

## Sample Research Essay

### Transplanted Authenticity in Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*

Following the life of the central character Manuela after the sudden death of her teenage son, *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* depicts a grieving mother's journey in Barcelona as she struggles to come to terms with the loss of her son. Released in 1999, Pedro Almodóvar's depiction of queer, sometimes ambiguously gendered characters alongside more traditional models guides the exploration of what it means to be authentic, and what qualifies something (or someone) as inauthentic – that is, something is not in fact what it is said to be, or more importantly for this film, not sincere. The character La Agrado's impromptu monologue explicitly centers around the idea of authenticity, but Almodóvar repeatedly complicates the concept of authenticity throughout the film. His diverse characters and his use of organ transplantations alongside other forms of transplanting serve to challenge traditional understandings of what authenticity is and highlights that most integral to being an authentic person is living truly to what one dreams of being. Throughout this paper I will demonstrate how Almodóvar's meditation on authenticity through the lens of transplantation, specifically in relation to a person's sense of being, in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* reflects the tension that exists within the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity, and further how these two concepts interact.

La Agrado's monologue to the theater is the most blatant and sincere exploration of authenticity in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*, serving as the baseline, defining moment of what authenticity in a person can mean. La Agrado puts forth the idea that to be authentic is to become what one has always dreamed of being. When talking about the expenses of transforming into her most authentic self, La Agrado adopts a humorous and playfully superficial attitude that at

first seems to make light of her story, but it also serves as a way to introduce who she understands herself to be to the audience – that is, an authentic woman. As she says, her character can be summed up as being agreeable to most: “They call me ‘La Agrado’ because I’ve always tried to make people’s lives agreeable.” This aspect of agreeability is important in her narrative as a trans woman, because La Agrado always faces the possibility of disrespect and being painted as an *inauthentic* woman because she was born biologically male. In fact, there are multiple instances in which the precarious acceptance of trans folk is established in the film: when Manuela first saves Agrado from being attacked by a client, and later when Rosa’s mother displays disdain upon seeing Lola kiss baby Esteban. Considering the film was made in 1999 and the film is presumably set a few years before that even, the audience of the time would have had much different understandings of gender identity than in 2018 – particularly the acceptability of blatant queerness. Thus, the humorous, coy manner in which Agrado delivers her monologue is one of the ways in which she manages to establish acceptance from her audience. This quality humanizes her in a way that helps the audience to understand a transwoman not as “other” or “monstrous” but just as *being* an authentic human that is deserving of respect.

From this central examination of authenticity, the blurring of where inauthenticity separates from authenticity is encapsulated in the medical motif that functions in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*, chiefly through two main routes: organ transplantation and cosmetic implantation. Authenticity takes on a complex and elusive meaning as Almodóvar shows us that many forms of being can be authentic. La Agrado emphasizes that, “it costs a lot to be authentic, and one can’t be stingy with these things because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.” Presumably “things” refer to the means that allow one to attain their dream being, so for Agrado that is the money that lets her physically transform into a woman. In

terms of implantation (cosmetic or otherwise), the audience's understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity is complicated as most basically, we understand things that are implanted to be, as Victoria Rivera-Cordero says, "transplanted elements," and thus by extension can be understood as a sort of artifice. More importantly though, the knowledge of La Agrado's breast implants, elements that have been "transplanted" into her being, do not lessen the audience's understanding that she is an authentic woman. It is from La Agrado's monologue that the audience begins to understand that elements not organic to one's being – elements that in the most conventional sense *are* inauthentic – can sometimes be a part of the journey to self-actualization of one's most authentic self. Further, it becomes evident that these elements can be literally anything: breast implants and jaw reduction surgery, or saint-like altruism, or unwavering commitment to motherhood.

