender selfportrait of Almodóvar himself) on the one hand, and Father Mañuel, the pedophilic teacher of the past, on the other, and their assistants, the assistant director Martin, in the present, and Father José in the past. This parallel is underlined by the physical resemblance between the assistants, both are bald and a bit corpulent, devoted, and also in love with, their superiors. Why bother mentioning this parallel? Is it just a matter of formal elegance? Not at all, for here Almodóvar is telling us something essential about the murderous violence involved in the drive to enjoyment. Let’s not forget that it is the director Enrique who modifies the screenplay written by Ignacio and brought to him by Juan, introducing the murder of the former object of desire Ignacio by Father Mañuel and Father José. Enrique writes this fiction even before he hears the confession of Señor

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¹ The vexed question of whether transsexualism is a perversion, a psychosis or a fundamental right of any individual is not the point here. This is an effort to clearly define the structures we find in Freud’s work which are rejected by today’s dominant ideology.
Berenguer, ex-Father Mañolo, who admits that Ignacio really was murdered by himself with Juan’s help. What is Almodóvar telling us if not that the drive is murderous and that he who creates fiction is a creature at the mercy of drive as much as he who lives it?

It is therefore necessary to see the sexual use the director makes of the casting couch, as he attempts to penetrate the essence of his actor Juan, as the equivalent of the abuse of the child Ignacio by his literature professor Father Mañolo. The child Ignacio sells himself to the priest in order to prevent him from expelling from school his friend Enrique, whom he loves. Juan sells himself to the adult Enrique in order to get the part of Ignacio/Zahara, a great role that will propel his acting career. In both cases, desire is first of all suffering and secondly betrayal. The faces of the two desiring subjects, Enrique and Mañuel, never express satisfaction, nothing but pain, indicating that for them, the object is always slipping away; in these scenes which many viewers find difficult to watch, man has recourse to the sexual act as an addict latches on to a drug, while those who are reduced to playing the part of the object of desire, Ignacio as a child, and Juan, the young man, are presented as irreparably split, broken by the revelation of this violence which is desire.

*The Bad Education* marks a change compared to the recent films of Almodóvar, but it reminds us a great deal of *The Law of Desire* (1986), a film where we find a scene in which a transsexual, played by the actress Carmen Maura, confronts the priest who had initiated her sexually as a boy, throwing her into the existence she struggles with in the present. However I do not want to dwell on this scene, to which Almodóvar has returned almost ten years later. Rather, I invite you to consider the opening scene of *The Law of Desire*, a scene which is very uncomfortable to watch, although it introduces a film full of charm. In an interview, the filmmaker comments this scene:
In this first sequence I indicate the profession of my main character and show you something about the relationship which exists between an actor and a director. The actor is always naked in front of the camera—and sometimes its rather dramatic, believe me. The actor is helpless in front of the director who reads him like an open book. In front of this demigod, the actor is transparent. That’s why he is so vulnerable and the power of the director is frightening. He says what he wants, and the actor does it, precisely, as if he were an animal. This first scene is neither erotic, nor pornographic, it’s pathetic. Anyone can understand that a guy could be paid for sexual favors. What is much harder to take is that someone would pay to hear that he is desired. That’s very different and much more serious. There is a sort of absolute lack of satisfaction of desire for this filmmaker, there is something that he will never have and that’s what he pays for. (Rouyer et Vie, p. 78, my translation)

Reading this commentary by Almodóvar which dates from 1986, it is impossible not to remember the gossip on the websites about the way Pedro Almodóvar mistreated his star Gael Garcia Bernal on the set of *The Bad Education*, insulting him because he did not lose enough weight to embody his feminine ideal, for example.

Almodóvar’s latest film foregrounds the hall of mirrors which has obsessed the filmmaker from the beginning. Through the lens of the camera, Father Mañuel, who slips onto the set during the shooting of the film, finds himself watching a story written by his former pupil Ignacio and directed by his former pupil Enrique; now Father Mañolo is called Señor Berenguer and he is able to view his own past narrated and deformed by two of his students who were is victims in the past.
Almodóvar enjoys underlining the use he makes of film as a mirror for life. Juan and Señor Berenguer enter a theater to kill time after having murdered Ignacio. There two gems of the French film noir genre are being screened: *La Bête humaine* by Renoir and *Thérèse Raquin* by Marcel Carné. Coming out of the cinema Berenguer, complains pitifully, « It’s as if all the films were talking about us » (Almodóvar, 2004).

