

CHAPTER FOUR

PEDRO ALMODÓVAR AND *WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS*

BREAKDOWN: THE HETEROSOCIAL SPECTATOR AND MISOGYNY

If the critical attention paid to Tennessee Williams is indicative of the meanings attached to questions of gender identification and homosexuality in a pre-'liberationary' period, then discussion of Pedro Almodóvar brings a contemporary perspective to such questions. As we have seen, for mainstream critics Williams's particular interest in female characterisation was a pathological and morbid manifestation of his own inversion. The public rendering of such characterisation in performances of Williams's plays was, apparently, a bitter and aggressively vengeful attempt to soil the sanctity of moral decency in female representation. I have argued that such hostile readings are a reactionary attempt to recuperate the unsettlingly de-naturalised representations of gender that Williams makes. Hostile critics infer that Williams's work was somehow an attempt to debase everyone else as he himself was debased. I have suggested that in as far as the playwright's compelling characterisations are debased, in that they attempt to fracture the powerful ideological containments erected around gender roles in post-war American culture, then Williams's opponents are correct. *Blanche*, *The Princess and Maggie the Cat*, as well as *Stanley Kowalski*, *Chance* and *Brick*, represent queer refractions of gender roles that show an awareness of how central gender identity

is for Williams as a homosexual - and furthermore, how central our homosexuality is within systems of gender.

In discussion of Pedro Almodóvar's films the issue of his special relationship with women characters and female actors, and his status as a women's director, is almost universally central: it is the abiding tag with which the Spanish writer and director is understood. Yet as a European art-house or independent filmmaker, the audience and the critical context in which discussion of his work takes place is already located in an apparently liberal, progressive and intellectually engaged context in which gay and lesbian culture is supposed to flourish, and in which the idea of an iconographic relationship between women and gay men, hags and fags, is accepted. Discussion of this audience context may provide an interesting consideration of the possibilities for queer articulation and resistance, and the limits of liberal chattering-class culture, that is, of middle-class liberalism that aspires to radicalism. The terms through which Almodóvar circulates are different to those which were faced by Williams. In many ways it would appear that Almodóvar's films are consumed within a cultural context that is politically and intellectually privileged. If Williams's work was received with a rabid hostility which stringently attempted to foreclose the more challenging and marginal aspects of the plays, then we may expect Almodóvar's work to receive a somewhat more enabling reception amongst the audiences of art-house cinema and the readers of liberal broadsheets. Given the extent to which audiences have been able to

transcend the ideological containments erected around Williams and still make resistant meanings, we might expect much more exciting and radical responses from an audience constituency apparently already predisposed towards an embracing of gay politics and conversant with the terms of homosexual representation.

A Case of Public or Private?

As well as being a maker of cultural products, someone who creates tangible artefacts, Pedro Almodóvar is a star - a personality, a phenomenon; an entity in himself. That is to say, he is a star for many within that small proportion of the population who are the metropolitan, liberal, urban, probably graduate, heterosexual middle-classes who frequent art-house cinema and who in Britain read *The Guardian*, or possibly *The Observer*, maybe even *The Independent* - the so-called chattering classes, who comprise an intellectual and social/artistic elite in Britain and in the United States. Almodóvar is also a star for those who occupy a space where this group overlaps with a section of urban lesbian and gay culture - queer 'culture vultures': largely students, and graduate professionals in education, the arts and the caring professions: middle class urbanites, or those who aspire towards those values. As largely a product of urban, and often metropolitan spaces, contemporary lesbian and gay culture has a particularly visible investment in the values of the 'chattering classes', witness the particularly high incidence of upward

class mobility many lesbians and gay men experience in their gravitation towards commercial, and cosmopolitan urban environments - at least in values and aspiration, if not in economic terms.¹

If Pedro Almodóvar is a star, then his homosexuality is, of itself, an issue of cultural interest. In the context of this study the values and meanings attached to the presence of significant subcultural characters is as important as the negotiations conducted through textual material. Not only are the terms under which important figures circulate significant as a kind of filter through which particular constituencies may decode textual artefacts, but highly visible and successful lesbian or gay celebrities are subcultural myths, in that they actually structure iconographies of queerness. As I suggested earlier, Tennessee Williams has a value in gay culture that far exceeds the literary worth of his substantial body of work: he is a figure around whom new notions of homosexuality and gender have emerged and been contested (for instance in the work of *Split Britches* and *Bloodlips* in *Belle Reprise*); key elements of Williams's meaning are transmitted and negotiated through the actual literary work (and its filmic forms as well) but always in a complex dialectic with an aura of the figure Williams is understood to be - itself a highly contested issue, as I have demonstrated. As theorists of popular culture, from Barthes to Richard Dyer, Andrea Weiss and Christine Gledhill have shown, stardom is a discourse with particular resonances in gay and lesbian culture, with a

strong and influential history - particularly in relation to film, but also in the theatre.²

The place of homosexuality in the laissez-faire liberal and intellectual culture addressed by *The Guardian* or *The Observer* is complex and ambivalent. On the one hand such august British journals secure an impression of their fairness, liberalism and reasonableness by distancing themselves from the rabid, hysterical and overt homophobia of tabloids such as *The Sun*. On the other hand, Michelangelo Signorile argues in the Preface to the British edition of his book *Queer in America* that:

most of the 'responsible' media refuse to reveal public figures' homosexuality, even when relevant - except, of course, when such revelations play into their homophobic agenda.³

Signorile's contention is that all media should report the homosexuality of subjects if relevant to the content of a story, regardless of the stance those subjects may have in relation to lesbian and gay politics (p.xv). His model of the closet is that it is 'a place where gay men and lesbians are forced to live - under penalty of ostracism and, in some cases, even death - since their earliest realization of their sexuality' (p.xi), and outing 'is a refusal by journalists to be complicit with the closet, a refusal to make special arrangements for the closeted when reporting the news' (p.xv). This outing, rather than a punitive act and experience of punishment, should be a

liberating experience (p.xv). Signorile accounts for ambiguity around homosexuality in what he calls the 'responsible' or liberal press by suggesting that journalists writing in such contexts cover up 'facts about public figures' homosexuality even when relevant to news stories because journalists are uncomfortable with homosexuality', masking this discomfort as a 'sympathy for gays' 'right to privacy" (p.xiii).

Clearly such reasoning seems plausible, particularly given the disingenuousness the 'quality' press exhibit in relation to the sensationalisation of homosexuality - often maintaining the liberal consensus by reporting on tabloid coverage of sensational stories, thereby situating the responsibility for such scandal with the downmarket press, whilst continuing to titillate their own readership. However, it seems that it is in relation to this titillation that Signorile's model is a little simplistic: the suggestion that the liberal/quality/responsible press collude with the closet, and that this is the primary tool through which homosexuality is oppressed overlooks the fact that the press actually deploy representations of gay and lesbian culture in order to engender a sense of ethical superiority and an assurance of liberal toleration, and that the metropolitan liberal middle-class culture addressed by such newspapers has a voyeuristic fascination that is in part a consequence of the need to demonstrate and affirm the security of their readership's liberalism. This requirement, then, of homosexual content, if only to demonstrate liberal tolerance, let alone to detail sufficiently explicit material to satisfy the demands of

kinky voyeurism, compromises both the rigidity of Signorile's model, and more importantly, the idea of straightforward demonisation or suppression of homosexuality by this liberal/intellectual middle-class culture.

An example of this ambiguity appeared in the *Life* 'magazine' section of the weekend *Observer*, in an issue that followed Pride weekend in London in 1995. The cover depicts a gay male couple embracing, decked out in Indian quasi-religious drag (in a fashion popularised by Boy George during his dalliance with Krishna consciousness), replete with nose rings, cropped and dyed hair, and on one of the pair, a head-dress of lillies and gypsophilia. The banner reads 'Pride not prejudice - Coming out in style'. Inside, the piece transpires to be a fashion spread highlighting the wild and wacky outfits some people had worn at the Pride festival. The short text read

At the same time as 100,000 people were camping at Glastonbury, almost twice that number attended what has become Britain's biggest urban festival. Lesbian and Gay Pride, held in Victoria Park in east London, has grown from a small march in 1971 to the huge and diverse event it is today.

Pride represents a milestone in a lot of gay people's lives, providing many of them with their first opportunity to come out.

The festival-goers on these pages demonstrate the wide variety of unsterotypical style statements currently being made in the gay community.⁴

Alongside cropped men in fetish heels or in pink Barbie wear are images of a butch and femme lesbian couple dragged up for their wedding, a lesbian couple and a gay couple in military uniforms, a couple in sailor suits, a femme dyke duo, a black funky-chick, a couple of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a cropped and goateed queer boy, and so on. The ambience of voyeuristic titillation is clear in the represented foreignness of the material, and in the expository tone, highlighted by the mode of address the feature uses - it is not aimed at anybody who might actually have been one of the two hundred thousand people who attended the event. Yet such is the anticipated sophistication of *The Observer's* readership the tone of the piece is only mildly offensive, taking a somewhat conspiratorial attitude which is allied with the subjects of the piece. The effect of the feature is to highlight the diversity of the Lesbian and Gay Festival (the text even refers to it), and to point out that the event was twice the size of the annual Glastonbury music festival, which received substantial television coverage - thus Pride is accorded some measure of dignity and respect, even superiority to an equivalent (nominally) heterosexual event, even if it is reduced to the level of being merely about display and spectacle: a fashion spread. It could also be argued that the iconography of the principal photography in the feature is somewhat at odds with the up-beat liberalism of the text, if not with the voyeuristic glimpse it offers the domestic

chattering classes of a 'wild' subculture. Under large pink letters 'Out and proud' a man in a cropped black fluffy jumper and shiny, tight black pvc jeans is shown on his knees, cropped and dyed head down in his hands, arse pushed into the air, and one leg slightly raised. On his feet he wears outrageous and enormous black pvc platform stilettos, decorated with silver studs. A huge black belt with bold silver details separates his waist from his pale and bare midriff, and the waistband of his designer underpants is just visible. The effect of the image, in terms of the provocative posture (the caption reads 'Dean Stevenson, exhausted after walking in the Pride march: 'I did this look to be glamorous.'') suggests other exhaustions, whilst the 'kinkiness' of the pvc and all the black intersects strongly with the image of the extraordinary shoes and the raised up arse to provide an image somewhat at odds with conventional liberal images of Pride - this is an intimate, provocative image, slightly sanitised by the extremity of the attire and the context of the focus on fashion. However, given its association with the headline 'Out and proud' the image is structured by the absence of any facial characteristics - no proud gaze from eyes which meet those of the spectator, no grins of proclamation, just the protruding arse and provocative iconography. The image is quite distinctly post-Queer, not only in terms of the particular aesthetic trappings it deploys - the clashing of fetish, drag and porn codes, but also because it is appearing in a national 'quality' broadsheet (albeit in the weekend 'lifestyle' section) and was obviously knowingly styled to key into recognisable symbols.

It should be clear then, that undertaking an analysis of *The Observer's* Pride feature purely on the basis of a closet versus liberation model, such as that expounded by Signorile, wouldn't sufficiently account for the functional purposes to which a liberal/broadsheet press utilises the explicit representation of homosexuality and the resultant ripples of discontinuity produced across the terrain of liberal consensus: any representation of homosexuality undertaken by such journals, Signorile suggests, must accord with 'their homophobic agenda' (p.xv). *The Observer's* Pride feature may have an agenda discontinuous with that of many lesbian and gay Pride participants (but it may not: indeed its agenda may be congruent with that of some lesbian or gay participants, and some heterosexual ones) but it certainly isn't attempting to keep homosexuality in the closet - the text implicitly 'outs' all the subjects photographed, and actually notes the importance Pride has in terms of being a very public space - a festival no less - in which to *come out*. Whatever policing and constraining effects contemporary laissez-faire liberalism, in the shape of the broadsheet press, has, those effects are fundamentally dissimilar to the effects operative in the immediate post-Wolfenden climate in Britain, where there was an assumption of secrecy on the part of lesbians and gay men and a public consensus about the abject nature of homosexuality itself.

Liberal Titillation and the Regime of the Couple

An article published in the America lesbian and gay magazine *Out* to coincide with the release of Almodóvar's film, *Kika*, noted recent gossip that had been circulating about the writer/director, which alleged that he had secretly married Bibi Andersen 'once billed as the tallest transsexual in Europe.'⁵ A British journalist, Robert Chalmers, repeated the gossip in *The Observer* at about the same time.⁶ In a *Late Show* special screened to coincide with the opening of *Kika* 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. What is notable then, about much of the queer and liberal media interest in Almodóvar, a filmmaker Marsha Kinder has described as having 'done more than any other Spaniard to popularize worldwide the image of a liberated outrageous Spain'⁷, is the preoccupation with his relationships, his bonds, with women - particularly his leading female actors.