Outside of the medical representation of implantation, transplanted elements also appear in a more figurative way. On Manuela's sudden return to Barcelona after her son's death, Rivera-Cordero notes, "...a new life begins for Manuela made up of transformed and transplanted elements from her past which forge a new identity still characterized by her role as a caregiver," (Rivera-Cordero 313). Manuela and Esteban themselves were transplanted individuals from Argentina when they arrived in Europe. In this transplant from point A to point B, Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit describe Esteban/Lola as the "point of origin" in the family, which is why Manuela feels the need to "...find the first Esteban...to close the circle," of the journey through motherhood that Manuela lived. Barcelona is where Manuela goes to find Esteban/Lola, but Bersani and Dutoit note that, "But of course the point of origin has already made a trip outside the family circle – to Paris – and s/he returned from that trip with the signs of a more radical crossing: transsexualized, s/he has travelled from one sex to the other, although

with each new seduction of women Lola makes an at least temporary return to the Esteban still appended to her body.” This journey to find Lola after Esteban II dies to tell him about their son is in itself a reflection of the value Manuela places on familial connection, and more significantly, allows her to fulfill the commitment to motherhood that is integral to her personal sense of authenticity. Most simply, Manuela dreams of being a mother. As she copes with her grief and embarks on this journey, Manuela finds a way to stay true to her dedication to motherhood through different relationships she forms with women in the film. As Viki Eggert Zavales notes, “The role of mother is so essential to her identity that, in the three moments when she cannot successfully execute her maternal role, she flees,” (Eggert Zavales 4). Even after her son is gone, Manuela does not reject these maternal aspects of herself, and this can be seen as Manuela’s way of being most authentic to who she is. Like an organ donor, Manuela continually gives the most important part of her being: her heart. She tenderly cares for La Agrado after she’s been beaten, she takes Rosa in when the woman needs it most, and there are all these instances where Manuela just *gives*. Manuela is not stingy with her “things” at all. Likewise, the silicone implants La Agrado is so proud of contribute to the manifestation of her most authentic self, overshadowing any hint of inauthenticity that may be associated with cosmetic surgery, and the transition from one sex to another. Thus, the transplanted elements can be understood outside of the framework of artifice and inauthenticity.

Between Manuela and La Agrado, it is clear that authenticity can manifest in various ways, but there is also the subtler understanding that neither is less than the other, while Lola is presented as an inauthentic specter of a man/woman. On screen this understanding that Manuela and Agrado are equals is reflected in the sweet friendship that instantly rekindles upon Manuela’s return to Barcelona. Manuela does not judge La Agrado for being a prostitute, nor

does Agrado think less of Manuela for running away without explanation 18 years prior. If these two characters are models of authenticity, Lola stands in direct opposition to both Manuela and Agrado, thus creating a tension between where the boundary of authenticity ends and where *inauthenticity* begins. In some ways La Agrado and Lola mirror each other; both have gone to great lengths to modify their body and present themselves as female while also keeping intact their penises, arguably the most masculine of all symbols. Using Lola and Agrado as focal examples, Eggert explores the idea of the “monstrous female,” writing, “If Agrado represents the successful creation of an alternative reality in which gender differences are blurred, tantamount to an evolutionary triumph, Lola stands in stark and unsettling contrast,” (Eggert Zavales 393). In one sense La Agrado and Lola are equally “monstrous” and inauthentic inasmuch as they are both biologically male and have undergone surgery to modify their gendered characteristics, but Lola diverges from Agrado in the way that s/he presents himself, which contributes to Lola being perceived as more “monstrous” and unnatural, an inauthentic poser of a woman, while Agrado’s status as a woman is never really challenged due to the way she presents herself in the same way that Lola is.

