

All About Women: Pedro Almodóvar and the Heterosocial Dynamic

Stephen Maddison

To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider ... to all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to all men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother.

Dedication, *All About My Mother*, 1999

Notions of gay identities as negotiations of gender have recently been subject to interrogation in border conflicts between female-to-male transsexuals and butch lesbians.¹ Despite the extent to which gender dysphoric and gender transgressive positions are often currently placed as functions of transgendered identities, rather than gay or lesbian ones, there remains a substantial history of camp performance, cross-gender identification, gender role play and gender blurring in uranist/homophile/queer/lesbian/gay cultures. Third sex models were amongst the first narratives we produced of ourselves, and they remain crucial to a whole range of cultural and political articulations for gay men and for lesbians. It is clearly too gross a simplification to suggest that transgendered identities are appropriating gay performances of gender; nevertheless, this may be a moment for considering the extent to which possibilities for specifically gendered resistance persist in gay culture. The Spanish film maker Pedro Almodóvar has been understood as a 'women's director', a tag that was used in Hollywood in the middle decades of this century to connote a particular standard of female-identified melodrama and latent homosexuality in the films of George Cukor, Nicholas Ray and others. In this piece I want to assess key ways in which gay male cultural producers can be understood to negotiate the production of gender in their work. To this end I shall explore the implications of Almodóvar's female identification and introduce the concept of heterosocial bonds as a way of understanding the structures of knowledge which are especially offered in his most recent film, *All About My Mother* (1999). Tracking the cultural effects of Almodóvar's representations will not only enable me to reinstate the notion of gay cross-gender identification into contemporary political debates, but will also enable me to discuss the ways in which such identifications relate to transgendered positions. I will be introducing the notion of heterosocial identification as a way of making sense of the specific kinds of queer articulation Almodóvar offers, and of politicising gayness in rather more radical terms than current rights agendas allow.

Female Identification

All About My Mother contains extracts of a performance of the Tennessee Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams's notorious classic acts as both a motif of the film maker's concerns, and as a marker of key episodes in the life of *All About My Mother's* central protagonist, Manuela. Of the extracts Almodóvar uses from the Williams play, one appears central to his concerns, as it is used twice. Early on in the film we observe Manuela and her son Esteban watching the end of the play in Madrid; and then again after his death, we see her watching the same part of the play in Barcelona. The repetition of an extract from the end of Williams's play foregrounds how diverse prominent productions have changed the ending of Williams's drama. In the play, after the night of Stanley's rape of Blanche, we observe her dislocation from a dangerous reality in which she is stranded, alone and powerless, the authority of her class experience, and the masquerade of her genteel femininity ripped away by Stanley's aggression. Blanche's sister Stella becomes distressed when the matron, who has come with the doctor to take Blanche to a mental hospital, struggles with her sister. Her distress increases after Blanche has been led away by the doctor (Blanche, has, after all 'always depended on the kindness of strangers'), but she is contained when her husband Stanley kneels beside her and puts his hand inside the front of her blouse, reinstating his sexual and material authority over his wife: the very authority Blanche threatened, and which necessitated her removal by him.² Blanche has been sacrificed because she too forcefully demonstrates the precariousness of heterosexual relationships for women, and negotiates them too knowingly. She threatens the security of Stanley's homosocial power, and makes the compromises of Stella's position too clear. At the end of Williams's play, Blanche is not mad, but distressed by the extent to which her opportunities for negotiating a hostile world have been taken away from her, and by the betrayal of her sister Stella, and her beau, Mitch.

In Elia Kazan's famous film of *Streetcar* (1951) Blanche is mad at the end, literally hysterical, seemingly without purchase in the material world. Here Stanley is merely a thuggish rapist who has 'caused' her illness, and who is punished.³ Mitch actually accuses him of this. This makes Stanley an abomination, a rupture in an otherwise rational, plausible heterosexuality, rejected by his wife and his poker buddies equally. In Kazan's reworking of the play, Stella is not placated by Stanley's erotic overtures, but takes the baby upstairs to Eunice's whilst Stanley calls to her as he had earlier. This may represent her refusal of Stanley's power at this point (although she's been upstairs before; we know that she can be seduced back down again), but it also reinvests in the notion of heterosexuality as a reasonable option for women, in which they exercise a degree of self-determination. This reading is potentially conservative. In Williams's original text Stella may stay, but this results in a much bleaker portrayal of heterosexuality, in which women have no choice but to eroticise their relations with men in order to maintain a denial of their real material

conditions. At this point, where else can Stella go? She suspects her husband of raping her sister, but what choices does she really have? Kazan's version doesn't need to answer these questions, but its handling of the end connotes options for Stella that are not consistent with the logic of the play. The TV film of *Streetcar* (1984) starring Ann-Margaret offers a much more radical Blanche, one in whom we can see the threat she represents to Stanley and which necessitates her removal from his homosocial world. This version returns to the spirit of Williams's text at the end, where Stella is willingly led into the house by Stanley. The ending of the CBS film of 1995 starring Jessica Lange is perhaps even more conservative and confusing than Kazan's. Here, whilst Stella does allow herself to be comforted, submitting to Stanley, he actually behaves like a 'new man' all of a sudden, comforting her and gently leading her into the house. Here the rape and removal of Blanche is offered as a welcome and functional closure which allows the normative and healthy heterosexual couple to be reconciled.