We have seen earlier that a deficit in the organization of the oedipal structure facilitates the entry into perversion. Moreover, it is well known that the blocking of the name of the father, or the absence of the paternal metaphor, is, for Lacan, the condition for the birth of a psychosis. This “*nom*” (name, but also negation) attribute of the paternal position, programs achievement of the symbolic order by the subject. The lack of this function would lead to a collapse of the three dimensions of imaginary, symbolic and real. This is an important ground rule to understand in order to attempt a distinction between perversion and psychosis.

This study proposes to examine the possibility of theorizing something which we will call the ‘not-entirely phallic’. For if the ‘entirely phallic’ contributes to the subject’s propensity to repression, any eventual ‘beyond the phallic’ is not then the equivalent of the radical absence of the phallic signifier as would be the case most notably in psychosis. In the “not-entirely phallic”, on the other hand, there is a sort of highlighting of that which, in the phallic, had been masked, paradoxically, by the existence of the fantasy. That which is masked, the underlying reality, is, in Lacan’s words: that “there is no sexual relation”.²

To summarize then, we have on the one side, the hypothesis of the ‘not-entirely phallic’, and on the other, the ‘not-at-all phallic’ (the absence of the paternal metaphor)

² See Seminar XX.
of psychosis, the first is what Lacan calls the Other *jouissance* in the late seminars in opposition to the *jouissance* of the Other, all-powerful persecutor operative in psychosis. The position of the ‘not-at-all’ would therefore be on the side of the denial of all difference in the real: difference between the sexes of course, but also eventually, difference between the generations, difference between life and death, while the ‘not-entirely’ which, as I just postulated, renders evident the absence of the sexual relation, as Lacan claimed, denies, not at the level of the real, but on the contrary, it points to the non functioning of the symbolic.

What is the fate of the paternal metaphor in the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar?

Let’s take this latest film where we find boys and their mothers. In all these families, whether it be that of the director Enrique Goded, or that of his childhood friend Ignacio Rodriguez and his brother Juan, never the slightest reference to a father of the family. But on the other hand in the boarding school, all of the adults are *padres*. However, as the ex-priest and pedophile who has left the order to become a citizen of post Franco Spain notes convincingly, he should not be called “Padre Mañolo », from now on he is Señor Berenguer, for he is no one’s father, he is not even the father of his own son. It is as though the priests, who had been in charge of the maintaining of the position of the big Other: God, had fallen from their perches after the death of Franco, the dictator who used to preserve this artificial order

In his late “Outline of psychanalysis” (1940) Freud comes back to the functioning of denial in fetishism and the result of this: the splitting of the subject. In his study of fetishism of 1927, he had noted this *Spaltung* during which the psyche maintains two representations which are simultaneous, but contradictory concerning the castration of the
woman. In order to attempt to distinguish neurosis from psychosis, Freud returns to the hypothesis of the split. This process is not limited to fetishism, for it is visible in the neurotic as well as in the psychotic. Finally, in the “Outline,” in the context of the denial of reality, Freud speaks of splitting in psychotic states: « Two psychical attitudes have been formed instead of a single one—one, the normal one, which takes account of reality, and another which under the influence of the instincts detaches the ego from reality. » (p. 202)

The question of psychic splitting is essential in order to understand perversion. The denial of reality of the fetishist, which programs his attitude towards castration, shows, as Freud saw, how two opposing attitudes can remain in place during the whole of a life, without ever canceling one another out. We can form the hypothesis that Freud refers here to perversion in general.

It is possible to postulate that the fetishist denies the phallic attribute to the father in order to assign it to the mother and to the woman in general, by means of the fetish object. The transvestite, then, goes one step further. He stages himself as the representative of what the mother, and woman, should be. As Perrier and Granoff, have noted, the transvestite is not, strictly speaking, identified to a woman, contrary to the opinion generally held. He stages the veil, behind which he attempts to designate himself, not as a woman, but as what a woman should be: the phallus. (As an illustration, I cite the magnificent stage gown that Jean-Paul Gaultier created for Zahara which can be studied on the official website for the film.) Around the site of unveiling, the whole drama of jouissance is played out. However, the transvestite can never imagine giving up

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1 It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. Freud (1927 : 154)
the organ kept in reserve for an eventual revelation which will assure his enjoyment.

Here think of another Almodóvar film, *High Heels*!