Significantly, this preoccupation sits alongside a tacit acknowledgement of Almodóvar's homosexuality. In the *Out* article Gooch recounts Almodóvar's frustration with Tom Hanks's reported ambivalence about playing a homosexual in *Philadelphia*: 'You don't have to do anything to play a homosexual. A homosexual is a human being.' (p.54), and then goes on to compare the writer/director's pop-cartoon appeal with that of other 'grand European bad boys, models of respected irrespectability' such as Elton John, Boy George, Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gaultier and Gianni Versace, all figures understood by both lesbian and gay, and cosmopolitan liberal middle class constituencies, to be queer. Robert Chalmers's *Observer* piece contains an instance of Almodóvar's frustration with being 'always 'the gay director Pedro Almodóvar'' (p.24). In both examples the slippage from Almodóvar's bonding with women to his homosexuality is seamless, to the extent that Chalmers makes clear his frustration with the writer/director's impatience about identifying his sexuality. There appears to be an underlying understanding at work here about the relationship between sexual desire (homosexuality) and identification (bonding with women) and between public consort with women (the appearance of heterosexuality) and private sex with men (the reality of homosexuality). The tenacity of this understanding occupies a special place in circulations of the queerness of Almodóvar and his work. When the subject of Maura, or Abril, or the male to female transsexual Bibi Andersen, arises in media discussion of the writer/director they are invariably positioned as his consort, despite a consensual assumption about his (homo)sexuality. Indeed this director-

muse relationship is offered as being emblematic, and constitutive of that sexuality.

It appears that in the manner in which the subject of Almodóvar is addressed in gay and lesbian, and mainstream liberal press, the terms of this relationship between the writer/director's sexuality and his identification with women are contested, and that complex tensions are being played out, not only between sexual orientation and gender identification, but also around the conditions of liberal public tolerance. As we can see, Almodóvar is a compelling subject for the analysis of heterosocial affiliations. The ways in which he is handled by both the queer and mainstream press suggest a conventional awareness of the cultural and political significance of gay men's relationships with women. It is also clear that the two contexts through which critical discourse about Almodóvar circulates have radically different agendas, but the ambiguous status of homosexuality in Almodóvar's work and pronouncements raises similar problems for both discourses; problems that are ultimately a function of the liberal-intellectual contexts both inhabit.

For straight liberal commentators the problem arises out of a need to balance the funky perversity of films like *Kika* or *Matador* or *Law of Desire* that is sold as a function of Almodóvar's homosexuality, with the danger of too fully instating the writer/director's work as queer, and thus as potentially troubling. Obviously

labelling him as queer is important, as we have seen, both for making him kinky and interesting *enough*, and for keeping that weirdness at bay, different from heterosexual normality. Here the more outlandish elements of Almodóvar's films can be a function of his perversity; however if he's made too perverse, too strangely non-heterosexual then that queerness becomes threatening, and may begin to speak for itself. The consumption of kinky queer culture within a liberal context can thus be seen as something of a faultline within hegemonic arrangements of gender. One key strategy that seems to be used to lessen the anxiety around the faultline, particularly for apparently liberal males, who of course must assimilate queerness within their privileged cosmopolitan milieu with some measure of homosocial panic, is to profile Almodóvar's association or consort with women. Here his strangeness is maintained (he's kinky, and hangs out with women all the time, and not with other men, as a properly unified homosocial subject would) but it is a de-sexualised queerness rendered cute and furry because it emphasises how sensitive and glamorous he is: note the comparisons with a raft of 'European bad boys', all fashion designers and pop stars. In an article in *The Guardian*, Nigel Floyd suggests that

[Maura and Almodóvar's] partnership seemed made in heaven, Maura's earthy beauty bringing flesh and blood reality to her roles as a bongo-playing nun in *Dark Habits* or a transvestite [sic.] in *Law of Desire*. Yet, like Diego and Maria in *Matador*, their partnership

burned brightest at precisely that moment when they began to
eclipse one another.⁸

Here, under the sign of divine normality ('made in heaven') Floyd suggests that the director-muse relationship of Almodóvar and Maura is symmetrical to that of a pair of (albeit perversely) heterosexual lovers. Moreover, her earthly beauty, her body, realises his mind, his vision. Thus for Floyd, not only are Maura and Almodóvar an honorary heterosexual couple, but the constitution of their roles within that *menage* coincides with traditional hetero-patriarchal understandings of women as physical and men as cerebral, with women bearing the physical marks of men's cognition. Such accounts make queer Almodóvar available for less anxious consumption by straight, liberal *Guardian* readers; for, although his world view is slightly naughty and dangerously daring (transvestites, bongo-playing nuns, lovers who have a death wish and so on) he can be tolerated, enjoyed even, in Floyd's view because his perspective reflects heterosexual arrangements - even aspires towards them. After all, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, with or without the jewels, were for the time an engagingly daring example of heterosexual coupledness. Grandiose liberal tolerance is secured through an assimilation of the gay director Pedro Almodóvar into the diversely cosmopolitan culture covered in the pages of *The Guardian*, whilst the values and world view of that urban liberal milieu are protected from any challenge Almodóvar's homosexuality may pose, because, through Floyd's eyes, that homosexuality merely recreates heterosexual models after all. Almodóvar's sexuality is thus rendered only partially visible:

implicit and connotated, but not represented in and of itself; what is available to reassure *The Guardian's* readers that it really is safe to assimilate the wild and outrageous director is a succession of couplings which are rendered so as to ape a publicly hetero-'sexual' orientation: Pedro and Bibi, Pedro and Rosy (de Palma), Pedro and Carmen, Pedro and Victoria. This strategy of assimilation relies on a residual post-Wolfenden structure in which public and private behaviours are separated, one begetting a voyeuristic fascination with the other, whilst the public front confers reassurances about matters of identity: this is one way in which the liberal slippage towards a reactionary position is effected. Michelangelo Signorile notes this formation, as we've already seen: discomfort around homosexuality is masked, suppressed, in liberal media by 'sympathy for gays' 'right to privacy.'⁹ This privileging by liberal discourses of public behaviour in matters relating to the constitution of sexuality attempts to re-secure any public behaviour in which heterosexuality itself is not *actively* problematised - thus Almodóvar's private sexual object-choice can become secondary to his public and productive association with women in the minds of *The Guardian's* tolerant readers. The laissez-faire voyeuristic attraction broadsheet analysis has for Almodóvar is insufficiently agile even to attempt to secure him for a radical context or agenda, even if they were disposed to do so. Given the dominance of heterosexual arrangements even the complexly mediated public/private boundaries still operate to privilege public, formalised structures of sexuality: family, marriage, engagement, courtship, parenting, romance and so on, and repress abnormal, problematic arrangements - or at least

express them through the filters of condescension and voyeurism that is liberalism. Post-Wolfenden 'toleration' of homosexuality has constituted the notion of the 'private' as a means of control through which the alternative is consigned to invisibility and covert control, and the public realm is normalised - alternatives appearing as just that: *alternatives* to normality - wild and daring spectacles always contextualised within frameworks of propriety. This privileging of public space acts as a sign system which structures private behaviour and identity: public participation connotes normality which presumes private obeisance. The liberal tolerance of the 'enlightened' chattering classes moderates this post-Wolfenden model, in that the public realm does not need to be continually purged of homosexuality: does not need to be closeted in other words, but the strategy still has some currency. If queer Almodóvar can be shown to be preoccupied with such reassuringly normal activities as public consort with women, from within the very site of his wild and perverse world (afterall, the women he bonds with constitute the repertory company of actors in his movies, his work), then not only does the idea of homosexuality not appear threatening, it actually appears to offer an amusing and novel view of ones own normality. Thus, we can see how this cosmopolitan liberalism is a ventriloquisation of more authoritative and reactionary interests; it exhibits a slippage away from a sponsorship of radical arrangements, towards a reconfirmation of mainstream hetero-patriarchal models.

From a queer perspective the existence within straight culture of such disparate, conflicting, positions as those represented by *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, for example, enables further control - making assimilation by lesbians and gay men to the latter's powerful, and apparently liberal culture (and clearly bits of it are liberal, or at least ventriloquise liberalism effectively) attractive over the former's truculent reactionism. After all, pandering to the tolerant world of disengaged cosmopolitan liberalism has its benefits: in Britain the assimilationist Stonewall lobbying group hosts an annual Equality show. In late 1994 this event was held at the Albert Hall, where the audience were entertained by the likes of Elton John, Sting, Richard Gere and Alison Moyet; also in attendance, with his wife, was the newly elected leader of the Labour party, the ultra-moderate social democrat, Tony Blair. Hobnobbing with such luminaries feels like validation, even if it is under the terms of liberal humanist consensus - particularly in contrast to the rabid hate-mongering of tabloids like *The Sun*. On the other hand such active foregrounding of queer culture as queer (in this particular space the labelling is necessary to secure the smug reassurance of toleration, unlike other appropriations of queer culture into the mainstream, in which it is unnecessary and inappropriate to identify the origin of the particular artefacts being plundered) brings the work of someone like Almodóvar into relief on a wide scale, foregrounding the ever possible threat that through that visibility he will be associated with challenging meanings - hence the need to attempt to assert stringent control over the circulation of his work in the very same liberal broadsheets which valorise him in the first place.

QUEER OPPORTUNITIES

The recuperation of Almodóvar by liberals strategically highlights his relationships with women, and so the terms through which we may handle his heterosocial opportunities are potentially traumatic, and are certainly highly mediated by heterosexual hostility, however valorising and celebratory such hostility at first appears. It would seem that there are two substantial difficulties facing those of us who would wish to disrupt the liberal assimilation of Almodóvar for heterosexual voyeurism so that we may address the queer and dissident possibilities in his work. The first of these is the director's own insistence upon addressing the mainstream, his desire to be a universally addressed artist, and his consequent reticence about queer self-identification. Paul Burston, an Almodóvar apologist, notes that the director himself, 'has always maintained that he hates 'obvious homosexual expressions', even going as far as to suggest that the homosexual relationship in *Law of Desire* could just as easily have been a heterosexual one.'¹⁰ As we have seen, Robert Chalmers's *Observer* piece contains an instance of Almodóvar's frustration with being 'always 'the gay director Pedro Almodóvar'' (p.24). In an interview in *Out* Almodóvar tells Brad Gooch, 'I could be married in two years, and I don't want anyone saying nothing against that. To be gay is not something that determines my life. It's a part, but not the most important part.'¹¹ When *The Flower of my Secret* was released in England, *The Pink Paper* ran an article on Almodóvar entitled 'Pedro's

Love of Ladies' which draws heavily on general understandings that Almodóvar maintains a special relationship with women in his films. However Mansel Stimpson, the author of the piece, goes on to express disappointment about Almodóvar's attitude to his homosexuality:

In 1994 his comments made it clear that the man who, as writer and director, brought us such sexually explicit films as *Law of Desire* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* was something of a conservative in his attitudes towards being gay...What is clear is that he is particularly apprehensive of the American attitude, which treats sexuality as a label. He sees the tag of 'gay artist' as constricting, and is relieved that gay sensibility is discussed much less in Spain than in the US or over here.¹²

These ambivalences make it difficult for us to be confident that Almodóvar is actually addressing us as a queer constituency. As we have seen, potential anxiety about Almodóvar's sexuality can be allayed by highlighting a reassuring association with women: therefore our second problem in assimilating Almodóvar for heterosocial purposes is that when such hegemonic control has been effected, the meanings attached to the writer/director's work can be moulded, corrupted, reworked. We are then faced with not only the prospect that Almodóvar's heterosocial expressions will become disseminated as heterosexual expressions through media that we are encouraged to feel allegiances with, but also with the prospect of that heterosocial representation becoming understood as misogyny.

In a promotional brochure produced by the UK video distributors of Almodóvar's movies in the run-up to 1994's Yuletide season of consumption, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* is described as telling the story of a 'group of women living in a punk-inspired Madrid [who] encounter...the will to forge strong female friendships.' The copy goes on:

Many find this kind of female bonding and oppression, portrayed through a gay man's sensibility, contradictory in Almodóvar's films. His flamboyance and fluctuations between humour and offensiveness, however, makes the questioning part of the journey.