The factual similarities between Lola and La Agrado are complicated by this question of what qualifies as authentic and what qualifies as inauthentic. La Agrado is presented throughout the film as a woman, is referred to as a woman by other characters (reflected by the use of feminine pronouns), engages in sexual relations with men, and in her monologue does not bring attention to the fact that her genitalia are male. Aesthetically, Agrado also “passes” as a woman better than Lola and so can more easily be perceived by others as an authentic woman, whereas Lola’s masculinity is more boldly displayed, resulting in this character being viewed as an inauthentic woman. Agrado is petite, wears fairly modest makeup, no facial hair is visible, and

her hair is neatly groomed, while Lola's body is much less curvy, her stubble is visible through caked on and gaudy makeup, and she wears disheveled wigs. Lola's identity is further thrown into question as both feminine and masculine pronouns are used to refer to him/her. S/he sexually interacts with other women, not men like Agrado. Further, in a moral sense, Lola is the most "monstrous" of all: s/he became Lola, breasts included, without ever warning his own wife, she is selfish and inconsiderate (such as when she robbed Agrado's house), and she stands in stark contrast to the loving nature Manuela and Agrado both embody. Manuela notes when recounting her story to Sister Rosa – "How could how could someone be so *machista* with such tits?" – Lola's new appearance did nothing to lessen his inclination towards adultery and controlling, jealous attitude towards Manuela. It is interesting that Almodóvar endows Agrado with more traditionally "authentic" feminine tendencies, especially since Lola, Manuela says, "has the worst of a man and the worst of a woman," which in turn contributes to the audience's understanding that Lola is neither authentic as a man or woman, but an unfortunate agglomeration of both.

Lola herself seems to be aware of the fact that s/he is somewhere in between a woman and a man, not wholly committed to either. In the scene where Manuela introduces baby Esteban to Lola, s/he says, "Don't cry. Papa is here now," firmly placing himself into the role of father. On this scene, Bersani and Dutoit suggest that Lola's tears convey the fact that, "Everything is real, and everything is false – which may mean that we are being asked, here and in the entire film, to construct and to accommodate a 'place' where the choice between the two, and the very formulation of such an alternative, would no longer be necessary," (Bersani and Dutoit, 110). While it is certainly true that Lola exists in a place between male and female, it is evident to me that the more troubling and "monstrous" qualities of Lola emerge not from his/her confusing

physical presentation but rather the qualities that reflect a person of poor character, someone who flies in the face of Manuela and Agrado's authenticity. One might find offense in Esteban's treatment of a young Manuela, but what is truly *monstrous*, to borrow Eggert Zavales' term, is Esteban/Lola's selfishness and lack of consideration that is in contrast with the characteristic that makes Manuela an authentic mother – her unwavering love. Further, the audience learns that Lola abused the kindness Agrado extended to him/her in a time of need by robbing Agrado's apartment while she was away at work. Agrado articulates the betrayal to Manuela, saying, "To do that to me, with all she owes me! Since we met in Paris 20 years ago, I've been like a sister to her." Funny, charming, sweet Agrado has consistently proven herself to be an authentic friend to Lola; in return, Lola throws that authenticity in Agrado's face. Where Agrado's inauthentic breasts actually served to make her physical being reflective of what she understands herself to be, a woman, Lola's inauthentic breasts do not seem to contribute to her becoming her most authentic self but instead further contribute to her being viewed as monstrous.

Perhaps most important to take away from Almodóvar's exploration of authenticity is the idea that inauthenticity can be a part of the process to become authentic. As screenwriter and director, he clearly conveys this message through his contrasting depiction of La Agrado and Lola. In her monologue Agrado says, "You are more authentic the more you resemble what you've dreamed of being." We understand that Agrado was not born a woman, and her breasts are fake, but that doesn't detract from the understanding that she is an authentic woman. And it's not the inauthentic breasts on Lola that make her so unlikeable, it's her mistreatment of people who are kind to her and her destructive tendencies that inhibit her ability to become her most authentic self. Lola is perpetually stuck in this gray space, not quite a man and not quite a woman, and so we cannot actually know if Lola resembles what she dreams of being. It is also

shown that resembling what one dreams of being can take many forms; in Manuela's case, her authenticity comes from her dedication to being a mother. Through his complex characters as well as medical imagery, Almodóvar shows that there exists some kind of transferability of the quality of authenticity, as if it is something that can be shared or taken up in unexpected ways, and that authenticity itself does not have one static meaning.



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