In Almodóvar's *Streetcar*, Blanche may still depend on the kindness of strangers, but after the doctor has led her away, Stella will not be contained: she calls Stanley a 'bastard', and tells him to leave her alone. As he returns to his poker game, she gathers her baby to her breast and purposefully walks off stage right, vowing never to return. There are several notable elements to this reworking. Firstly, Stella is not acquiescent as she is in Williams's original, and secondly, like Kazan's Stella, she leaves Stanley. However, unlike Kazan's Stella, she doesn't just go upstairs whilst Stanley calls to her as the opening of their sexual role-play. In Almodóvar's *Streetcar* Stella is leaving the stage all together, whilst Stanley returns to his buddies and the homosocial network that excludes and oppresses her (he is not fixated upon her leaving and calling to her as he is in Kazan's film, nor is he rejected by his buddies). The effect created here is to make heterosexuality seem as intolerable as it is in Williams's original, whilst at the same time effecting a greater sense that women have choices outside of their relations with men. The fact that Stella is played in *All About My Mother* by the character of Niña, who's having a lesbian relationship with the actress playing Blanche, heightens this effect. Women have options, experiences, opportunities, which don't include men. Almodóvar may have changed Williams's original, but he has also evaded the conservatism of Kazan's interpretation.

The use of *Streetcar* in this latest Almodóvar movie seems almost too appropriate. It remains Williams's most famous and celebrated play. Williams's female characters were troubling as both overtly sexual, and as signs of the playwright's homosexuality at a time in the US when cold war ideology was insisting upon the virility of the imperial state.

Blanche, Maggie the Cat, Serafina delle Rose, Leona Dawson, the Princess Kosmonopolis, aren't good girls: they are sexual, but are frequently disillusioned with heterosexual relationships and the negotiations they must make with men. For critic Stanley Kauffman, these women characters were emblematic of Williams's 'transvestite sexual exhibitionism'.⁴ Whilst Howard Taubman was sufficiently concerned about the effect on audiences of such representations that he entreated them to 'Look out for the baneful female who is a libel on womanhood.

Look out for the hideous wife who makes a horror of the marriage relationship.

Be suspicious of the compulsive slut ... who represents a total disenchantment with the possibility of a fulfilled relationship between man and woman.'⁵ I would argue that these critics are correctly identifying the extent of Williams's gender dissidence in making representations of heterosexuality in which the dysfunctional nature of women's gender role is apparent. It is this dysfunction which Kazan disguises in heightening the specific (rather than structural) brutishness of Stanley, and Stella's limited refusal of it. Almodóvar pushes this dysfunction even further: Stanley returns to his buddies, and Stella moves on. This moving forms a symbolic symmetry with the meta narrative of *All About My Mother* in which the main character of Manuela moves on to form alternative bonds with other women in order to reconcile herself with the difficulties men have caused in her life .

Almodóvar's repetition of his interpretation of the ending of *A Streetcar Named Desire* offers a striking signpost to the film maker's own identifications, and *All About My Mother* has garnered contemporary versions of the same kinds of critical response accorded to Williams. Gilbert Adair has said that it is 'the expression of one (not so paradoxical) definition of a homosexual as a man who loves women.'⁶ Whilst Andrew O'Hagan states the proposition more explicitly: '...Truman Capote dreamed of being a long-limbed lady in a Valentino frock ... what Capote couldn't be himself he resolved to have around him ... He befriended these frighteningly elegant women, these society queens, who liked nothing more than having a comical, yapping writer for a lapdog ... Pedro Almodóvar...has always struck me as having something of the Capote character. There are more than a few particles of his projected self in the women he admires.'⁷ Of course, O'Hagan, like Kauffman and Taubman before him, needs to reject the understandings of gender within heterosexuality that such identifications offer. We need to look elsewhere to find confirmation of the ways in which such identifications signify. Mike Silverstein, a gay man writing in 1971 says that Williams was 'among the first to teach me that women are my sisters, fellow-victims. Blanche DuBois, Hannah Jelkes, above all the Gnadiges Fraulein ... these were the first sisters I had encountered'.⁸ Almodóvar's audiences in the UK and US are largely made up of middle-class professionals, whose appreciation of art house cinema signifies their liberalism and

thus enables them to acquire the kinds of metropolitan cultural capital that distinguishes them from their suburban equivalents, or from other less appealing class fractions. However, such audiences do not need to be reading Almodóvar's cross-gender identification as a radical critique of heterosexuality in order to acquire the necessary liberal kudos. The film maker's female identification in this case could merely be a marker of his homosexuality, and a rather colourful version of it at that.

Nevertheless, the fact of Almodóvar's gender dissidence, his bonding with women as an expression of his homosexuality as a rejection of masculinity, is not just within the purview of subcultural reading. Rather, it's the explanatory narrative offered by *The New York Times* for him being understood as a 'women's director': 'Pedro Almodóvar's escape from his father's machismo was to listen to the women in his life.'⁹ This strongly suggests the extent to which cultural expressions of gay identities and practices, such as those made by Almodóvar, have become assimilated by mainstream popular culture. The prevailing awareness of Almodóvar as 'One for the Girls' or as 'The [Gay] Man Who Loves Women' may reflect an assimilation of gay subculture, but this awareness also loosely attaches itself to residual knowledge that understands homosexuality as a third sex, derived from theories produced by sexologists at the turn of the century that understood same-sex desire as the inversion of gender identity and sex.¹⁰ Andrew O'Hagan is labouring with this knowledge when he talks about the way in which Almodóvar 'wants to be his female characters, and they, *'las chicas de Almodóvar'* ... seem more than willing to play into the director's ambivalent hands.'¹¹ Whilst Gilbert Adair compares the writer and director to the bisexual Pierre Loti who 'loved men and he loved women and, had there been a third sex, he would have loved that too.'¹² These readings display a dominant critical awareness of Almodóvar's gender identification in *All About My Mother*, but such knowledge is handled anxiously, and is certainly not offered as the reason for the film's greatness.