Here the disclaimer that Almodóvar's view of women is the function of a gay man's sensibility seems to precisely address the cosmopolitan, liberal audience I have been locating: knowledge of the writer/director's sexuality adds kudos to watching his films, whilst the wacky offensiveness, flamboyance and fluctuations - all codes for the campily hysterical artistic temperament in line with understandings of both the Latin disposition and the effeminate homosexual one - invite a voyeuristic spectacle of satisfyingly grandiose proportions. Almodóvar's *enfant terrible* reputation is something of a bonus for this cosmopolitan audience: rendering a potentially politically incorrect landscape without the hazards of illiberal complicity. In the Almodóvarian world women are oppressed by punk lesbians who piss on them, husbands who smack them around, mentally unstable sex-gods with whom

they fall in love whilst (literally) in enforced bondage, priests in the name of whose love they have become 'women', porn stars who rape them, and trash TV that offers up rape as voyeuristic spectacle.

Yet for those who would wish to engage with Almodóvar's work in a more ingenuously radical context, rather than the assimilationism of *Guardian*-culture *faux* radicalism, the issue of the filmmaker's apparent outrageous fluctuations is crucial: clearly it isn't satisfactory to sponsor the assimilation of an overt misogynist. Rose Collis, former film reviewer for Britain's *Gay Times*, says of the rape scene in *Kika*:

But is Almodóvar merely being 'misogynist' - a charge often levelled against him in the past - or is he daring us to find it funny, despite its horror...¹³

Uncharacteristically, British queer journalist Paul Burston makes an acute assessment of Almodóvar's predicament when he says:

It is worth noting that the straight male critics so quick to point a finger at Almodóvar are usually the same straight male critics who rush to defend the misogynistic pleasures of your average Hollywood boys' own adventure. And, of course the sensational coverage generated by such scenes tends to distract us from the

fact that Almodóvar's films are often a celebration of powerful women.¹⁴

The price of liberal assimilation is that homosexual culture risks speaking for that liberalism and not for itself: as I have suggested, the sponsorship of Almodóvar by the responsible press may satisfy the conditions of middle class aspirant intellectual liberalism, but it also offers us the opportunity to exploit such visibility for more radical ends. Thus it is important to represent these negotiations as a dialectic: the liberal press have not had a consistently valorising view of Almodóvar; as his fame has spread, and his *enfant terrible* reputation has become more celebrated, it appears that there has been a concurrent need to question the political and personal appropriateness of the writer/director within the very liberal space in which he acquired visibility. The excess and schlock melodrama celebrated in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* were lamented as absent from *High Heels* and lambasted as being too excessive, too politically compromising in *Kika*. It's worth noting that film critics, those pundits who make film their especial concern in more specialised periodicals such as *Sight and Sound* in Britain, unfold yet another narrative of Almodóvar's oeuvre, in which it is the films before the first truly commercial offering, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, which had a 'fresh and challenging vision'; latterly Almodóvar's 'growing sense of professionalism has resulted in a worrying lack of edge, emotional or otherwise.'¹⁵ Such accounts do suggest an insider's expert smugness, but lend an authority to more mainstream, liberal accounts which appear to appropriate the

terms of this relationship between Almodóvar's increasing success and popularity and an inverse sense of his worth. As a particularly fraught and contested feature of Almodóvar's work, it is in relation to the faultline representation of women that later liberal questioning has taken place in order to effect hegemonic exclusion of the writer/director.

Clearly it seems that the stress heterosexual, mainstream critics (presumably the audience Almodóvar wants to address for fear of becoming a 'gay artist') place on his relationships with women can also serve more explicitly homophobic purposes than the ability to consume, safely and voyeuristically his wacky and cute queerness. As we have seen with Tennessee Williams, critics who speak from a position of unmediated dominance within hetero-patriarchal systems take particular relish in bringing attention to the misogyny of gay male heterosocial activity. As I noted, Stanley Kauffman accuses Williams of 'viciousness towards women...lurid violence that seems a sublimation of social hatreds', which of course enables Kauffman to have his cake and gleefully eat it: displaying his own parochial, fatherly concern for possible oppression of the fairer sex at the same time as manifesting his own unsublimated hatred of the homosocial abject, particularly when it is attempting heterosocially to circumvent that homosociality.¹⁶ This has become something of a standard strategy, and the recuperative patriarchal impediment at work in Kauffman could surely be seen in Robert Chalmers's boorish anxiety when he writes of Almodóvar for *The Observer*.¹⁷ Chalmers's article, 'Pedro on

the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown?’ unfolds his own fantasy narrative of Almodóvar’s oeuvre in which ‘*Kika* is a return to the early Almodóvar formula of shock-melodrama, a tired strategy which is bound to produce diminishing returns’ (p.26). This diminishing artistic bite is accompanied, in Chalmers’s fantasy, by the writer/director’s increasing petulance and impatience. Almodóvar’s apparent resentment over the interference of ‘Anglo-Saxons’ becomes not only a marker of his artistic temperament (itself a not very subtle indication of a pejorative homosexuality), but an opportunity to instate ideological framing around undifferentiated and suspicious outsiders. Chalmers lumps together non-Anglo-Saxon Spaniards, denizens of ‘foreign art-house productions’, intellectuals, typified by Paul Julian Smith and the un-named writer of ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ and badly behaved gay men (those who compeere competitions such as ‘General Erections’ Chalmers cites from *Pepi, Luci, Bom and other Girls on the Heap*), in a move which re-seals an Anglo-Saxon ethnic hegemony. It seems ironic that the exclusion of Smith’s overly intellectual (read effeminate) discourse of diversity is effected through the authoritative instatement of Spanish homophobia by quoting *The Guardian’s* former Madrid correspondent. Even at the moment at which Chalmers’s jingoism requires him to suggest that Spanish society is more homophobic than ‘ours’, any murmur of alignment with homosexuality is displaced by the confidently hegemonic assertion that ‘almost all readers are likely to find some unfamiliar material in *Desire Unlimited’s* reading list’. (p.26, my emphasis) Thus an inside group of unquestioning liberalism is invoked, a reassuringly inclusive

consensus, unless you happen to be Spanish, or one who is 'unfamiliar': these are the outsiders through whom Chalmers's cultural superiority becomes stated, and through whom Almodóvar becomes identified as a kind of Norma Desmond-cum-Dorian Gray figure, a pitiable parody of itself, an ageing drag-queen whose earlier excesses and debaucheries are taking their toll, and whose lack of normality (non-Anglo-Saxon, homosexual) is leaving him artistically spent, past the gimmick of 'shock-melodrama'. In Chalmers's criminally irony-free fantasy Almodóvar 'on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown' is frustrated and lonely, but petulant, and consoling himself in attempted normality in the pseudo-marriage with the pseudo-woman Bibi Andersen.

Women on the Verge of Queer Sistership?

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (1988) is Almodóvar's most successful and famous film. Paul Julian Smith, probably the most widely published 'expert' on Almodóvar is quite emphatic about what I would call the film's heterosociality:

Almodóvar has been punished by male critics for placing himself so consistently on the side of the woman (on the side of sentiment and of spectacle). In spite of its success, *Mujeres* was awarded neither the Spanish Goya for best director nor the Oscar for best foreign-language film: the prizes went to more 'serious' (more 'masculine') works. While actual women may not thank

Almodóvar for his overidentification with feminine stereotypes which they may well wish to challenge, there is cause to welcome that boundary confusion brought about by his cinematic narcissism. It suggests an unfixing of identities (both sexual and national) which can only tend to support that feminism which is committed to social and psychic change.¹⁸

Yet what form does that heterosocial representation take? How would Smith resolve the tension between his understanding that the film is something feminism should welcome when women may wish to challenge it? Smith is keen to identify Almodóvar as a 'glitch' in the cinematic system because he is 'a Spanish director who has achieved international renown; an openly gay director known for his love of women'; but can such an ambiguously self-presented homosexual deliver the boundary confusion that causes the disturbance of critics in the 'overidentification of a filmmaker with the women in his films.'¹⁹ As we have seen, many reactionary straight liberal responses to Almodóvar's work precisely emphasise his interest in women because this brings his imputed queerness into a heterosexual frame, displaying his consort with women as a token of his sensitivity to soften and allow unfettered consumption of his outrageousness. It is clear, then, that the opportunities for claiming Almodóvar as a queer or heterosocially heroic figure are fraught and unstable because our responses are filtered through complex contextual considerations.²⁰ However, it is because Almodóvar's work lies

at such a hectic intersection of ideological, political and representational concerns that his films are so interesting and the stakes so high.

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown opens with a voice-over by Pepa (Carmen Maura) who tells us that she moved to her apartment with Iván when, for her, the world was falling apart and she wanted to save it, acting like Noah by bringing couples of animals to live on her terrace. She adds that she was not able to save the couple she cared about most, her and Iván. The camera pans down a shape of candy pink material to a mass of tousled brunette locks. We realise that Pepa is asleep and dreaming, and the shot cuts to a terrace, rendered in dream-like monochrome. We get our first look at Iván, and he is a function of Pepa's subconscious. The first thing he does is use fresh breath spray, he then walks along a terrace past a succession of diversely exotic women and speaks a number of melodramatic romantic insincerities ('I cannot live without you') to each as he advances. He is speaking into an elaborate 1950s style microphone, and his voice sounds fragmented, non-naturalistically mechanised. We are immediately presented with a number of contrasts: between Pepa, fuschia pink, intimately voiced, and Iván, dully monochrome, vocally artificial and disembodied; Pepa, present in the film's diegetic reality (albeit asleep), Iván a fantasy, a figment of Pepa's imagination. As the opening tableau of Pepa's subconscious gives way to the film's narrative these contrasts become a structuring dynamic. 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. Although *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* does not maintain the first person narrative position of the immediate post-opening credit sequence, where we share Pepa's intimate reflections and see her dream directly through her 'eyes', the film nevertheless maintains an equivalence between Pepa's experience within the narrative, and our own experience as the audience. As Iván is elusive to Pepa, so he is elusive to us, and we share her frustration at his duplicity and slipperiness. As Pepa wakes from her dream of Iván he is leaving her a message on her answering machine; she runs to the telephone, but is too late. We hear his disembodied voice as she does: the film avoiding a customary cut to Iván leaving the message at his end of the phone. She rings the studio where they work, but he's already left.

Within the narrative of the film, Pepa and Iván are actors. Before Pepa goes to work, we see her with the doctor, who tells her that she is pregnant. Later, at work, Pepa is dubbing her voice onto the soundtrack of *Johnny Guitar*. As we join her, she is the Spanish voice of Joan Crawford in a scene where Crawford's Vienna is having a confrontation with her leading man, played by Sterling Hayden, who has the Spanish voice of Iván, who has dubbed his lines earlier. Pepa's performance of Crawford-as-Vienna runs alongside Crawford's, and their words of barely

controlled passion are part of a narrative of desertion and ill treatment at the hands of Iván-as-Hayden-as-Johnny Guitar. So, to the script of a film rife with troubled signification (of Crawford's iconic star quality, of recuperated feminist resistance, of pathological lesbian desire - all of which have activated considerable subcultural queer investment) we watch Carmen Maura acting the role of Pepa as she negotiates the trauma of performing in a film which commentates on the feminine subjection she's experiencing in our film as romantic victim in her relationship with Iván. This deliberate breaking of cinematic naturalism is a powerful device that Almodóvar has also used in *Law of Desire*. This device of filmic refraction has an intensified ironic effect for foreign audiences of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, particularly English speaking ones, given that Crawford and Hayden's drama in *Johnny Guitar* is enacted in English. As we participate in the literal translation, through over-dubbing, of a cultural text into a new context, the original and familiar artefact of *Johnny Guitar's* drama becomes especially contingent, potentially inauthentic, and this adds greater impact to our sense of Pepa producing a self-conscious, narrativised effect of herself in her role within a familiar patriarchal drama of male indifference and female suffering. To underline the effect, Pepa is overcome and faints.

Yet even in the midst of such female suffering, a suffering we masochistically share in our principal identification with Pepa, Iván remains elusive, disembodied, a mechanised effect equivalent to the iconic fiction of Crawford or Hayden on the

screen in the studio Pepa is working in, whilst our heroine is present, corporeal, passionate. Her femininity, her suffering, the part she plays in response to male heterosexual infidelity and mistreatment, that is a performance, an act, scripted by her role as a heterosexual woman. Unlike Iván's insincerity which brokers his power and freedom as a man - his refusal to step into the world of emotions and responsibility, Pepa's role-playing is a sign of her entrapment. Crucially, it seems that the representation of Pepa suggests a self-conscious awareness of her performance, especially in the scene where she is overdubbing Crawford, and her fainting suggests that it is the strain of maintaining her performance of stoic powerlessness, in the face of male brutality and refusal to engage emotionally, that produces female hysteria. Hysteria here is an effect of lack of choice. The self-consciousness of Pepa's professional acting allows us to think of her relationship with Iván as a role where she knows she's following a script, but manifests hysterical frustration that she can't find another one to follow.

This de-naturalisation of Pepa's performance of the wronged woman shows how this role is about repressing the effects of mistreatment, maintaining wounded silence, suffering but not hitting back, retaining passivity because men maintain power. Ironically this suggestion of the role-playing necessary to sustain women's position, allied to the Pepa-centred narrative and scopic organisation of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, has the effect of rendering women as more real than men. Iván is but a mechanised, disembodied refraction, potentially damaging,

but not present, he displays no self-consciousness, no acknowledgement of role-playing, he is but the voice of absent authority: there's nothing behind the role, no emotional engagement. 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.

This sense of women's realness in contrast to the refracted absence, the empty signification of Iván, pervades the film. The receptionist at the studio is interfering and nosy, the pharmacist Pepa goes to for illicit sleeping pills has a lurid pink face from a cosmetic treatment mask she's trying, whilst the other women in the chemist's shop gossip, commenting rudely on how Pepa doesn't look as good as she does on television, Iván's estranged wife, Lucía, maintains a stolid fury throughout, telling Pepa to 'fuck off'. Women are real and colourful, their insults, judgements and motivations are up front, delivered honestly and unconsciously. Iván is but a monochromatic mask of honeyed subterfuge, he tells Pepa's answering machine 'I don't deserve your kindness' yet he hurts her.

Thus far it does seem that *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* delivers a conventional patriarchal narrative of relationship breakdown: women emote passionately, occupying the physical space as ciphers of suffering, whilst masculinity remains emotionally elusive, never really a part of the breakdown, but

utterly instrumental, constitutive even, of female behaviour within it. Iván's masculinity is but a parody of patriarchal faithlessness as he exchanges Lucía for Pepa, Pepa for Paulina.

The Woman's Film as Gay Film?

The key disjunction with which *Women* initially modulates these conventions is that it offers us little choice but to identify and valorise the corporeal, hysterical space Pepa occupies. Not only is Pepa the film's only significant protagonist, but events and perspectives are continually skewed to portray her affectionately.

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown appears to encourage us to revel in the masochistic experience of identifying with such hysteria and emotional trauma.

Psychoanalytic film theory, which has represented a powerful, and often residual, phase in the evolution of cinematic studies, would suggest that the organisation of the cinematic frame protects an imputed male spectator from castration anxieties that the narratively subjugated woman embodies; this organisation elicits a sadistic gaze upon the woman which punishes and controls her. The valorised masochistic collusion which *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* encourages seems quite different to such sadistic spectatorship. Here the slipperiness and elusivity of Iván acts not only to centralise Pepa in the narrative, but actually makes an identification with a patriarchal representative in the text elusive as well: Iván has an insubstantial textual presence. In this (as in many formal considerations of genre and mode) *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* offers a striking contrast

to *Pulp Fiction* in its scopic organisation and narrative representation of gender. As we saw earlier, *Pulp Fiction* offers aspirant patriarchal spectatorship diverse iconographies of hip masculinity with which to align, and for good measure a couple of abject queers for the purposes of counter-identification; women are mere homosocial foils for male display and exchange. In *Pulp Fiction* the manifestation of women's punishment for embodying the threat of castration doesn't merely reside in the organisation of a sadistic and controlling gaze, but is narratively and comically glorified in the punishment of women, such as in the scene where Vincent administers a terrifying and piercingly phallic injection to Mia's heart with a foot long needle.

We could suggest that *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown's* sponsorship of our masochistic identification displaces the sadistic, patriarchal gaze, the object of which is to control castration anxiety, and replaces it with a queered gaze, one which aligns our spectatorship with Almodóvar's heterosocial affiliation with Maura/Pepa: the actress his publicly acceptable consort, the character his own creation. This reading of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* would seem to be compatible with Mary Ann Doane's notion of the women's film, a genre with a lavish history of gay subcultural investment.²¹ Doane suggests that the woman's film attempts to constitute female subjectivity and desire through the sponsorship of fantasies associated with the feminine: masochism, hysteria, paranoia and neurosis. Gay male audiences have tended to access the pleasures of the so-called

woman's film through the vehicle of star adoration and identification: witness the cultish veneration of Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck and others, that has come to define camp spectatorship. We could argue that historically the loose and sometimes vague genre of the woman's film has provided as much pleasure in resistant subjectivity to gay male audiences as it has to female ones.²² Indeed many of the characteristics of the woman's film have been appropriated as substantial components of gay male gender resistance, although the issue of appropriation is a complex one. The discursive and subcultural association of gay men with landmark woman's films such as *Mildred Pierce*, *Sylvia Scarlet*, *Now, Voyager*, and *A Star is Born* could be interpreted as appropriative of what is essentially women's cultural space, but this is a troubled, problematic interpretation. Clearly the canon of women's films can be significant in many contexts simultaneously, and one needn't negate another; nor are there substantial institutionalised power differences between constituencies of gay men, and of heterosexual women such that either may have the power to enforce the true reading on the other: both are empowered and disempowered in different, but often symmetrical ways, as I have been discussing. An important inducement to the investment gay men have made in woman's films is the understanding about the homosexuality of key Hollywood personnel involved in their production. The homosexuality of George Cukor, the pre-eminent woman's director, has been subculturally appreciated for many years: in *Hollywood Babylon* Kenneth Anger recounts how Clark Gable had Cukor fired from *Gone With the Wind* because he was homophobic, and Patrick McGilligan's

biography, *A Double Life* recounts the same narrative.²³ We do not need to fall back on an idea of some essential gay sensibility to see the significance of Cukor's sexuality to gay men's investment in his movies. Camp spectatorship and the parodic, excessive overdetermination it sponsors provides an iconography of reading traces for queer audiences, destabilising naturalising discourses and representations with an excess of authenticity, an ironic subversion or an insistence on surfaces and performativity, artificiality. That mode of reading, whether its purpose is to find especial messages or meanings, or merely the presence of another like mind, has been a crucial part of gay subcultural activity through pre- and post-Stonewall periods back to the turn of the century, and possibly before if we accept Rictor Norton's thesis about the mollies (notwithstanding doubts about the continuity of molly culture).²⁴ As I discussed in the opening sections, our notions of queerness or homosexuality are constituted and contested through our interaction with subcultures. In the case of George Cukor and the woman's films that came out of post-war Hollywood, it seems fair to say that not only are they the bearers of gay subcultural investment, but that they display and communicate reading traces that exhibit an awareness of subcultural activity that is inherent in the production. Gay men do not have a genetic predisposition to be interested in women, femininity and glamour (many of us, alas, show little interest in such trappings) but these are things that our gay subcultural alignments show us have been important to gay men, and may give us clues as to where we may look for similar gay men to ourselves in a culture that often necessitates our closetedness

and discretion. Other gay men in other parts of the subculture, maybe in different temporal or spatial locations, with access to the means of cultural production, in filmmaking, art or music, may also lay the foundations of such reading traces as expressions of their interests and also as signposts to other queers, and friends in the know. That these markers of camp spectatorship may offer the opportunity for gender dissent, or heterosocial affiliation by gay men, only makes our political and historical investment, as well as our reading skills, more acute. Of course, it remains to be seen whether such queer reading traces fulfil their heterosocial potential politically, but such activity is neither the expression of our essential empathy with femininity, nor of our essential proclivity towards pro-feminism or a progressive gender politics - though it may be.

In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* as in *Now, Voyager*, women's emotional excess may be venerated within the fictional world-order that is the cinematic diegesis and thus offer gay male audiences camp reading traces; but such feminine hysteria remains meaningful within wider patriarchal culture as a mark of not having control. It is here that tensions between the reading strategies of gay men, and of women, may appear, particularly when gay men may precipitate the celebration of filmic imagery that marks, however sublimely, women's powerlessness in heterosexual relations with men. Of course, the most successful of these films will be those that position such emotional excess as rebellion, as wilfully and determinedly outside the ambit of homosocial authority. Maria LaPlace

has made a convincing reading of *Now, Voyager* which integrates understandings of Bette Davis as star icon with feminist film criticism and suggests that the film offers 'a symbolic system in which women can try to make sense of their lives and even create imaginative spaces for resistance, a system which the film...enters despite itself.'²⁵ The concession with which LaPlace concludes her account suggests a degree of selection that makes her reading plausible: this is valuable strategic practice. Clearly the woman's film has a vexed history of meanings for women, regardless of any subcultural activity on the part of gay men. Hollywood aggressively produced and marketed woman's pictures to fulfil what was understood to be a dominant share of cinema audiences, and they have remained enormously powerful sources of pleasure and pride, but also difficulty, as Jeanine Basinger encapsulates:

the woman's film reminds women that they have a biological function related to their role as women...love is their true job...the movies prettied up the woman's biological function as love...Over and over again the answer to the question of what a woman should do with herself was wrapped in shiny paper and presented as love.²⁶

Consuming women in woman's films as objects for the experience of love, as bearers of romantic pleasure and romantic pain at the hands of men, may be relatively unproblematic for gay male spectatorship, which isn't undermined by being located so far outside authoritative male homosocial subjectivity. Indeed, as I

have been arguing, queer heterosocial affiliations precisely strive to achieve this distance from powerful, masculine homosocial formations and revel in such romantic and emotional representation. However, the meanings of potential identification with emotionally flamboyant, excessively feminine women are different for lesbian and for straight female spectators than they are for gay male ones. For gay men such representations of women are anti-masculine, they are role models for acts of dissent against dominant codes of maleness that gay men are forced to inhabit, and then are punished for inhabiting queerly. Such identifications attempt to reimagine homosexual identity as something other than a mechanism for purifying and policing homosocial power structures with which women are patriarchally exploited and gay men are despised. For straight women, such representation of valorised hysteria may authenticate their experiences of heterosexuality and womanhood as subjects of homosocial activity, by offering sisterly collusion and images of poised transcendence, but ultimately they lock women into heterosexual suffrage - glamorous, gutsy, but still suffering, still gaining cultural privilege by virtue of their subjection to men.²⁷ For lesbians, such material seems to be unsatisfying in that it confirms a feminine and powerless position women are already forced to inhabit in relation to men. As lesbianism is precisely about resisting participation in relations with men, and certainly ones which follow the patriarchal script of heterosexuality, the opportunity to identify with victimised heterosexual women, however glamorous their suffering, is going

to be pretty meaningless. As Paula Graham has argued, gay men may be punished within masculine subjectivity, but lesbians are excluded from it:

femininity is, after all, a relatively privileged category from which lesbians are excluded, but which is also, for women, a mark of subordination to masculine authority, and not a form of resistance to it ... Even 'excessive' femininity ... still seems to have considerably less appeal to lesbian audiences than to gay male audiences.²⁸

So, in the context of gay male culture, I am suggesting that spectacles of female emotional excess act as reading traces, opportunities that we learn about through our membership of gay subcultures, for our anti-homosocial identification. Sometimes these reading traces are a function of gay subcultural investment on the part of producers or directors, and they can act as a nod and a wink to gay audiences conversant with the codes of camp spectatorship. However, even though such identifications may evade complicity with a sadistic patriarchal gaze, the disparity between gay male, straight female, and lesbian readings of such ecstatic masochistic identification may disrupt the heterosocial potential of camp spectatorship; this is not necessarily because such disparity invalidates gay male practice, but because this difference marks ideological tensions. The adoration of spectacles of female emotional excess, where that excess is the breaching of rationality and containment, is an important part of gay male cultural vernacular, but beyond its value as a subcultural language, a kind of community glue, we need

to be sensitive to the particular ways in which we line up these identifications with our homosexuality.

***Edward II* : Queer Homosociality?**

An illustration of these difficulties can be found in the late Derek Jarman's film *Edward II*, which was released in 1991, but got caught up in the excitement about so-called New Queer Cinema in 1992 with the release of *The Hours and Times*, *Swoon*, *The Living End*, *RSVP*, and the new wave of queer activism aimed at *Basic Instinct* and *Silence of the Lambs*.²⁹ *Edward II* is a very striking film for a number of reasons bound up with Jarman's retelling of Marlowe's drama in the context of Thatcherite Britain, and the emerging queer politics typified by the newly formed activist group, Outrage; Jarman himself writes in notes in the published script, that it sets out to represent a gay love affair by taking 'a dusty old play and violat[ing] it.'³⁰ This modernisation of a Renaissance narrative produces a number of incoherences which would seem to be out of step with Jarman's apparently radical queerness, which in *Edward II* seems very much lined up against the gentry and the bourgeoisie, both of whom are modelled on Thatcherite archetypes: the yuppie suited businessman, the handbag-clutching Tory housewife from middle-England, and the crisply khakied SAS-style soldier. Not the least of these ruptures the film exhibits is that the site of our heroic queerness is in the heart of the monarchy. The film makes it clear that the ideology of respectability upheld by state apparatus is incompatible with queerness, but Edward and Gaveston's continual anxious

mediation between gay love and royal duty somewhat overshadows more radical possibilities of the new queer agenda. Jarman's own outspoken attitude to his homosexuality and his HIV status made him something of a hero, certainly for British queer activists (in September 1991 he was canonised by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence), yet Jarman's work as an artist and filmmaker owes more to traditions of bohemian high art classicism than it does to street politics.

However, *Edward II* is particularly compelling in its handling of camp spectatorship, and for the way in which it positions gay men and straight women in adversarial relations. As we might expect, the film is visually stunning, with most scenes being rendered as painterly tableau, the characters vividly displayed in front of minimalist stone backdrops. Each shot displays iconically precise composition, with skin and fabrics, blood and water, lit to highlight their form and texture, always displayed with a sensitivity to the spectacle of detail. By far the most complex and richly displayed spectacle in *Edward II* is that of Queen Isabella (Tilda Swinton), Edward's wife. In each of her scenes Isabella shimmers, resplendent in a succession of fabulous outfits that self-consciously reference the formulaic excess of female star iconography; in an interview where he talks about *Edward II* in detail, Jarman himself notes that in one particular scene Isabella looks like Joan Crawford, in another that she's a cross between Crawford and Christine Keeler, and in another that she looks like Evita, 'the musical, not the politician.'³¹ What have been called a

'Vogue's gallery of designer dresses'³² evoke the spectacles of Audrey Hepburn and Eva Peron, amongst others, but it isn't just the costumes which plug into such a distinctive visual vernacular, one that has a strong history of gay male identification: crucially it is Tilda Swinton's performance, which manages to capture elements of pastiche and irony but also makes astonishing use of poised stillness that at different points evokes stunned victimisation and sinister evil.

It clearly isn't necessary to sift through anecdotal and incidental biographical material in order to situate Jarman as a gay man, but it may be necessary to engage in such subcultural enterprise in order to think about Jarman as the kind of gay man who identifies or aligns himself with women. What becomes clear from Jarman's volumes of memoirs, *Dancing Ledge*, *Modern Nature* and *At Your Own Risk* is that in his own subcultural milieu, he did not have much to do with women at all.³³ The journals suggest a membership of, or movement through, an assortment of artistic cliques, bohemian enclaves and upper and middle class gay subcultures, but Jarman's principal interests usually seem to lie in other men, in either sexual or fraternal terms. Clearly the finished product that is the representation of Isabella in *Edward II* is the result of a complex collaboration between the director, his writers, costume designers, photographers, lighting designers, and of course, and not the least Tilda Swinton herself. B. Ruby Rich has noted how 'Tilda Swinton's brilliance as an actor - and full co-creator of her role - invests her character with more weight,

and thus more evil, than anyone else on the screen.³⁴ I shall return to the issue of evil shortly. At the risk of being overly speculative though, it doesn't seem too bold to suggest that the extent to which Isabella signifies as a camp icon in *Edward II* is an indication of the extent to which such imagery plays a part in urban gay male culture (as understood by Swinton and other workers on the film, as much as by Jarman), rather than an indication of Jarman's own female identification or heterosocial practice. The iconography of the diva or the Hollywood screen siren saturates gay male culture, and is naturalised in this context, so that it often functions as a kind of background noise that most men who circulate through urban gay space will be familiar with, even if such representations do not describe or elicit their identification. This familiarity with camp female iconography will also be true for those honorary members of gay subculture - friends, political affiliates, camp followers both male and female, straight-queer chicks and chaps - all of whom may fraternise with gay men and lesbians in gay spaces because the party's funkier, or as a respite from homosocial chauvinism, or as heterosocial political dissent.

One of the most striking images near the beginning of *Edward II*, one notable amongst many striking images, is of two naked young hustlers who are having sex in Gaveston's bed in France as he receives his call home from Edward. The men themselves represent an iconography of queerness that seems to have become

representative of the activist group Outrage, and the kind of queer politics it represented in Britain in the early 1990s. The men are white, young, smooth and beautiful, their heads are shaved to precision, they are lithe, muscled and masculine, and they are utterly uninhibited, exhibitionistic even, in their sexual practice: in many ways they are a gay ideal that we may aspire to. The couple are also genderless: their matched physicality negating sexual difference, unifying masculinity in a narcissistic union. Not for these two perfect faggots the easy iconography of active and passive that is exhibited in Leo Bersani's reading of Erik and Riton fucking on the roof in Genet's *Funeral Rites*.³⁵ These studs are raunching around, but their perfectly matched physical type and masculinity, and thrillingly undifferentiated sex acts deflect any understanding of top or bottom or power imbalance, let alone camp spectatorship, effeminacy or female identification. This couple represent one of the ruptures that makes *Edward II* so fascinating. They are an ideal of homosexuality that remains unfulfilled by Edward and Gaveston throughout the film, indeed that they cannot fulfil: the queer hustlers are a product of queer Britain in the 1990s, whilst Edward and Gaveston are Renaissance sodomites. Despite their easily identifiable iconographic origins, as possible sites of identification this couple of nameless hustlers have no culture, they are not shown having to integrate their subjectivities and sexuality into a social system, they don't even display the rank and taste that clothes might afford. They're just perfect faggots having a perfect (non)fuck. Their unselfconscious and irony-free eroticism makes a striking contrast to the troubled coupledness of the king and his working-

class lover. Edward and Gaveston have vexed conversations riddled with doubt and anxiety, they share the absurdity of constitutional pomp and they share an intimate humour as they dance the tango; but they don't have sex and they don't represent the perfect faggottry of the hustlers who form an ideal of queer sexuality against which we measure Edward and Gaveston. The introduction of the hustlers and the idealisation of homosexuality they represent so early in the film allows us to monitor continually the levels of homophobic intervention Edward and Gaveston must overcome in order that they may fulfil that idealisation. However, the hustlers also serve to define homosexuality in purely libidinous terms that efface gender from queerness. This organisation of homosexuality becomes more sustained as the narrative of the film develops and Isabella comes to increasingly personify the homophobic obstacles Edward and Gaveston face in becoming perfect queers, where that perfection is a mutual sameness of masculinity. In the book of the film, Jarman celebrates this masculinity, staking his particular claim upon the 'real' lovers: 'Neither Edward nor Gaveston were the limp-wristed lipping fags so beloved of the tabloids. Edward swam in winter, hedged and ditched the fields of his house at Langley. Gaveston was the finest horseman of his age.'³⁶

At first it appears that Isabella is deferential and eager towards Edward, craving his attention, but there can be no sexual satisfaction in their relationship, and apparently there can be no sisterly solidarity either. Presumably such an affinity

would compromise Edward's aspiration to perfect masculine faggottry.

Immediately after Gaveston has returned, to be greeted by his lover with titles and power, we watch Edward and Isabella in bed, abortively having sex. The crisp porcelain of Isabella's complexion remains unblemished by any facial expression as her overtures are coldly rejected by Edward, who appears impatient and repulsed by her. In the published script of the film, which contains Jarman's personal notes, he comments on this scene:

An unsatisfactory bedroom scene with Tilda and Steven - she thought it might be misogynist, I thought the audience would have some sympathy for her, even if she plays it hard.³⁷

A short while later we join Isabella in bed, alone, wracked with jealousy and frustration, but still looking iconographically sublime of course. The military Mortimer entices Isabella to his rebellious cause. After her humiliation by Gaveston, who puts her up against a wall and feints to kiss her, pulling away as the queen in her frustration kisses back, and finally some abuse from her husband, who calls her a 'foul strumpet' for fawning on him, Isabella induces Mortimer to have Gaveston killed. Mortimer comes upon the queen as she is shooting a crossbow at a stag suspended from the ceiling. She's resplendent in full Eva Peron drag, and hysterically gleeful at having thrown off her marital obligations. Later, she returns to the marital bedroom, dripping in strings of effervescent pearls as she brings news to Edward that Gaveston's exile is to be repealed, knowing, as we do, that she has planned with Mortimer for him to be killed upon his return. An exotic and

passionate encounter in the corridor cements Isabella and Mortimer's allegiance and immediately afterwards Mortimer stabs Gaveston at a cocktail party in front of Isabella and Edward, who then attempts to banish Mortimer from the court. Thereafter war breaks out between the Thatcherite riot squad of Mortimer's army and Edward's Outrage activists. Whilst war rages in the background, Isabella, impeccably coiffed, is Eva Peron (the musical) as she addresses the multitude at a microphone. Jarman remains respectful of Marlowe's legacy and ultimately aspirant faggotry is routed, although Edward's unfortunate demise on the end of a poker becomes a paranoid fantasy, whilst the king escapes at the end alive. (How very queer...)

Edward II seems to illustrate some of the problems that arise when we insufficiently situate homosexuality within the broader field of gender. It seems particularly unfortunate in a film so bristling with the iconographic majesty of Isabella and with self-conscious, state of the art queerness (even Outrage themselves are on hand as Edward's army), that the interests of women and of gay men can be represented as so antithetical and as so much a function of patriarchal power structures. Indeed, despite her aesthetic glorification, it becomes clear that Isabella herself has little power beyond the symbolic status of her title. Humiliated and rejected by her husband (and her husband's lover), she must make herself an object of exchange, selling her passion and legitimacy to Mortimer, who does have enough material authority to get her on the throne and secure her position.

Edward's homosexuality is only a problem in as much as it leads him to reject Isabella, thus producing her scorn, and also in that it offers Mortimer the opportunity to seek power. Otherwise the triangle of Edward, Mortimer and Isabella forms a perfect homosocial system. The passing of Isabella from one powerful man to the other marks the conclusion of their struggle for true patriarchal subjectivity, which is itself marked by ownership of the throne. Edward possesses monarchical power. Mortimer wants power and uses Isabella to get it. The object of their struggle, which is national royal power, symbolised by the throne, is never questioned: queer Edward expects obedience, deference and the trappings of that power as much as Mortimer or the chorus of Thatcherite earls; this queerness declines any critique of state power, or any affiliation with political resistance. The issue at the heart of the film is about who has the biggest balls to sit in the big chair, not about challenging or resisting complicity with the structures the chair may represent. Early in the film Edward allows his lover to slouch across the throne, later Gaveston larks about on it in the nude, whilst Mortimer and Isabella later occupy it with pomp and appropriate attire. The basis of Edward's oppression seems to be a recognition that his masculinity is insufficiently ample to justify his ownership of the throne: he never does manage to capture the perfectly unified masculinity of the hustlers, and this brings about a dubious alignment between the perfect queerness they represent and institutional state power. Edward's Outrage army seems to be something of an incoherently incorporated visual gag, rather than indicative of the film's embracing of a queer politics which

challenges state power. Indeed, when Edward realises that he will be impeached if he does not reject Gaveston, he sacrifices his great gay love for the sake of his power and the support of the grubby and grasping earls of middle-England.

However, at least Edward mourns his sacrifice: Isabella, on the other hand seems to become more evil and less sympathetic the further she moves from stunned, frustrated victimisation towards power and fulfilment. Most chilling, and most erotic, is her murder of Kent, Edward's brother, who has helped the rebels for the sake of the monarchy, but who then challenges Mortimer and Isabella's legitimacy as holders of the throne. Isabella is as poised and as perfectly coiffed as ever as she bends down to kiss her brother-in-law's neck. As Kent begins to writhe, we realise that the kiss is too long, too intense; when he starts to struggle and blood pumps out over his throat and her chin it becomes graphically clear that she has gorged the life out of him. Isabella finally steps away, her metamorphosis from 'fawning strumpet' through frustrated wife to homosocial token and finally to malicious vampire is completed. As Ruby Rich suggests, 'For women, *Edward II* is a bit complicated. Since the heroes are men and the main villain is a woman, some critics have condemned it as misogynist.'³⁸ *Edward II* may be a misogynist film, but only in the extent to which it makes Isabella complicit with a ruthless perfidy and lust for power most usually engendered in men within the state's constitutional autocracy, and which even intoxicates the heroically validated but viciously victimised queers.

Colin MacCabe offers a different interpretation which suggests that *Edward II's* misogyny is an effect not of a blindness to state power structures, but of Jarman's sexuality itself:

The film is much more unambiguous in its misogyny than any of his other work. In that gay male dialectic where identification with the position of woman is set against rejection of the woman's body, *Edward II* is entirely, and without any textual foundation, on the side of rejection.³⁹

There is, of course, considerable disingenuousness in these words, and an implicit naturalisation of the author's own heterosexuality and consequent innocence of misogyny. Clearly MacCabe doesn't have the space or the brief to dissect gay male relationships with women. However, his argument has the effect of unifying a gay male relationship with women that is continually balanced between identification and repulsion. It is offensive to suggest that male homosexuality is an effect of a physical repulsion for women: this idea has its modern origins in psychoanalytic and psychiatric practice which until very recently clinically pathologised homosexuality.⁴⁰ Clearly many individual gay men are misogynistic, as is much gay culture. Dominant cultures, formed through constant hegemonic renegotiation, are pulling towards patriarchal interests; that means that all counter, resistant, conformist, reactionary and dissident cultures will be formed out of interactions with aspects of that dominant culture. In other words, our society and the knowledges it circulates are misogynistic; this should not surprise us. Such glib

accusations deflect analysis of the functions women may have in gay culture, as well as dissection of the *usefulness* knowledges about supposed gay male misogyny have within homosocial systems. There's also something disquietingly homophobic about the assumption that all homosexual men identify with women. It is a basic assumption of this project that such identifications are valuable, but MacCabe's totalising tendency is ill conceived. Not all gay men identify with women, even though, as I have suggested, gay male culture is saturated with the iconography of camp spectatorship such that most will be familiar with the practice. MacCabe's statement is derived from the continuing prevalence of inversionist knowledge about homosexuality, which gay activism has rightly repelled. Third sex accounts of homosexuality work to shore up the authenticity of heterosexual gender roles, and thus patriarchal power. However, accounts such as the third sex models are an attempt to make coherence out of complex and contradictory elements, which arise partly through our own dissident interventions. I would suggest that inversion theories offer us the opportunity to strike back at normative ideologies of gender through the very site of our constraint. Points that require particularly intense policing by dominant authorities are those which elicit dominant anxiety, and thus contain faultlines we must exploit.

However, I have suggested that Derek Jarman's homosexuality, as he ruminates upon it in his biographies, was not meaningful to him in this way; he did not understand his own queerness as a dissident gender identification, but as a form

of erotic liberation and bohemian rebelliousness. If the representation of Isabella exhibits a malicious loathing of womanhood, then this occurs precisely because Jarman was not interested *enough* in female identification to elevate her out of normal patterns of homosocial (misogynist) representation. Aesthetically and performatively Isabella represents an almost mathematically precise interpretation of gay male camp iconography, but this imagery is then employed in a narrative which consolidates and naturalises gay male masculinity to such an extent that it may exchange that female iconography in order to purchase the possibility of homosocial agency and power, symbolised by the throne of England.

Hysteria and Heterosocial Dissent

If we are to suggest that the markers of camp spectatorship deployed in *Edward II* underwrite homosocial structures, because Isabella's star iconography and sexually repressed hysteria enable her homosocial exchange by gay men as much as sexual objectification would enable her exchange by straight men, then Jarman has unwittingly offered us a critical apparatus with which to assess the heterosocial potential in specific arrangements of camp spectatorship or female identification. This is not to suggest that the iconography of camp spectatorship *necessarily* aligns gay men with straight men by enabling them to enter homosocial bonds through the exchange of women, but *Edward II* shows us clearly how such forms of spectatorship have this (politically undesirable) potential. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* seems to be calling on familiar and identifiable reading traces

that invite camp spectatorship: female protagonists, marginalisation of men, validation of emotional excess, flamboyant iconography and kitsch aestheticism. These reading traces are substantiated with our knowledges about Almodóvar's sexuality, regardless of the often unhelpful way in which he may comment upon it. Furthermore, such inducements are offered in the context of Almodóvar's circulation through media apparently affirmative to our subcultural interests, where we are encouraged to feel politically comfortable. Liberal broadsheet journalism, as we have seen, may strenuously, but insidiously, attempt to recuperate Almodóvar's aura of camp spectatorship and thus dissipate his potential heterosocial challenges, but such recuperation can never be secure, and in the context of the agility of gay subcultural reading, and the powerful inducements offered by *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, the film may feasibly retain substantial dissident capacity.

As we have seen, the early parts of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* offers us pleasures we associate with the woman's films of 30s and 40s Hollywood. We are invited masochistically to align our identifications with Pepa in her self-conscious manifestation of emotional trauma in the face of her partner's desertion (Annette Kuhn notes that woman's films were often derogatorily known as 'three-handkerchief movies'⁴¹). I have also suggested that the non-naturalistic break in the diegesis offered by Pepa's dubbing of *Johnny Guitar* instates the notion of contingency within the text of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*: its

narrative is not universal, but specifically derived from the genre of the woman's film, as is that of *Johnny Guitar*, and the native languages of both films are but one potential point of ethnic or national origin. More importantly, such an instatement of contingency within *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* highlights the conditionality of Pepa's role-playing of the mistreated heterosexual woman. We come to see her state of hysterical trauma as a cultural response, conditioned in part by a governing patriarchal narrative represented in *Johnny Guitar*, where female dissent and personal authority, to say nothing of the resistance of lesbian identity, becomes crushingly and cloyingly recuperated. The most perfect moment of Pepa's hysteria is when she faints in the studio, ending the session in which she has been dubbing Crawford's voice into Spanish. What is striking is that it is during Pepa's performance as an actress attempting to represent another woman's hysteria and emotional distress, that she is overcome, and not whilst she is 'herself' within the trauma she suffers at Iván's hands. It would seem that what is unbearable is the role of powerless heterosexual woman, and not the simple knowledge that some man doesn't love you any more. In the film's press book Carmen Maura comments on the tight skirts and high heels that she has to wear in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*:

Of course they'll be uncomfortable, but I'll never show it. For someone like Pepa, high heels are one of the best ways to handle her suffering. If Pepa didn't keep up her looks, her spirits would break down completely.⁴²

Significantly the ruptural hysterical excess represented by the fainting, the breakdown in the coherence of Pepa's subjectivity, is produced by performative strain (Pepa-as-Crawford-as-Vienna-as-victim) and not by the strain of her ill-treatment by Iván. It's her powerless role Pepa can't cope with, not the fact that she's in pain because a man rejected her. This acts as something of a break from the conventions of melodrama and the woman's film, yet continues to maintain Pepa within an emotional framework we recognise as constitutive of these genres, which continues to validate, and indeed propagate, women's (and gay men's) feelings.

After Pepa has procured some illicit sleeping tablets from the pink face-masked pharmacist, she returns home. She moves to the kitchen where we enjoy close up shots of her making gazpacho - all reds and juice and the violent whizzing of the liquidiser. She puts all her sleeping tablets into the jug and tells the gazpacho and us that she is 'sick of being good'. With this decision and the discordance of the blender ringing in our ears, Pepa goes into the bedroom and heaves Iván's suits out of the wardrobe. The soundtrack swells with the magnificently pompous tango of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherezade*, signifying hypnotic passion. Pepa lights a cigarette, but then reminds herself that she shouldn't smoke. So she tosses the matches and cigarettes onto the bed, primal scene of her relationship with Iván, where they catch fire. Woman's passion, igniting in the bed, isn't rational, but it isn't accidental either. The music surges in an intermediate climax. As Pepa walks back to

the bed, she's carrying a large plastic tulip of Iván's, which has a pink bloom on the end. The erect tulip detumesces crudely and spectacularly in the heat of the flames and the music, whilst Pepa stands watching the fire, transfixed, until the smoke starts to choke her. She runs out of the bedroom and returns with the hose from the terrace, with which she douses the fire. Phallic tulips wilt under the heat of a woman's passion, whilst the crude force of ejaculation is not only cold, like water from a hose, but antithetical to such incendiary passion and to the atmosphere of drama and spectacle. The flames and the music are irrational, wanton, enveloping; the water is sensible, necessary and premature: the fire must be extinguished or the bed and the apartment will be consumed.

Iván's estranged wife Lucía has recently been released from a mental hospital and has engaged the feminist lawyer Paulina Morales to sue Iván for the years that she has lost. It is clear once again that it is Lucía's position of powerlessness in her relationship with Iván that has caused her the mental illness for which she now seeks judicial compensation, and not the necessary emotional trauma of desertion. At first Pepa's notion of not being good any more consists of more aggressive attempts to speak with Iván and hold him accountable, but she fails to track him down. Conversely, Pepa seems to be finding it very easy to link up with other people, through a series of Dickensian coincidences which complicate the plot to the point of farcical confusion: her friend Candela arrives at the flat when she cannot contact Pepa by phone because Pepa has ripped it out, Marissa arrives with

her boyfriend Carlos because the real estate agent has sent them, and Lucía arrives seeking vengeance because she thinks that Pepa is about to go to Stockholm with Iván. Carlos turns out to be Iván's son. He fixes the telephone, and his mother, Lucía, rings the airport to claim that she has planted a bomb on the plane to Stockholm. Candela is on the run because she gave a home to a Shiite terrorist with whom she was in love and who has now been captured. She attempts to throw herself off the balcony. Eventually the police arrive, investigating the bomb threat telephoned to the airport, but this induces panic in Candela, who thinks that they have come for her. Temporary calmness occurs when all parties drink Pepa's spiked gazpacho which, like Oberon's love potion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, induces even the threatening figures of the police to succumb to Pepa's spell.

At first it appears that Lucía is squaring up to compete with Pepa for Iván's affections. However, this interaction does not proceed as we would expect, with each measuring up the other's manifestation of feminine attributes that may appeal to men. Rather, they bond through a shared experience of powerlessness in relation to Iván. Pepa and Lucía reflect on how they both know him as a voice, disembodied, instructive. When Pepa's confusion and suffering has cleared enough, she understands the urgency of Candela's situation and goes to see the feminist lawyer, Paulina Morales, for her advice. We already know that Iván is going to Stockholm with someone, and not with Pepa or Lucía. Whilst Pepa waits to see Paulina she answers the secretary's phone and recognises Iván's voice. He hangs

up, but then she notices a plane ticket to Stockholm on the desk. When Pepa enters Paulina's office, the lawyer looks up, recognising her, and says 'Of all the nerve'; we now understand that Paulina must be Iván's new lover. Pepa explains Candela's predicament, but Paulina Morales is unsympathetic; her advice is that Candela should turn herself over to the very authorities she fears, so that they can put her in jail: after all, she says, Candela has committed a crime and must pay. Pepa replies that her friend's only crime was falling in love and being afraid; she adds that she herself would have done the same. Paulina is scornful about Candela and Pepa's 'lovelorn' status. Pepa gets very angry and Paulina tells her to leave or she'll call the police. Pepa hits the lawyer across the face. As Pepa leaves, Paulina's secretary asks if the meeting was helpful: Pepa smiles contentedly and replies that she feels much better.

In her encounter with Pepa, it becomes clear that Paulina Morales, feminist lawyer, is allied to the very same male interests of which the other women on the verge of a nervous breakdown are victims, and which they are in various stages of overcoming or understanding. Paulina is not tied to the other women through any experience of emotional trauma, through which she may gain an appreciation of powerlessness in relation to men; indeed, Paulina is sufficiently distant from such an understanding that she actually calls upon the authority of men against another woman. Far from recognising any difficulty in her gender, as a role that propagates passivity, Paulina precisely gains her power over other women through

the degree of her naturalised conformity to such subordination. Pepa has been forced out of Iván's affections as Paulina has insinuated herself into them. It would seem that Pepa's anger, and her deeply satisfying violence when she hits Paulina, is justified in the face of such gender treachery, all the more authentic as Pepa is acting not only for herself, but on behalf of other disempowered women, Candela and Lucía. Paulina is visibly stunned when Pepa hits her, and this shock at our protagonist's violence exhibits a fracturing of the lawyer's naturalised position. This naturalisation of Paulina's status acts as a kind of ideological denial through which she has been able to offset her potential victimisation with the degree of her favour and success in a male world, which is represented by the legal system in which she works. The effect of Paulina's treachery deepens when we realise that she is Lucía's lawyer in her suit against Iván, but he is now the lawyer's lover: no wonder the case has not been successful.

After Pepa faints at work she begins to move away from the traditional model of hysteria with which woman's films traditionally make sense of heterosexuality. The scene in which she hits the gender traitor, Paulina, marks the climax of this thematic arc which takes Pepa from the kind of female masochistic icon camp spectatorship venerates, into a substantially more powerful textual position which we may describe as exhibiting Almodóvar's heterosocial bonding with her. In a sense Paulina Morales helps to facilitate Pepa's ascension into a more powerful position. From the moment at which she faints in the dubbing studio Pepa begins

to move away from manifesting the spectacle of hysterical behaviour we might expect of a wronged woman. Such spectacles invariably suggest an appropriate deficit of activity as expected of women within patriarchal gender roles. Pepa's transcendence of this passivity is again marked when she tells the gazpacho that she is sick of being good, and when she hits Paulina this transformation seems to have come full circle: hysterical women are the ones that get hit across the face, they don't do the hitting. Pepa gradually emerges from under the weight of manifesting the pain of her mistreatment by Iván, which displays her passivity, and then she proceeds to act for other women. She approaches a lawyer on behalf of Candela, and she drugs the policemen who potentially threaten her friend. Pepa manages to overcome the adversarial conditions of her relationship with Lucía, and the two women find a shared experience of having to display acceptance and love in the face of Iván's refracted duplicity in their relationships with him. At the climax of the film, when Lucía fails to be reconciled to Iván's treachery by such bonding, Pepa intercedes in an attempt to stop her from shooting Iván.

As Peter William Evans has noted in his volume on the film in the BFI Modern Classics series, the closure of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is ambiguous.⁴³ We have seen how Pepa has overcome the necessary display of her hysteria, we have seen her intercession on behalf of Candela, and her control of the potential chaos at her apartment when all the coincidental and farcical elements of the narrative collide (with the exception of Iván), which becomes complete when

the policemen succumb to the narcotic effect of the gazpacho. However, Lucía tears the fabric of this unity and harmony by taking the policemen's guns and pointing them at Pepa. The two women are the only remaining conscious figures. Lucía asks Pepa what it was that she had to tell Iván. Pepa tells her that she has nothing to say to him now: 'I just want to forget him and you should do the same.' Lucía says that she had forgotten him in the hospital, but then one day she heard his voice on the television telling a woman that he loved her: she didn't recognise his face, only his voice. Lucía behaved as if she was cured and was released from the mental hospital.

PEPA: If you're cured, stop aiming at me.

LUCÍA: But I'm not cured. I faked it and I fooled them. I can only forget him by killing him.

Lucía suggests that now Pepa knows, they should drink a toast. The tension mounts as both women raise glasses of the drugged gazpacho; a series of reverse shots establish eye contact between the women. Lucía breaks the deadlock by throwing her gazpacho into Pepa's face. Whilst Pepa runs to the kitchen in distress to wash the juice out of her eyes, Lucía escapes with the guns, hijacking the boyfriend and motorbike of Pepa's neighbour, Ana. Pepa and Ana follow in the Mambo cab, and the two women commiserate with each other about their fate at men's hands. Ana is jealous of the fact the Lucía is sitting on the bike seat: Pepa reminds her that Ambite, her boyfriend, is being held at gunpoint. Ana shrugs this off, he's unfaithful and she's going to get some money and buy his motorbike:

'With a bike, who needs a man?' Lucía is enjoying herself enormously, cackling into the wind as she fires the gun at the pursuing Mambo cab, entreating Ambite to go faster or she'll shoot him. Pepa arrives at the airport after Lucía and finds Iván's ex-wife putting on her glasses and pulling out a gun ready to shoot her prey. Pepa pushes a luggage trolley at Lucía, and watches it as it knocks over the potential assassin, who fires the gun into the air, causing panic. Pepa faints. She revives in Iván's arms with Paulina looking on disdainfully, but pushes him away and tells him to let go. She tells him to instruct Paulina to go away. He dithers, and Pepa does it herself. The lawyer retreats. Iván may be incapable of action, but he remains capable of honeyed rhetoric: he tells Pepa that he's ashamed, and that he's treated her so badly. She tells him that all she wanted was to talk to him. He asks her to say what she needed to say, but it is too late. We know that the withheld information concerns Pepa's pregnancy. Pepa admits that at any time before their meeting she would still have told him, but not any more. She only came to save him from Lucía, now she wants to go. She turns away and returns to her apartment.

Here at the end of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, Pepa's romantic restraint is the equal of any heroine of any woman's film, even that of Bette Davis's Charlotte Vale in the sublimely melodramatic *Now, Voyager*. Yet the meaning of Pepa's restraint doesn't lie in some noble sacrifice, a self-denial for a liberal morality; her restraint appears to be a heterosocial triumph. Peter William Evans suggests that 'our cravings for a happy ending are frustrated' but his hegemonic

'our' nominates and naturalises an audience looking for patriarchally inscribed heterosexual romance.⁴⁴ In as much as Pepa's reconciliation with Iván would undermine that resistance fashioned from her hysteria, then the ending of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* does offer satisfying completion. Yet there remain some fundamental ambiguities here which may remind us of the difficulty we face in maintaining consistent textual dissent. Pepa, and indeed Lucía, remain embedded within narratives of heterosexual romance: given that the narrative structure of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is organised upon the premise of Iván's elusiveness, it would seem appropriate that the conclusion of this arc would bring the erstwhile lovers face-to-face for some kind of reckoning. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* seems to offer us three different kinds of resolution with Iván represented by Pepa, Lucía and Paulina.

The lawyer gets her man, and is leaving the scene of the problematic diegesis with him. Yet her romantic conquest is a hollow one that we aren't encouraged to identify with: Paulina Morales is a gender traitor, and worse, hasn't been on the verge of a nervous breakdown, has indeed, colluded with those forces which would bring other women to that verge. We are supposed to find her famous feminism ironic in the light of her gender treachery, but such humour undermines gay heterosocial investments in female bonding by belittling women's activism. That the lovers are leaving Madrid, glorified heart of Almodóvar's oeuvre, underlines her marginalisation. The film's ending does marginalise Iván within the

structure of personal affiliations, as our heterosocial expectations demand: Pepa does dismiss him. However, she has come to the airport to save Iván, and not, as we may hope, to save Lucía from the consequences of shooting Iván, in what could have been an act of sisterly bonding between the women. As Lucía is escorted away, Pepa ignores her, and tells Iván that she came to prevent his assassination. Here, then, Lucía is but the means to bring Pepa and Iván together so that they may play out a final scene in their romance. It is Lucía, with her glorious relish of the motorcycle chase and her vivid, purposeful pursuit of Iván who embodies the film's sponsorship of hysteria as rebellion against homosocial vanity and complacency, but her version of narrative completion is marginalised and carted off to the mental hospital. Anyway, we could see Lucía's need to kill Iván as an indication of her ongoing infatuation from which she hasn't recovered. Pepa and Lucía, potentially heterosocially united in homosocial defiance in their bonding and in their assassination of Iván, end up leaving the airport separately, Lucía escorted by the police, with her plan thwarted by her potential ally. Iván lives to fly off with the gender traitor. This conclusion, with its heterosocial disappointments and emotive good-byes, resuscitates a conventional account of female hysteria as emotional weakness in the face of abandonment and frustrated romance, which back-tracks somewhat on the efforts made earlier to identify hysteria as the effect of maintaining a powerless gender role. Lucía knows that her only freedom comes not with the knowledge that her love relationship with Iván is over, she already knows that, but with his death and thus with her release from having to

continually endure the pain of his choice and power, and her passivity. To that end, Pepa's rescue of Iván recuperates Lucía's audacious dissidence. We may rejoice in Pepa's brushing off of Iván's ludicrous disengenuousness, and that she is able to maintain restraint, but this is a much weaker, more rational conclusion of her relationship with Iván than murdering him would have been. The incendiary passion, brilliantly underscored with Rimsky-Korsakov, that burns Pepa's bed and threatens to consume the apartment, which seemed to represent an embracing of hysteria but also a refusal of passivity, is here extinguished in the rationality of Pepa's dignity and restraint. Such an uncompromising resolution of Pepa and Lucía's verging breakdown as Iván's glorified murder would certainly alienate the mainstream liberal audience Almodóvar seems so concerned to address at the expense of a more specialised and radical one; clearly this isn't a risk the writer/director is willing to take.

In the ending of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* it seems that the manifold disparate factors which make up the context of the film's production and consumption coalesce. Knowledge of Almodóvar's sexuality and his particular interest in women lead us through a narrative which does offer many of the pleasures associated with camp spectatorship, both for audiences of gay male queens, and for diverse appropriative or heterosocially aligned camp followers. The narrative perspective would seem to confirm the director's affiliation with women by sponsoring Pepa's perspective, whilst the scopic organisation of the film

decentres male protagonism, which makes it difficult for an imputed male spectator to gain sufficient leverage to enter into an exchange of women through a textual patriarchal representative. However, this is often true of many melodramas and so-called woman's films which choose not to address a male spectator. At its most successful *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* manages to fuse such woman-centred interests with a continuing acknowledgement of its appeal to camp spectatorship, thus offering the conditions for heterosocial bonding.

In the final scene of the film we see Pepa arriving home to the shambles of her apartment, after she has left the airport. Candela, Carlos, Marissa, the telephone repairman, and the policemen are all still sleeping, and there is broken glass and spilled gazpacho all over the floor, the bed is a burnt-out wreck and the telephone is disembowelled. Marissa is sleeping out on the terrace, while her erstwhile fiancée is curled up with Candela on the couch. Pepa steps over the mess and notes that 'the repairman is a doll, but I better save him for Marissa.' She joins Marissa out on the terrace as she wakes up. Pepa confides that she's pregnant and Marissa gives up her chair. Marissa then confides that she had a dream which has left her no longer a virgin. The two women are sharing their distaste for virgins as the credits roll.

Under the influence of Pepa's magic potion, the gazpacho (which with its violent red seems to evoke her passion, and was whizzed together under her spell, 'I'm sick of being good') what emerges at the end of *Women* is a set of bondings that transcend the adversarial relations sponsored by homosocial systems. *Edward II* shows us that the trappings of camp spectatorship alone do not safeguard gay men's relations with women from reproducing these bonds, which work to sustain patriarchal authority. Similarly the portrayal of Paulina in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* shows us how the exchange of women within homosocial arrangements often sets up competitive relations between women themselves for the limited advantage of male patronage. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* brings Pepa to an epiphanal moment which fractures the normativity of her breakdown, exposing the powerlessness of her romantic obsession for Iván, which locks her into suffrage. Such fracturing doesn't give her power, it can't: she remains subject to male power, and in a way we can see the inexorability of her meeting with Iván at the end of the film as symptomatic of this. Yet there are diverse ways of inhabiting a position which retains significant structural powerlessness, and during her combative encounters with Paulina and Lucía, and in her protectiveness of Candela, Pepa seems to develop a more resistant attitude towards the relations in which her gender role is manifested.

Our (gay male) pleasure in masochistically identifying with Pepa's romantic pain leads us through the same epiphany. Our knowledges about Almodóvar, circulated

through a liberal press anxious to instate his associations with women, and the markers of camp spectatorship with which Pepa is represented (the lurid kitsch of her outfits, her deft handling of phallic tulips, telephones and feminist lawyers) elicit gay male camp spectatorship. This queer gaze upon Pepa may initially be manifested through a pleasurable masochistic identification, but such pleasure does not become recuperatively entrenched. A gay male gaze upon Pepa does not pin her into a punishing scopic relay where our homosocially induced instability may be disavowed through her suffering. We could say that this is the predominant effect of the use of camp spectatorship in *Edward II*, but for all its ambiguity, our identification with Pepa in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* remains structurally distinct from Jarman's ambiguous handling of female representation. In watching *Edward II* those gay men whose principal textual investments usually lie in identification with women have a significant problem, in that the very possibility of plausible queer subjectivity is organised as being antithetical to the interests of empowered womanhood. Edward and Gaveston's security and happiness, their integrity as a plausible couple, falls in direct proportion to the ascendance of Isabella. In *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* there is no such split in identificatory positions: plausible anti-homosocial subjectivity and campily empowered womanhood are both unified in Carmen Maura's character. Pepa's self-conscious enlightenment about how her tormented romantic infatuation has normalised her subordinate gender role, leads to her subsequent empowered activity in the punishment of the gender traitor, the

bonding with other women and the assistance of fellow victims of male power (Lucía and Candela). This gender enlightenment and bonding activity express both her empowered womanhood and her heterosocial alignment at the same time. Unlike the empowerment sought by Paulina Morales, which must be traded for desirability in male eyes and sponsorship of male interests (punishment of Candela), Pepa's resistance is not a function of her exploitation of the structural subordination of identities proximate to her own. Indeed the strategies by which she resists her own subjection to the homosocial narrative complement and enhance gay male homosocial resistance derived through an identification with her. We can see a striking contrast not only within different female characterisations in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, but between Pepa's complementary heterosocial dissent, her refusal to be homosocially exchanged or complicit with the homosocial exchange of others, and the more problematic alignment made by Roseanne's domestic goddess with homosocial mechanisms. As we have seen, there seems to be a reluctance in *Roseanne* to step away from the privileges heterosexual women may accrue in relation to lesbians or gay men through their circulation in homosocial systems. The character of Roseanne Conner assiduously exhibits a refusal to be homosocially exchanged herself, but is willing to court queer culture as a naturalised homosocial subject so as to trade on homosexual abjection and perversity in order to accrue trendiness and normativity.

To date *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* has been Pedro Almodóvar's most celebrated work, so much so that it has recently warranted a volume all to itself in the British Film Institute's prestigious Film Classics series. The joyous, almost flippant account it offers of a resistance of homosocial mechanics seems to have given the writer and director his greatest success yet, as Paul Julian Smith has noted.⁴⁵ It is ironic that Almodóvar attains his most substantial, much sought after, mainstream recognition at the moment at which he is most appreciated subculturally. As I inferred in the earlier discussions about Almodóvar's circulation through liberal press, his subsequent work, whilst it may often offer more acute reading traces of camp spectatorship (the astonishingly lurid sets, and the towering transsexualism of Bibi Anderson in *Kika*, for example, or the fantastically knowing enactment of diva mannerisms by Femme Letal's drag act in *High Heels*) has also struggled to stabilise effective heterosocial representation. The infamous and protracted rape scene in *Kika* offers a familiar staple of gay pornographic fantasy in a startlingly erotic and farcical form, set up to disquiet our voyeuristic desires by refracting them through Andrea Scarface's television programme, but in doing so it confuses camp flagrancy with manipulative victimisation. Similarly, Almodóvar's continuing desire to signify in mainstream contexts, and his personal alignment with glamorous and famous heterosexual coupledness, has led to some troublingly homosocial arrogance in his exchange of Carmen Maura as his identified consort and muse, for Victoria Abril in the first instance, and more recently for Marisa Paredes. This passing on of favours from one woman to another too closely

replicates the kinds of treatment women experience within homosocial systems: having to win and maintain favour with men in order to attain social credibility; especially as Almodóvar, as an internationally renowned *auteur*, wields considerable power in relation to the careers of actresses whom he may, or may not choose to fete with his adoration. Such reactionary activity suggests that gay men may find it difficult to sustain heterosocial dissidence in the context of their own continuing oppression, where the inducements to acquire shreds of homosocial authority are potent, but destructive to alliances of trust built up through heterosocial activity with heterosexually resistant women (be they lesbian or straight).

Almodóvar's most recent film, *Live Flesh*, which has also been his most acclaimed for some time, seems to further consolidate the homosocial identification the writer/director has been pursuing. Strikingly for an Almodóvar film, the central protagonists of *Live Flesh* are men, 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 Sancho 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 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. Victor is not only the redemptive agent for the women, but is the manifestation of masculine virility on behalf of the incompetent Sancho and the impotent David. 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 more concerned with phallic iconography, as Victor's virile, cuckolded crotch is made equivalent to the dramatic device of Sancho's pistol.

As ever, opportunities through which we may exploit faultlines are shifting and elusive. It is clear that Almodóvar cannot be consistently claimed for his

heterosocial potential. Nevertheless, identification with Pepa in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* not only satisfies many of the desires of camp spectatorship, but politically aligns gay male investments with the project of empowerment and resistance of women within heterosexuality. The film exhibits a marked effort to resist slipping into becoming merely an opportunity for self-indulgent wallowing in a masochistic consumption of the spectacle of women's anguish. Almodóvar's successes in *Women* are relatively modest and as we have seen, they subsequently become elusive in his work, but in the way in which the film enhances a resistance of homosocial practice by encouraging a coalition of straight female and gay male interests, he circumvents an antithesis engineered for patriarchal interests, and he models a pattern for our heterosocial dissent.

¹Obviously these issues are complex. Despite the upward class mobility many gay men and lesbians undergo as a necessary part of their integration into metropolitan gay subcultures, many lesbians and gay men continue to earn less than their middle-class heterosexual counterparts, partly because we are more likely to take jobs in less prestigious and materially rewarding circumstances, but where it may be easier for us to be queer. See Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998). For an account of how aspiring towards middle-class artistic values is related to the emergence of gay male identity, see Derek Cohen and Richard Dyer 'The Politics of Gay Culture' in *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, edited by Gay Left Collective (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); for a consideration of how

the search for signs of lesbian existence and desire engenders an interest in literature and the arts, see Alison Hennegan 'On Becoming a Lesbian Reader' in Susannah Radstone (ed.) *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988).

²Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972); Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979) and 'It's being so camp as keeps us going' in *Only Entertainment* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992). See also: Andrea Weiss, 'A queer feeling when I look at you: Hollywood stars and lesbian spectatorship in the 1930s' in *Stardom: Industry of Desire* edited by Christine Gledhill (London & New York: Routledge, 1991); Quentin Crisp, *How to Go to the Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Alex Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Lisa Henderson 'Justify Our Love: Madonna and the Politics of Queer Sex' in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, edited by Cathy Schwichtenberg (Boulder & Oxford: Westview Press, 1993); Wade Jennings 'The Star as Cult Icon: Judy Garland' in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, edited by J. P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

³Signorile, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media and the Closets of Power* (London: Abacus, 1994) p.xv.

⁴'Out and Proud', photographed by Gavin Evans; fashion by Lucinda Alford and Karl Plewka, *Observer Life*, 9 July 1995, pp.38-41.

⁵Brad Gooch, *Out* May 1994, p.56.

⁶Robert Chalmers, 'Pedro on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown?' *The Observer* 5 June 1994, p.24.

⁷Marsha Kinder, 'Remapping the PostFranco Cinema: An Overview of the Terrain', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13, 4.

⁸Nigel Floyd 'The New Man from La Mancha', *The Guardian*, 5 December 1991. Note that Maura's character in *The Law of Desire* is a post-operative transsexual and not a transvestite.

⁹Signorile, *Queer in America*, p.xiii.

¹⁰Paul Burston, 'Genre Bender' in Burston, *What are you looking at? Queer Sex, Style and Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1995) p.141.

¹¹Brad Gooch, 'The King of Kink', *Out*, May 1994, p.57.

¹²Mansel Stimpson, 'Pedro's Love of Ladies', *The Pink Paper*, 19 January 1996, p.18.

¹³Rose Collis, 'Pedro Almodóvar: Putting the Boo back in Taboo', *Gay Times* 90, July 1994, p.16.

¹⁴Paul Burston, 'Through the Keyhole: Interview with Pedro Almodóvar', *Attitude*, July 1994, p.66.

¹⁵David Thompson, 'High Heels' review in *Sight and Sound*, vol.1, no.12, pp.61-62.

¹⁶Stanley Kauffman, *Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

¹⁷Robert Chalmers, 'Pedro on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown?', *The Observer*, 5 June, 1994.

¹⁸Paul Julian Smith, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (London & New York: Verso, 1994) p.101.

¹⁹Smith, *ibid*, p.100.

²⁰Not the least of these contextual considerations is Almodóvar's nationality. One significant advantage of Smith's work is his expertise in Hispanic culture, language and history. Unless I am directly quoting I have chosen to use the English translations of titles of the films as an indication of the specific and partial context of my reading, which pretends no particular expertise in Spanish culture. I heed the admonition Smith gives to 'foreigners [who] cannot expect Almodóvar to subscribe to forms of resistance which evolved in response to the triumph of the British and North American Right in the eighties; and if they are serious about respecting cultural difference they must pay more attention to a nation whose understanding ... may well be more sophisticated than their own.' In cultural criticism there is a considerable tension between a residual investment in authenticity (yet which we necessarily and strategically re-instate in order to make intelligible concepts such

as identity: heterosexual, man, British and white; nation) which left wing politics usually respects in order that the margins of power may speak to identify the conditions of their lives, and an investment in post-modernism, through which authenticity has been discredited, which seems to have had the effect of proliferating everything and specifying nothing. We may suggest that post-modernism is an effect of American (and Anglo) globalisation. It is not my intention to attempt to represent the authentic Almodóvar – to uncover the true reading of his work, nor to naturalise the English Anglo-Saxon origins of my own identity. Almodóvar is an international commodity, as he is an important artefact within marginalised and often politically progressive queer subcultures. An authentic Spanish context is not the only one in which Almodóvar may be validly consumed; indeed we may suggest that the metropolitan system is available in Madrid and Barcelona, as much as it is in London. It seems to me that the question is about recognising the potential for power imbalances, and for a blindness to the partiality and culpability of ones own position.

²¹Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

²²A lot of critical work has been done on women's pleasures in the women's film, see: Jeanine Basinger, *How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994); Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*

(London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993); Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Hearth Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987); see also, Christine Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991). For commentary on the generic limitation and complexities of the woman's film, see Mary Ann Doane, 'The Woman's Film' reprinted in Gledhill, (ed.) *Home is Where the Hearth Is*, *ibid*, p.284.

²³Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (Paris: JF Pauverte, 1959); Patrick McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life* (London: Faber, 1992).

²⁴Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1992). For discussion about the continuity of the molly subculture, see Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982); Randolph Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites: homosexual behaviour and western culture in the eighteenth century', *Journal of Social History*, 11, 1977-78; Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London & New York: Cassell, 1994).

²⁵Maria LaPlace, 'Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Hearth Is*, p.165.

²⁶Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*, pp.17-18.

²⁷It is important to note, however, that most feminist criticism of the woman's films recuperates them as sites of women's pleasure and importance. Very few, if any,

feminist film critics locate their pleasures within structures of heterosexuality, and most emphasise the opportunities of subjectivity that the woman's films offer, rather than dwelling on analysis of the masochistic pleasures they enshrine.

²⁸Paula Graham, 'Girl's Camp? The Politics of Parody', in Tamsin Wilton (ed.) *Immortal Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995) p.178.

²⁹For discussion of *Edward II* in this context, see B. Ruby Rich, 'Homo pomo: The New Queer Cinema' in *Sight and Sound*, no.2 vol.2, September 1992, and in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Pam Cook & Philip Dodd (eds), (London: Scarlet Press, 1991).

³⁰Derek Jarman, *Queer Edward II* (London: BFI, 1991).

³¹Mike O'Pray, 'Damning Desire', *Sight and Sound*, no. 6 vol.1, October 1991, p.10; Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p.124, p.148.

³²*The Time Out Film Guide*, ed. Tom Milne (London: Penguin, 1993) p.205.

³³Derek Jarman, *Dancing Ledge* (London: Quartet, 1984); *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (London: Vintage, 1992); *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament* (London: Vintage, 1993).

³⁴B. Ruby Rich, 'Homo pomo: The New Queer Cinema', p.169.

³⁵See Leo Bersani, *Homos*.

³⁶Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 30.

³⁷ibid, p. 20.

³⁸B. Ruby Rich, 'Homo porno: The New Queer Cinema', p. 169.

³⁹Colin MacCabe, 'Throne of Blood', *Sight and Sound*, no. 6 vol. 1, October 1991, p. 12.

⁴⁰For discussion about homosexuality as hostility and fear of women, see Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality* (London & New York: Quartet, 1989) p.67, p. 51.

⁴¹Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, 2nd edition (London & New York: Verso, 1994) p. 209.

⁴²Quote reprinted in Peter William Evans, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, (London: BFI, 1996) p. 70.

⁴³ibid, p.73.

⁴⁴ibid, p.72.

⁴⁵Smith, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, p.101: 'There seems little doubt that *Mujeres* is Almodóvar's most popular work. It remains at the time of writing the only Spanish film to have grossed more than one thousand million pesetas in the domestic market; and it was sold to Spanish television for the unprecedented sum of two hundred million pesetas. The commercial success of *Mujeres* abroad was also exceptional, making Almodóvar the biggest-grossing foreign-language director in the US for 1989.'