The identity of the transvestite is, very obviously, entirely dependant on the gaze of the other, witness to the phallic attribute. The phallic attribute and the circulation of the phallus are fundamental inscriptions for all sexual identity, including the cases of disavowal which characterize perversion. This is still true because of the distinction which is permanent, even though confused, between the organ and the phallus. On the other hand, as soon as the distinction disappears, the subject finds himself faced with the impossibility of any sexual identity, and that is the fate of the transsexual.\(^4\)

A character which becomes almost omnipresent in Almodóvar’s cinema is the transvestite: usually a comic character like Agrado in *All About My Mother*, but sometimes sinister like Lola, in the same film, who is associated with the world of crime and drugs, and with the violence which can not be dissociated from sexuality. *The Bad Education* focuses on the mystery of a child who is the victim of sexual abuse, Ignacio Rodriguez, who has become Zahara, a transvestite, prostitute, drug addict and blackmailer.\(^5\) Note that the critics refer to this character and to his predecessors in the other films calling them “pre-operative transsexuals”. I insist that nothing could be farther from the truth, for it is impossible to imagine these subjects demanding the surgery which would remove the penis which gives all of its meaning to their identity.

These characters use hormones and cosmetic surgery to obtain the skin, the eyes, the

\(^4\) To quote someone whose source is Lacan’s own comments on the matter, « The possibility of transsexualism, seems to me to be present in every psychosis under the vague guise of what we call psychotic homosexuality. Just as the delirium of interpretation is one of the cristalizing forms of psychosis, transsexualism is another, whose attributes are present on the borders of every psychosis. " (Czermak 1982:22).

\(^5\) Urban et Billings remark that it is scarcely surprising that transvestites and M to F transsexuals are attracted so often to prostitution : because their ideal image is based on the iconic representations of advertising, that is what they buy when they undergo transformation and eventually their bodies become that merchandise that the market will validate when they succeed in selling it.
nose, the breasts (two, insists Agrado), in short, the whole appearance of a woman, but it is clear that what they value most, is the penis that remains hidden.

It seems necessary then to think about the relationship between fetishism and transvestism on the one hand, and transsexualism on the other. And in doing so, I propose to define more precisely the contribution of Almodóvar.

Roger Ebert has fun pointing out the similarities between The Bad Education and Hitchcock’s Vertigo. Vertigo is a film in which a man asks a woman to impersonate the woman he loves, without realizing that in fact, she is the woman he loves. When she’s not playing that woman, she’s giving a performance—in his life, although it works the other way around in hers. « Who am I for your desire? What is my sex confronted with your desire? » These are the eternal questions of the hysteric, and, as long as Almodóvar restricted himself to this sort of psychic structure, we all adored him. Even when Agrado, in All About My Mother, proclaimed « I’ve paid a lot to be what I am. But, when it is a matter of appearance, you must never be stingy. For a woman is the more authentic, the more she looks like what she has always dreamed of being, » we buy it. “I know very well but still. »

However, when a character in The Bad Education says that all of a sudden, he had lost his faith, that, no longer believing in hell, he was no long afraid and without fear, everything became possible—well, that’s a problem. “If God is dead, everything is permitted,” says a hero of Dostoievsky, but Lacan replies : « If God does not exist, everything is forbidden”. God is dead and the superego orders us to enjoy, but every possibility of enjoyment is from now on a betrayal of the supreme enjoyment which can only exist as forbidden. Without prohibition, there is no transgression. On the other
hand, in Almodóvar’s film, or rather in Enrique’s film within the film, when Padre José and Padre Mañolo have assassinated Zahara-Ignacio and Padre José says that no one has seen them, Mañolo replies, « Si Dios, » but José is quick to reassure him « But He is on our side ! » If God exists, then everything is permitted, as any suicide bomber demonstrates every day in Iraq or in Israel. Thanks to his direct line to the divinity, he is allowed to ignore all constraints or considerations which are simply human.

Perversion, although it is, just like neurosis, a structure organized to deal with desire, rarely evokes a positive response in others, and even less an identification. Lacan has fun when he proposes, in his famous essay « Kant with Sade » that perversion is the ultimate expression of ethics. In fact, the logic of perversion is that of human desire as such. Lacan reminds us that Freud’s teaching underlines the perversity of man’s desire in so far as it refuses the laws of adaptation and of survival which govern the animal world.

Let’s have a look now at the relationship between femininity and perversion. While the woman is not entirely subject to the phallic function, this does not mean that she is not at all subject to it. The formula of Lacan only means to underline the fact that there is no $x$ which constitutes an exception to this function. Thus Lacan will write, (scandalously): « Woman does not exist ». What this means, simply, is that the category woman does not admit the universal, only the contingent. Contingency (not-all) presupposes impossibility because there is no $x$ which escapes the phallic function ($\varphi$).