Almodóvar has been understood as a gay film maker despite the fact the he has not always been forthcoming about his sexuality, and has indeed, been hostile to such kinds of understandings.¹³ Homosexuality has had a different historical trajectory in Spain than it has had in Britain and in the US; notably Almodóvar is a product of what has been called 'la movida', an outrageous expression of new found artistic and cultural freedom in Madrid following the death of Franco in 1980. As part of this subculture, Almodóvar has been licensed to make more flamboyant representations than Williams could have conceived of making in the US fifty years earlier. Notwithstanding the movida movement, Almodóvar is still only accorded a grudging respect at home in Spain, and continues to receive more acclaim abroad.¹⁴ Nevertheless, his films are commercially successful, and an important economic and cultural export. In the UK and in

America Almodóvar's audiences of gays and lesbians, along with middle-class, professionalised, university educated, broadsheet reading constituencies do not understand the writer and director's sexuality as problematic as such. Rather, we might imagine his queerness, moderated as it is by stories of his possessive intimacies with his muse-like female actors¹⁵ and of his apparent (but unconfirmed) long-term relationship with Bibi Andersen, a male-to-female transsexual, to be positively part of his appeal to an audience anxious to secure its class authority through its cosmopolitan sophistication.¹⁶ An appreciation of such exotic trappings does not mean that audiences are necessarily identifying with Almodóvar's gender dissent.

The intimacies Almodóvar produces with his leading female actors may help to foster an understanding of his films as instances of emotional and cultural affiliation between women and gay men, in terms of both the conditions of their production, and in terms of their consumption by audiences. However, such affiliations are also marked by the hierarchical relations of which they are a product: Almodóvar is a powerful cultural producer, his actors are dependent upon him for their livelihood. In a *Late Show* special screened to coincide with the opening of *Kika* (1993) in England, Almodóvar himself notes that he and Carmen Maura were once almost like an 'official couple', 'like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, without the jewels'. He is referring to a period in which Maura and the director worked and associated together, through the making of *Pepi, Luci, Bom and other Girls on the Heap* (1980), *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *Dark Habits* (1983), *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Matador* (1986), and *The Law of Desire* (1987) up until their last work together on *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). During the making of *Women* the 'couple' became estranged and subsequently Victoria Abril became Almodóvar's favoured female actor. Later, the director dropped Abril, to take on Marisa Paredes as his favoured star. Such 'coupledom' may signify as instances of what I shall go on to describe as heterosocial relations, dissident formations; however, they also collude with Almodóvar's ambivalent presentation of his sexuality, to allow him to be comfortably assimilated by straight art house audiences. Clearly the director is queer for such audiences (that is part of his appeal to their liberalism), but the dalliances with these women mute overt sexual provocation: his brand of queerness is colourful and exotic, yet familiarly normative, to the extent that the director exercises a familiarly unmediated power over women.

Almodóvar has recently been referred to as the only remaining European *auteur*, a film maker whose thirteenth film, *All About My Mother*, 'premiered to near unanimous acclaim at Cannes – where it was taken as a vital reminder of what European cinema has lost in terms of style and accessibility, and of what Hollywood has frittered away in terms of emotional investment and substance'.¹⁷ However, we should stress that such understandings are not a function of

Almodóvar's gender identification, however widely understood those identifications may be in readings of his work. What is apparent is that Almodóvar's reputation as a great film maker is emerging in spite of, or perhaps alongside, such understandings.

All About My Mother has particularly strong similarities with Almodóvar's earlier film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in terms of both its commercial and critical success, and in its concentration of female identification. Yet the dominant critical consensus produced about Almodóvar's oeuvre, is that *Mother* follows a trend established with his last two films, *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) and *Live Flesh* (1997) which 'betray a pensive mood, ditching excess, melodrama and kitschy hysteria in favour of moderate, fine-grained story-telling'.¹⁸ It is true that *All About My Mother* has an emotionally intense, sombre quality; it is debatable, however, whether such qualities were not to be found more abundantly than these critics are acknowledging in his earlier films, such as *High Heels* (1991), *Matador* or *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* Foregrounding *All About My Mother's* emotional gravitas does serve to recognise its quality and power, without emphasising its female identification. Linking it with the apparent seriousness of *Live Flesh* and *The Flower of My Secret* enables critics to announce that Almodóvar is now a great film maker, because he has moved on from the camp, melodramatic female identification for which he became famous. Several film critics in the UK have embraced *All About My Mother* as the most accomplished Almodóvar film to date; however, the specific content of their appreciations makes my point clear. Philip French considers the machismo *Live Flesh* (1997) to be a 'minor masterpiece', but found earlier Almodóvar to be 'tiresomely camp'; for him *All About My Mother* is the director's 'finest film to date'.¹⁹ Andrew O'Hagan, grudgingly capable of accepting that whilst Almodóvar's authorial transvestism isn't 'everybody's cup of tea, for sure', does feel that *All About My Mother* 'is not as campy and brash as the usual Almodóvar ... There's a slow feel to it, and a new perceptiveness'.²⁰ Whatever account of *All About My Mother* these critics wish to make, their interests are partial and transparent. *All About My Mother* may be dramatically rich, but it's not since *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* that an Almodóvar film has had such a strongly situated ensemble of female characters. We could argue for a greater continuity of content between *Mother* and *Women* than between *Mother* and the machismo *Live Flesh*. In *Women* Pepa (Carmen Maura) isn't coping with having been dumped by her lover, Iván. Emotionally Iván's abandonment and irresponsible cruelty are all too proximate for Pepa, leading her to the verge of the title's breakdown; yet physically Iván is elusive, insubstantial, even ephemeral, as Pepa's verging leads her through a farcical series of near-misses and coincidences through which contact with the caddish Iván eludes her. If hysteria is a sign of the strain of maintaining the role of powerlessness, then I would suggest that *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* eventually exploits the faultline such hysteria represents,

fashioning it into a gender dissidence which attempts to refuse male control, male rationality. Yet even in *Women* the narrative, and Pepa's emotional epiphany are both driven by the structuring absence of Iván. Pepa may transcend his cruelties, but they define her actions, and those of the film.

All About My Mother may not contain a single gay male character (although it may: Esteban is coded, but not named as such), but it is arguably Almodóvar's gayest film. What is crucial, however, is that this 'gayness' is instated not through any representation of *homosexual* desires or practices, but through a female identification that O'Hagan and others are acknowledging, but suppressing in their accounts of *All About My Mother's* emotional and dramatic depth. It seems clear that in *All About My Mother* Pedro Almodóvar is offering an extraordinary degree of female identification, and that this is causing some consternation amongst straight cultural critics who wish to rescue the film's greatness from such identifications and secure its address for the metropolitan professional middle-classes who patronise art cinema. My project here is to resituate *All About My Mother's* female identification in the context of gay dissidence. We have seen the extent to which Almodóvar aligns the project of this film with powerful subcultural modes of gender dissent, such as those offered by Tennessee Williams. I now want to go on to develop a model for understanding how such gender dissent works as a constitutive element of contemporary gay identity.

The Heterosocial Dynamic

Eve Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial relations has now passed into the lexicon of contemporary lesbian and gay studies. Indeed, her book *Between Men* effectively reorientated the field of professionalised lesbian and gay studies.²¹ Homosocial bonds describe the relations between men, be they intimate, combative, competitive or collegial, through which the authority and centrality of men's interests are secured. In the homosocial network, women are exchanged as tokens of social desire between men, and homosexuality is constantly conjured as a visible and threatening proximity to the interior plausibility of masculinity. Hollywood buddy movies have become understood as iconic manifestations of homosocial relations. A particularly good example is the multiple Oscar winning *L.A. Confidential* (1997), with its fastidiously gendered male leads (touchingly, one is bookish, bespectacled and feminised, whilst the other is all Brando poses and snarling butchness). Their powerful, almost romantic affiliation is cemented through a common disgust for corruption, the pomposity of their moral purpose, and the homosocial exchange of a hooker who looks like Veronica Lake, who both secures their repression of any homosexual panic unleashed by their intimacy and yet stands as a symbolic conduit for it. Quentin Tarantino's

celebrated cult film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) installs a similar network of relations between men which are facilitated by women. These relations may often be hostile or violent, but always secure common male interests that are defined through the marginalisation and exchange of women, and the repression of homosexuality. Almodóvar puts it well in his own analysis of recent Hollywood films: "[Women] can only be the dumb love interest of the hero who needs him to save her, or who's there so he doesn't appear to be gay."²²

Sedgwick suggests that male homosocial bonds maintain a functional relationship with homosexuality which is actively connoted as a policing mechanism, 'the result has been a structural residue of terrorist potential, of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia.'²³ The content of homosocial narratives, such as the one represented in *L.A. Confidential*, show us that this leverage rests on a misogynistic horror of the feminine and an understanding of homosexuality as men's potential to perversely manifest that femininity. Even if aspirational patriarchal subjects appropriately vilify women as representations of femininity, and signal their distance from abjection with constant invocations of homophobia and displays of dominant heterosexuality, they remain caught in what Sedgwick characterises as a 'double bind': 'For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men."²⁴ Almodóvar's own *Live Flesh* (1997) has been admired by Philip French and others, as we have seen, for its celebration of machismo; the director himself has said that it was 'made from the balls'.²⁵ Strikingly for an Almodóvar film, the central protagonists of *Live Flesh* are men, are indeed a homosocial archetype: police partners. David is cuckolding his partner Sancho, who is a drunk. During a tense confrontation, it appears that Victor, who is stalking Elena, shoots David, causing his paralysis and putting him in a wheelchair. Years later, whilst David and Elena are living in a loveless marriage, it transpires that it was in fact Sancho who shot David as revenge for his relationship with Carla, Sancho's wife. Women are the vehicles through which relations between the men are driven. Elena's frustration with her marriage to David (and the film makes unpleasant and inaccurate associations between sexual impotence and using a wheelchair) provides the opportunity for him to seek some kind of redemption through a confrontation with Victor, the apparent cause of his disability. Carla's frustrated marriage to Sancho pushes her into a relationship with the young and beautiful Victor, just released from prison where he was incarcerated for shooting David (a crime that we know he didn't commit), but this relationship merely provides the opportunity for a further confrontation between Sancho, the real cause of David's disability (and Carla's husband) and Victor. The ironies and Dickensian coincidences which structure the narrative of *Live Flesh* are, however, as near as the film gets to manifesting the kinds of queer motifs of camp spectatorship that we expect from Almodóvar. Instead the film rests on homosocial romanticism between men:

when David learns that he has been disabled by his partner, and not by Victor, this offers the opportunity not for revenge, but for the production of greater intimacy between them. Similarly the film's climactic showdown between Sancho and Victor, whilst it enables a resolution of Victor's hatred of the man whose crimes he has paid for, is scopically much more concerned with phallic iconography: Victor's virile, cuckolding crotch is made equivalent to the dramatic device of Sancho's pistol. Philip French and others may enjoy *Live Flesh* as a representation of their interests, but its collusion with narratives which reproduce patriarchal and homophobic masculinity is an indication of how prevailing the inducements towards homosociality are, even for gay men.

There are a number of difficulties with Sedgwick's homosocial thesis. Most notable amongst these is her reticence about suggesting that female gender categories may also be policed by homosocial relations which vilify lesbianism.²⁶ However, another may be that, whilst Sedgwick's work signposts ways in which the experiences of women and of gay men as objects of homosocial ideology may be symmetrical, her mapping of homosocial networks alienates them. Both women and gay men acquire social power through their collaboration with homosocial structures, but this collaboration reinforces the repression or exploitation of the other identity. Women acquire social status by virtue of their heterosexuality, through men, where performances of femininity mediate powerlessness. Lesbians tend to reject such status, and in their gender dissidence often parody modes of femininity, using them to broker sexual desire whilst undermining gender authority. Gay men acquire social status the more fully able they are to operate in intimate relations with other men which repudiate the possibility of homosexuality. That is, the more that gay men are able to acquire social and economic power or to pass as straight, then the more privileges they can acquire by colluding with the functional homophobia of homosocial bonds, and with the resultant commodification and exchange of women. Thus, even though many of us continue to perform queerly or campily in a rejection of straight-acting, our material position in economic systems can work to uphold or ventriloquise homosocial power.

This dynamic is played out by many heterosexual women unwilling to negotiate the privileges that heterosexuality offers them, and by many gay men willing to embrace the negation of women in order to pass as real men (and affluent enough to participate in the market in a similarly authoritative position). Yet the kind of cultural representations celebrated in much gay culture often resist such normative abrogation, and enact what I would call gender dissent. *All About Eve*, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Pedro Almodóvar, along with Tony Warren and *Coronation Street*, John Waters films, drag queens, Madonna, Bette Davis, Barbra Streisand and a whole legion of other divas, bitches, dames and hags are celebrated to the extent that

they are in gay culture precisely because they either celebrate female networks and women's space, or because they offer that space as the opportunity for anti-homosocial affiliation. I characterise these kinds of relations as heterosocial bonds.²⁷

Heterosocial bonding is a reversal of the discourse of homosociality. If homosocial relations strive towards an appropriate masculinity by suppressing women they also instate a faggot-other disavowed through misogyny. We could suggest that such relations produce a condition of gender dysphoria for straight women, lesbians, and gay men, where their gender is culturally organised in such a way as to facilitate their exclusion, oppression, humiliation and powerlessness. Heterosocial moves attempt to resist these formations of women and of gay men by producing alternative models of gender relations that resist the dysphoria of homosociality. Narratively, heterosocial bonds are often concerned with displacing the dominance of homosocial representations of women and queers, which constitute male subjectivity, by foregrounding bonds that express our interests. Examples of such heterosocial initiatives may include slash writing, where heterosexual women, lesbians and gay men appropriate bonded male pairings from science fiction TV shows and write them into homoerotic stories (such as Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*).²⁸ There are also several popular TV texts which express a heterosocial dynamic (with varying degrees of success), or can be subculturally read to do so, such as *Roseanne*, *Will and Grace* and *Gimme Gimme Gimme* (a BBC2 sitcom, 1998); whilst recent films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998) and *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) offer similar possibilities. Heterosocial identification is about finding ways of expressing gender for gay men and women which resists homosocial abjection. I refer to such strategies as *heterosocial* because these identifications oppose the homogenisation of discrete, sex-based gender categories, and the opportunities for social power that are determined by *homosocial* structures. These structures work to define all gender in relation to dominant male identities, in effect foreclosing gender difference and producing sameness.²⁹

It is striking that although *All About My Mother* has been assimilated by mainstream critics as their most favoured Almodóvar film, the terms of this assimilation are caught up with the maturity, and emotional gravitas of the narrative, which offsets the less appealing camp histrionics (code for drama driven by female concerns). I am arguing here that we need to assert the value of those 'histrionics' in our celebration of this film: they are the signposts to a more radical interpretation, and a validation of what remains a substantial gay subcultural practice, despite the familiarity with such practices shown by dominant critics in their repressions of our potential opposition. I will now go on to make a heterosocial reading of *All About My Mother*.

Gender Dissent

We have seen how the kinds of hostile interpretation enunciated by Kauffman, Taubman and others, have been enshrined in substantial productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* which tend to see Blanche as a rather annoying disruption of the Kowalski's normative nuclearity whom we are relieved to see removed by Stanley, or as in some way defeated at the end of the play (after all she is raped and humiliated by Stanley, disbelieved and betrayed by her sister Stella and finally led off to a mental hospital by the doctor – the only kindness she can rely upon comes from a stranger). The most recent film version of *Streetcar* (1995) sees Jessica Lange reprise her performance on Broadway and in the West End. In it her reading of Blanche is so preciously, insistently neurotic that it seems perfectly sensible to violate her and cart her off to a lunatic asylum just to shut her up. These kinds of readings of Blanche have her flee towards fanciful excesses of madness in order to be able to reconcile those elements of the play which doggedly oppose the plausible rendering of her as simply victimised. Moreover, such accounts situate Stella as either a passive object in the face of Stanley's aggression, libido, or (ridiculously) 'new man' posturing, rather than present her as a victim of his homosocial authority with no choice but to concede her sister in order to protect her own vulnerability. This prevailing reading overlooks the extent to which Blanche is both genuinely threatening to Stanley's domestic authority and wider homosocial privilege, and the extent to which, as a homeless, jobless middle-aged woman she arrives in New Orleans on the streetcar named desire in a severely precarious position. All she has at her disposal are the knowing deployments of her femininity, upheld by her privileged class and ethnic experience.

In Almodóvar's reading of *Streetcar* in *All About My Mother* we can see his attempt to reinscribe female resistance as a refusal of these prevailing readings; in effect, as his attempt to reinscribe the play with Williams's, and his own, heterosocial dissent. Almodóvar's Stella does not collude with Stanley's attempt to reinstate his authoritative eroticism of her: she tells him to get his hands off her, she calls him a 'bastard', and leaves the house with her child, vowing never to return. Almodóvar doesn't offer a coherent reading of *Streetcar* which reconciles all the complex gender currents that it represents, rather he offers only fragments. Nevertheless, this concluding fragment is represented twice, and in the wider representational context of *All About My Mother*, in which, as we have seen, a number of inter-textual references signpost themes of female identification, we could argue that the effect is to instate a gay heterosocial alignment with the interests of women as fellow victims of homosocial power.

Streetcar is a play in which the very possibility of queer spectatorship, queer subjectivity is expressed as a critique of heterosexuality and male power enacted through an identification with both the vulnerabilities of women within such systems and the dissident potential they represent. I am arguing that *All About My Mother* represents and invites similar kinds of identification. It knowingly colludes with the codes of camp spectatorship, inscribing the film within a history of gay male identification with women, constituting an environment in which such an historically *subtextual* reading strategy becomes the film's *preferred* reading (even for *The New York Times*, no less) to the extent that critics have felt the need to stress instead *All About My Mother's* dramatic gravitas.

However, it's not just *Streetcar* that Almodóvar 'samples' (to borrow musical phraseology) in *All About My Mother*. The film is practically a lexicon of camp allusions and queer iconic references. Almodóvar establishes the value and level of intimacy between Manuela and her seventeen year old son Esteban early in the film by showing them sitting down to watch the Bette Davis movie *All About Eve* on TV. Manuela buys her son Truman Capote's *Music For Chameleons* as a birthday present, and the two meet that evening at the theatre to see *A Streetcar Named Desire*, another birthday treat. After the play, when Esteban tries to get the autograph of the actress who played Blanche, Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes), he is killed by a car. Later in the film the character of Rojo goes on to rehearse Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. Even if we are not intended to decode these inter-textual references as an implication of Esteban's homosexuality, the use of such emblematically 'gay' texts inflects the landscape of *All About My Mother* with connotations of queerness that in their abundance signify well beyond any mere subcultural awareness of the camp significance attached to Blanche DuBois, Capote or Davis.

The title of *All About My Mother* clearly references *All About Eve* (1950), a film venerated in gay culture as the paradigmatic Bette Davis movie (closely followed by *Now, Voyager*), and emblematic of a wider pattern of gay male appreciation of the Hollywood women's films of the 30s, 40s and 50s. This reference immediately instates an association between the general practice of female identification in gay culture, and the concept of motherhood, and even with Almodóvar's own mother. To underpin this association *All About Eve* is diegetically instated when Manuela and Esteban, single mother and (possibly queer) son sit down to watch it. Esteban is killed by a car the night of his birthday, the night of their trip to see *Streetcar*, in which Blanche is played by a queen of the theatre, Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes) and Stella is played by her lesbian lover Niña (Candela Peña). After the show, Esteban, star-struck by Huma Rojo, persuades his mother to wait with him in the rain for the actress's autograph. As they're waiting, Manuela finally promises Esteban the birthday present he really wants: to know about his father. As the

actresses leave the theatre in a taxi, Esteban and Rojo lock each other's gazes, and he chases the cab into the street, where he is killed. Her son's death motivates Manuela to seek out Esteban's father for herself, a journey which takes her to Barcelona, where she forms a series of extended intimacies with her old friend La Agrado, a transsexual prostitute, Sister Rosa and her mother, and Huma Rojo and Niña. As with *Women*, it is ostensibly the search for a man which provides dramatic impetus. Yet it becomes clear very quickly that in *All About My Mother* it is the relationships Manuela forms with other women, that make the most meaning. The search for Esteban's father resurfaces in the latter part of the film, but does not organise narrative development: it merely precipitates Manuela's geographical relocation. We learn that Esteban's father is a pre-operative transsexual, like La Agrado, a 'chick with a dick' and eventually he makes an appearance, by which time his presence acts as a symbol of mortality: he has infected Sister Rosa and the child they conceived with HIV. Effectively, Esteban has no father, only a mother who mothers, who generates familial bonds regardless of whether she has her own child on which to perform such care, and a 'man' who is striving to live as a woman, and in so doing attempting to reconcile the damage 'her' male power has done.

The death of Esteban not only catalyses the narrative drama of *All About My Mother*, but it also neatly separates the emotional and political idea of motherhood from the performance of such a role in the context of family. Esteban's death also allows Manuela's mothering of other characters in the film to be denaturalised; Manuela's actions are not natural extensions of her role in her son's life, they are specific, localised and meaningful performances. Manuela exhibits 'professionalised' mothering skills: she is a chef, a nurse, and most importantly, as she tells Huma Rojo, she can lie convincingly and she can improvise. She is thus qualified to be an actress, something she does when she pretends to be a prostitute, and when she replaces Niña as Stella in the production of *Streetcar* in Barcelona. The idea of women as actors is one that has long been a preoccupation of Almodóvar's films, for example in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, as I've already discussed. In *All About My Mother* motherhood is equated with acting, with the production of a performance. Motherhood is not a biological given, but a chosen role, fashioned by women's experience: Sister Rosa's mother must mother her husband, who has been infantilised by Alzheimer's, but she fails in her attempts to mother her daughter, who rejects her and seeks out Manuela instead. Manuela, recovering from the death of her son is resistant to Sister Rosa's seduction of her. The nun is first introduced to us in her social work on behalf of transsexual prostitutes like La Agrado. Manuela is gradually seduced into the role of Sister Rosa's mother, as she becomes implicated in the lives of Huma Rojo and Niña. Eventually, the convoluted plot brings the women who have formed an informal network together in Manuela's apartment one afternoon, where they consume ice cream and Cava. This network, or

family, produces a child, Esteban 2, the son of Sister Rosa and the transsexual Lola. Rosa and Lola both die of AIDS; but the child, born HIV positive, is raised by Manuela, symbolically supplanting both her own dead Esteban, and her adoptive child Sister Rosa. As Huma Rojo recognises a special bond between herself and the first Esteban, forged in their locked gaze as he exhibited his fatal desire for her autograph, so that bond symbolically attaches to his successor, Esteban 2. The film ends, in Huma's dressing room, scene of her preparations for her performances, with a reuniting of the 'family' and the news that Esteban 2 has neutralised his HIV infection, a medical miracle, a utopian product of his gender dissident mothers.

This vision of female bonding and the performances of motherhood substantially displaces the interests of men. *All About My Mother* is not narratively driven by the affections withheld or expressed by men (like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*), it isn't concerned with the qualities required to become a plausible man, or with the fatalism of heterosexuality (like *Matador*), nor does it ruminate on the nature of bonds between men (*Live Flesh*, as we have seen). The central characters of Manuela, La Agrado and Huma form an affiliation which reinforces their ability to sustain the loss of Manuela's son, and Huma's girlfriend Niña, and the hardships of street life for La Agrado. The men in *All About My Mother* are marginal and obstructive to the functioning of women's lives, rather than constituting the motivational plausibility of them. The film's only father is Sister Rosa's, whose Alzheimer's signifies him as a child dependent upon his wife. Lola may be symbolically the father whose absence Esteban felt to be a structuring condition of his life, but it's ironic that materially the father he longed for is living as a woman, and was doing so at the time he was conceived. The actor who plays Stanley in Huma's production of *Streetcar* is the only character in the film who signifies as a man and as an adult, and he's represented as a function of penile libido. He suggests to La Agrado that she gives him a blowjob, and is sufficiently invested in the prospect that he'll even consider sucking *her* penis to get his own sucked. La Agrado may retain her penis, but she is only signified by it in 'Stanley's' attempted sexual exploitation of her; to the other women, she is a sister, a daughter, a would-be mother. Nevertheless, however mediated, however tucked away by the narrative, La Agrado's penis exists and helps to contribute to her accepted, but de-naturalised 'womanhood'. When Huma and Niña are unable to perform their *Streetcar* one night, La Agrado offers instead her manifesto of the 'authentic' woman, one whose physical attributes may all have a price tag, whose tits (hips, cheek bones, and so on) are silicone, but who is the manifestation of her dreams. Earlier, La Agrado has expressed her distaste for drag queens, whose interpretation of womanhood is all make up and heels.

We may understand La Agrado in literal terms as transsexual, but she is also potentially a key location of gay male heterosocial identification. There have been two predominant modes for making transsexual identities intelligible: one represents the transsexuality as a negotiation that corrects a personally experienced mistake of anatomy, whilst transgendered modes locate dysphoria in dysfunctional binary systems and attempt to resist gender altogether. The transsexual 'Bond' girl, Caroline Cossey, is an example of the former mode, whilst gender 'outlaw' Kate Bornstein, is an example of the latter.³⁰ La Agrado does not represent either of these modes. She does not seek to pass as a woman, where the mechanics of that womanhood are concealed, made natural, and her gender performance is not organised around attaining the sexual and social affirmation of men; rather her performance is for women. Nor does La Agrado reject gender: she dismisses drag queens not because they perform or parody gender, but because they are preoccupied with glamour and don't appreciate that there's more to being a woman than wigs and sequins. La Agrado represents residual strains of maleness (the penis 'Stanley' wants to suck, the attempt to reinscribe the 'authentic' woman, her camp affectations) that may make her an indeterminate woman, but her actions and emotional affiliations express her alignment with the interests of women. She operates as a woman not because she seeks to naturalise an idea of womanhood (even though she loves her fake Chanel) but because she strives so completely to identify with the experience of women, to participate in relations with women in kindred terms. In this she represents a mode of dissent against the power of homosocial gender ideology. This is an instance in which distinctions between gay gendering and transgendering may be structurally less important. She may signify within the terms of both formations as a key point of heterosocial identification for audiences, gay male, heterosexual female, lesbian, and transgendered who would wish to resist homosocial control. In as much as we may see common ground between gay heterosocial identification which recognises a dysphoric relation to homosocial gender power, and transgendered identification, La Agrado may offer common ground.

Almodóvar's celebration of a female bonding which refuses male influence and control in the family, which marginalises male interests, and ridicules male sexual preoccupations, is self-consciously inclusive of 'pretend' women: Almodóvar dedicates the film, amongst others, to 'all men who act and become women'. We may question whether it is desirable to accept Lola and La Agrado, the chicks with dicks, as women, but politically this may be less important than whether they function in ways which substantiate women's (and gay men's) resistance of male homosocial control. Femininity is not the sole realm of women; nor is gender oppression the sole experience of women. The presence of these 'women' who are authentic in their constructedness in bonds with diverse females (mothers predominantly, and lesbians, the old and the young)

affirm the potential of heterosocial dissent. This dissent is practiced, ecstatically and traumatically, in their gossiping over sparkling wine and ice cream, in their tough love, and yes, in their procreation. I would argue that the families created by Manuela, Huma, Sister Rosa, Lola and La Agrado resist colluding with male homosocial mechanisms: public displays of masculinity, the ownership of progeny, the structural control of women and the public disavowal of homosexuality. Rather, they embrace difference and communality, however demanding and cathartic the consequences may be, as an effacement of homosocial authority.

Manuela's reconciliation with Lola is crucial here. Lola, the father of Manuela's dead son Esteban, the father of dead Rosa's son Esteban, whose tits are bigger than Manuela's, and whose affections are an 'epidemic', represents not only Manuela's emotional pain, but what she has referred to as women's inherent lesbianism. Dead Esteban, the tortured product of a perverse romance, as well as the baby Esteban, are their progeny, conceived in a 'lesbian' coupling (woman and transsexual) and cherished as the children of all the women (Huma maintains a bond with dead Esteban; she cherished his picture). Baby Esteban, this child of heterosocial communality, defeats AIDS, no less, a disease that has been associated, whomever it afflicts, with homophobic fantasies, and which has a much higher rate of transmission in Spain than in the UK.³¹ Heterosociality rejects the process in homosocial narratives by which ideologies of gender constitute difference only in order to unify male subjectivity, in actuality producing 'sameness'. Homosocial patriarchy constitutes gender as a function of male interests which is sustained through the manifestation and abjection of others. The possibility of heterosocial bonds acknowledges the violence of such sameness and attempts to act discontinuously with the hegemonic unity of interests expressed in manliness as an instrument of authority (hence *heterosocial*). Rather than suppress bonds with women, displaying domination of them through public institutions of romance and courtship and the display of rigorous, penile male power, heterosocial identification opens the possibility of a denaturalisation of gender difference, an attempt therefore to re-imagine gender power. The complex communality established by the women in *All About My Mother*, accommodates and enjoys difference, where that difference signifies against homosocial practice. La Agrado may not be a 'real' woman, but her behaviour and emotional engagement resists homosocial authority.

I would argue that *All About My Mother* can be read to sustain an effervescent level of heterosocial dissent, in spite of its commercial and critical success. Powerful readings produced by straight male critics recognise the structures of female identification, and subsequently marginalise them as a determining quality of *All About My Mother's* greatness in favour of the film's general emotional depth or its dramatic gravitas. However, I hope I have argued that such

strategies fail to recover this film. They are but one reading, which cannot account for all the representations the film puts into play, but which have become dominant because they reproduce the plausibility of homosociality, and lubricate the (safe) appropriation of exotically homosexual Almodóvar by liberal art house audiences. There may be an impoverishment in the radicalism of the contemporary gay moment, but *All About My Mother* manifests more exciting possibilities. It represents a post-gay practice, characterised by a radical inclusion of resistant identities which imagine a displacement of male homosocial power, which does not resort to economic exploitation to bring it about, and which offers a utopian fantasy of the HIV pandemic to boot.

¹ For an account of these conflicts see Judith Halberstam and C. Jacob Hale, 'Butch/FTM Border Wars: a Note on Collaboration', Judith Halberstam, 'Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum' and C. Jacob Hale, 'Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/Ftm Borderlands', all in *GLQ*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1998.

² Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin, 1962), pp. 225-226.

³ See Maurice Yacowar, *Tennessee Williams and Film* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977) p.22.

⁴ Stanley Kauffman, *Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment*, New York: Harper and Row, 1976; quoted in Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p.126.

⁵ Howard Taubman, 'Modern Primer: Helpful Hints To Tell Appearances from Truth', *New York Times*, April 28, 1963, section 2, p.1.

⁶ Gilbert Adair, 'The Man Who Loves Women', *The Independent on Sunday*, 29 August 1999.

⁷ Andrew O'Hagan, 'Pedro's Latest Surprise', *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 August, 1999, p.22.

⁸ Mike Silverstein, 'An Open Letter to Tennessee Williams', in Karla Jay and Allen Young (eds) *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Pyramid, 1974), p.70.

⁹ Brendan Lemon, 'A Man Fascinated by Women, as Actresses', *The New York Times*, 19 September, 1999, p.15.

¹⁰ See Gert Hekma, 'A Female Soul in a Male Body': Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth Century Sexology', in Gilbert Herdt (ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1994); George Chauncey, 'From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualisation of Female Deviance', *Salmagundi*, 58-59, Fall 1982-Winter 1983; and Tim Edwards, *Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹ Andrew O'Hagan, *ibid.*

¹² Gilbert Adair, *ibid.*

¹³ See Robert Chalmers, 'Pedro on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown?' *The Observer* 5 June 1994, p.24.

¹⁴ Paul Julian Smith, 'Silicone and Sentiment', *Sight and Sound* September 1999, vol.9 no.9, p.30.

¹⁵ "He *is* like a lover! He asks everything about you! He needs everything! He's curious and intense and possessive, like a boy." Cecilia Roth (Manuela in *All About My Mother*) quoted in Jonathan Van Meter, 'A Man of Many Women', *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 September, 1999, p.68.

¹⁶ See Chalmers, *ibid.* and David Gritten, 'One for the Girls', *Telegraph Magazine*, 14 August 1999.

¹⁷ Tom Charity, 'All About Pedro', *Time Out*, 18-25 August 1999, p.27.

¹⁸ David Gritten, *ibid.* See also Jonathan Van Meter, 'Man of Many Women', *The New York Times Magazine*, September 12, 1999, p.67; and Paul Julian Smith, 'Silicone and Sentiment', *Sight and Sound*, September 1999, p.28..

¹⁹ Philip French, 'Mum's the Word', *The Observer*, 29 August, 1999.

²⁰ Andrew O'Hagan, *ibid.*

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

²² David Gritten, *ibid.*

²³ Sedgwick, *ibid.*, p.89, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Sedgwick, *ibid.*, p.89

²⁵ Tom Charity, *ibid.*, p.28.

²⁶ For a discussion of this difficulty, see Teresa de Lauretis, 'Film and the Visible', in *Bad Object-Choices* (eds.) *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp.258-274.

²⁷ Stephen Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Culture* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

²⁸ See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London & New York: Verso, 1997) for critical discussions of slash. See Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters*, *ibid.*, for further discussion of slash as heterosocial practice.

²⁹ These are familiar arguments in feminist discourse. See Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation', reprinted in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993); Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Craig Owens 'Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism' in Alice Jardine & Paul Smith (eds) *Men in Feminism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989).

³⁰ Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York & London : Routledge, 1994) and *My Gender Workbook: How to*

become a real man, a real woman, the real you, or something else entirely (New York & London: Routledge, 1998).

³¹ I am aware that the reality of worldwide AIDS infection is that the majority of those living (and dying) with the disease live in central Africa and do not identify themselves as gay. Nevertheless in the West the early stages of the epidemic were widely associated with homosexual 'infection' and other homophobic fantasies. See Stuart Marshall, 'Picturing Deviancy' in Tessa Boffin & Sunil Gupta (eds) *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (London: Rivers Oram, 1990); and Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).