The relation of woman to enjoyment (jouissance) is necessarily different from that of man. As Lacan says, woman’s enjoyment, unlike man’s, is not absolute in the sense of, both inaccessible and forbidden. For man, phallic enjoyment always belongs to the Other, which is Lacan’s term for Freud’s Primal Father, that is to say man’s enjoyment is
always prohibited. As is the case for man, for woman, the enjoyment of the Other is impossible, but this impossibility does not include prohibition and therefore the possibility of a supplementary enjoyment is open to woman. (This is what Lacan calls the "plus de jouir")

The expression « Woman does not exist » supposes that for woman to exist, as a concept, it would have been necessary to pose the existence of at least one woman who could represent for women the site of an enjoyment equivalent to that of the father of the primal horde, that is, an enjoyment exempt from the threat of castration. There would then have been, as is the case for man, a limit for all the other women in regards to the phallic function. Because we do not have this equivalence for woman, it follows that there is a dissymmetry which means that woman does not exist as a category the way man does. As a result, if Woman does not exist, there is no sexual relation. Man, as an element of a category belonging to the universal, cannot enter into relation with woman who only manifests herself in contingency and never in terms of the universal.

Is it possible to imagine a position which would permit us to avoid these two poles which are equally unattractive? Ignacio / Juan has taken a screen name ‘Angel’. The angelic position lays claim to this sort of transcendence, but, in doing so, betrays a perverse type of disavowal. Both the neurotic and the pervert are fascinated by questions concerning their sexual identity. Importantly, psychoanalytic theory proposes that only access to symbolic castration can relieve this suffering at the level of fantasy. The transsexual avoids, once and for all, the back and forth of imaginary identifications, for he is trapped in the real of his anatomy. The only castration he will have access to will be surgical in the ablation of the organ.6

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6 This only concerns the M to F transsexual. He would not seem to have access to the phallic signifier for the question of sexual identity is for him strictly limited to the corporeal dimension. Whence the conclusion
At the moment of conclusion, we must come back to the absence of the name-of-the-Father postulated at the beginning. That which is missing and which leads to the construction of the perverse structure, is the paternal metaphor as an empty signifier. Also called, by Laplanche, the enigmatic term, this signifier is the substitute for the desire of the Mother. *Che vuoi*? What does the mother want—this is the primordial encounter with the opacity of the Other. The fact that the phallus is a signifier, not the signified, is all important here: the phallic signifier does not furnish a response to the enigma of the desire of the mother, it does nothing more than point to the inaccessible space of this desire. Moreover, as the work of Lévi-Strauss, upon which Lacan relies, shows, every signifying system necessarily contains such an element which is both excessive and paradoxical.

*Che vuoi?* What do you want? The question we are all awaiting an answer to... but the only answer there is is at the level of Lacan’s surplus enjoyment. To desire is to aim at enjoyment, the drive is in fact the answer to the *Che vuoi?* Earlier I reminded you of the anecdote, taken from the tabloids, concerning a woman who fed herself to the crocodiles, anecdote which Enrique thought was a great subject for a film. *Bad Education* closes with information concerning the continuation of the careers of the three protagonists remaining at the end of the film. Juan will become Spanish cinema’s heartthrob during the 90s. Señor Berenguer will attempt to blackmail him and will be killed by Juan. As for Enrique, he will continue to make films with the same «pasión». I suggest that we should hear the word passion in its etymological sense as suffering. It is well known that for Lacan, anxiety is not awakened by a lack, but rather by the lack of a lack, that is to say, by the emergence of an object in the place of the lack. In the final of several Lacanians that this structure is proximal to psychosis. In his study of President Schreber, Freud had insisted upon the fantasy of feminization linked to paranoia.
analysis, anxiety is the middle term between desire and enjoyment. Desire coincides with
the absence of satisfaction (the lack of the object), while enjoyment (jouissance) links
subject and object together in a movement that is often painful. But is there any
alternative? In fact, the anecdote about the woman and the crocodile was the second story
cut out of the newspaper by the young filmmaker. Now I will conclude by giving you the
first. This is read by Enrique just before the first appearance of Ignacio which starts the
narrative. It is horribly cold on the plains of La Mancha. On a deserted highway, a
motorcyclist who has frozen to death speeds along chased by two police officers who try
to stop him. Across the plains he rushes and it is impossible to arrest him for he is
already dead. How could we find a better description of the perverse subject, stuck
between two policemen, anchored in a structure which is beyond him, abandoned to a
jouissance which is out of his control, which he has not chosen.
References:


