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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SPAIN

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Tacones lejanos. When asked in a 1987 interview why in Spanish Oedipal narratives the erotic desire for the mother is frequently redirected toward the father and the patricidal impulse displaced onto the mother, Almodóvar first claimed he did not know and then went on to describe a forthcoming film project called Tacones lejanos. He said it was about two sisters from the south of Spain, who run away from home because their “Bernarda Alba”-type mother frightens them by prophesying they will be guilty of destroying the world. Once they flee to Madrid, their parents perish in a fire. And once they become women, whenever either of them has sex, their mother’s ghost appears, which drives the sisters crazy. Finally, they have a duel with their mother’s ghost and, after killing her, discover that she was really alive and only pretending to be a ghost. So they inadvertently commit matricide. But, consistent with the surrealists’ hatred of the patriarchal mother, Almodóvar claimed that “the mother’s behavior is actually more murderous than that of the girls.” He explained,

The idea of motherhood is very important in Spain. The father was frequently absent in Spain. It’s as if the mother represents the law, the police. . . . When you kill the mother, you kill precisely everything you hate, all of those burdens that hang over you. In this film, I’m killing all of my education and all of the intolerance that is sick in Spain. . . . It’s like killing the power.30

Four years later at a screening at the Directors Guild in Los Angeles, when asked how an outrageous story of matricide had been converted into an equally outrageous melodrama about mother love, Almodóvar claimed that he had only “borrowed” the title from that other project, which still remained undone.

Yet clearly there was more to it than that, for he had also turned that inverted Oedipal narrative inside out.31 The subversive goal was no longer to destroy the maternal but to marshal melodrama’s full arsenal of emotional excess to eroticize and empower it for those traditionally marginalized under patriarchy—or, in other words, to liberate the maternal from the dreaded image of the repressive pa-

triarchal mother, which so frequently haunts Almodóvar movies.

Tacones lejanos (Literally Distant Heels but retitled High Heels in English) is still a story about a passionate daughter (now a TV news broadcaster named Rebecca, brilliantly played by Victoria Abril) who is haunted by a powerful mother (played equally brilliantly by Marisa Paredes). The matriarch is no longer a repressive Bernarda Alba, but an aging, promiscuous pop singer named Becky Del Paramo, with whom the neurotic daughter is erotically obsessed and for whose love she jealously kills two patriarchs—both her stepfather and her own husband, Manuel (the owner of a TV network and her mother’s former lover). As if working her way toward phallic empowerment, Rebecca uses sleeping pills in the first murder (a weapon frequently associated with women) and her husband’s little snub-nosed gun in the second. As in the original matriarchal story of Tacones lejanos, the murderous daughter (a conflation of the two sisters) is sympathetic, but this time, so is the mother—despite her narcissism and adultery. When Becky learns that her daughter has committed these two murders, she comically advises her in a warm motherly tone, “You need to find another way of solving your problems with men,” and then adds, as if to counter any lingering phallocentric assumption, “You need to choose your weapons more carefully.” Finally, like Mildred Pierce, she is willing to take the rap. But neither of these crimes is punished or condemned.

The fact that Becky sleeps with her daughter’s husband hardly raises an eyebrow, especially since the daughter has purposely chosen to marry Manuel precisely because he had been her mother’s lover. This marriage enables her to finally best her mother in their traditional female rivalry and also to replay the murderous Oedipal drama that is represented in the film’s prologue (where a freckled little Rebecca kills her stepfather after he tried to sell her into white slavery to swarthily natives in the islands).

Apparently, Girard’s thesis (which foregrounds the homoerotic backstory of the Oedipus myth) also applies to the Oedipal heroine, namely, that it is the homoerotic desire to love/inimate/become the parent of the same sex (in this case, the mother) rather than the
heterosexual desire for the other (in this case, the father) that really drives the Oedipal narrative. In *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Silverman argues that this “negative Oedipus complex” is essential to feminism because it “make[s] it possible to speak for the first time about a genuinely oppositional desire which challenges dominance from within representation and meaning, rather than from the place of a mutely resistant biology or sexual ‘essence.’” In other words, it allows the daughter to voice her love for the mother, as is clearly the case in powerful feminist Oedipal narratives like Helma Sanders-Brahms’s *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (Germany Pale Mother, 1980) and Chantal Akerman’s *Le rendezvous d’Anna* (The Meetings of Anna, 1979). In contrast to Almodóvar’s previous homoerotic variations on the Oedipal narrative (such as *La ley del deseo*), *Tacones lejanos* (like many subversive feminist texts) boldly proclaims that mother love lies at the heart of all melodrama and its erotic excesses, for it is a passion with primal appeal to all genders and sexual persuasions. Therefore, the rebellious patricidal impulse must be redirected back toward the father, who remains merely a pawn or minor obstacle in the women’s game. As Almodóvar quipped in the 1987 interview, “Fathers are not very present in my films. I don’t know why . . . . This is something I just feel. When I’m writing about relatives, I just put in mothers” (Kinder, “A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar,” 43).

As in other Almodóvar films, although the patriarchs are soon dispatched, the police endure to the bittersweet end. *Tacones lejanos* also adopts the mother/police dyad that Almodóvar mentioned in the 1987 interview. But, instead of making the police a patriarchal mother like Bernarda Alba, Almodóvar creates a maternal police detective who is frequently called Judge and who doubles as a female impersonator named Femme Lethal. With this false persona, he specializes in impersonating Rebecca’s mother on stage and also succeeds in impregnating Rebecca in his dressing room. As if that were not sufficiently confusing, this protean figure also masquerades as a drug addict and other informants fabricated for his various police investigations. Given, this endless chain of impersonations, even his
role of detective becomes suspect, especially since he wears a false beard and appears to be a mild-mannered young bachelor named Eduardo living with his bedridden mother, an ineffectual repressive matriarch who imagines she has AIDS (as if she believes it is the modern version of the Theban plague), and with no father in sight. His perpetual slippage of identity is heightened by the casting of Miguel Bosé, a well-known Spanish pop singer and sexual icon. Clearly, Bosé’s symbolic function in the Oedipal narrative is not to be a seductive or castrating patriarch like Laius or Creon but rather an androgynous hybrid like the mysterious Sphinx and the protean seer Tiresias who both poses and solves the narrative enigmas. Yet instead of being an obstacle to the Oedipal hero or testifying to his guilt, this investigator falls in love with the Oedipal heroine and insists on her innocence under patriarchy, even when he discovers that she deliberately murdered her husband and father.

After tracing Almodóvar’s representations of policemen from the odious villain in his debut feature, Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón (Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap, 1980), to the sympathetic spectators in the closing scene of La ley del deseo, D’Lugo concludes that he positions the law to “valorize murder, gay love,” and other acts that defy the old Spain. He claims, “The characterization of the police begins to undergo a transformation in What Have I Done? where Polo, an impotent police detective who keeps crossing Gloria’s path, turns out to be the on-screen witness and authenticator of the heroine’s actions.” It obviously reaches a new stage of inversion in Tacónes lejanos where the glamorous androgynous hero is a cop and where virtually all policemen are tenderhearted souls who identify with those marginalized under patriarchy. In this way, Almodóvar subverts dominant ideology by realigning the center with the marginal.

Along with the title, the film version of Tacónes lejanos also retains the central importance of the audio fetish, which is grafted over the traditional visual fetish of the woman’s shoe. Even though its reverberations are somewhat diminished in the translation from the Spanish title Distant Heels to the English High Heels, the audio fetish dominates the primal scene. In 1987, Almodóvar said,

I remember when I was a child, it was a symbol of freedom for young girls to wear high heels, to smoke and to wear trousers. And these two girls are wearing heels all the time. After running away, the two sisters live together, and the older remembers that she couldn’t sleep until the moment that she heard the sound of distant heels coming from the corridor. (Kinder, “A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar,” 43)

In the film, this memory is eroticized and attributed to Rebecca. It is also paired with a primal tale of poverty (evocative of vintage maternal melodramas like Stella Dallas) told by her mother, Becky, who replaces the missing sister. As an impoverished child of janitors, Becky watched the well-heeled feet of bourgeois passersby, which could be seen through the window of her humble basement flat, a space that she nostalgically reappropriates, redecorates, and reoccupies (just as her daughter compulsively replays the murderous Oedipal narrative). In the passionate scene in the family basement where Rebecca describes her aural memory to her mother (like a lover confessing her love), we actually witness how the daughter’s primal story appropriates the fetishized visual images from her mother’s earlier memories, which are still visible through the basement window in the background but which now acquire new erotic associations with mother love.

The power of the audio fetish is also strengthened by giving both daughter and mother oracular professions that rely on their voice and by implying that their speech is connected with their status as sexual subjects pursuing their own desire. Both use the airwaves, ordinarily controlled by the patriarchy, to address their passion to a privileged female listener. In one hilarious scene, Rebecca nervously flubs the news, giggling at disasters because she thinks her mother may be listening; clearly, it is her mother who is both Model and Other, the privileged spectator for whose loving gaze and sympathetic ear she always yearns. Yet the TV network and its hardware are owned by her husband, Manuel, who has hired both her and his current “bimbo” Luisa to do the evening news. Rebecca succeeds in dis-
mantling his power over the airwaves by murdering him and by using his medium to broadcast her “live” confession nationwide. Conversely, her more conventional rival, Luisa, who had sex with Manuel shortly before he was murdered, is forced into silence; she stands by Rebecca, signing the news for deaf viewers, fearful that her impersonation of a deaf mute will be misconstrued as the real thing and that the murder confession will be taken as her own.

Almodóvar claims that Rebecca’s TV confession was the germinal idea for (what he calls) this “tough melodrama,” as well as its “emotional high point.”

Television is a medium I hate, but what Rebecca does on the news program is something I’ve dreamed about a lot: after reading the news of a death, the presenter confesses that she is the culprit and gives all the details with complete naturalness. But the real key to the scene was what follows… She goes on to show the news audience an envelope of ordinary-looking photos, explaining that after the murder she photographed all the objects she shared in common with the victim, punishing herself with the terrible awareness that, from now on, their only meaning would be as memories. (press kit)

She turns these frozen photographic images into fetishistic substitutes for her dead husband (a strategy of the masochistic aesthetic, at least, according to Deleuze), who proves to be merely a secondary fetish for mother love.

The voice of sexuality is strongest in Becky, whose masochistic torch songs (actually performed by Luz Casal) are primarily addressed to her tortured daughter. This is particularly true when she dedicates the heart-wrenching “Think of Me” to Rebecca, who is temporarily in prison for the murder of her husband. Rebecca is so disturbed by this song that she tries to buy the radio (the patriarchal apparatus on which it is being transmitted) so that she can turn off its erotic force. Not only are these musical numbers particularly appropriate to the romantic excesses of melo-drama but they are also resonant in the context of the new feminist theorization of sound, particularly in the work of Silverman and Amy Lawrence, who have emphasized the importance of the maternal voice in subject formation. Thus, the women’s subversion of the patriarchy (what Almodóvar calls in the press kit, “acting behind the back of the law of man and that of God”) is achieved primarily by fetishizing the maternal voice, which is amplified through media transmission and hardware as well as through dubbing and impersonation. In this way, it succeeds in replacing the unspoken Name-of-the-Father and the hollow voice of God.

The subversive potential of the maternal voice under patriarchy becomes most compelling in two brilliant comic scenes in which the gender of the maternal performer is most ironically compromised through a dazzling chain of masquerades. In one scene, sexy transsexual actress Bibi Andersson leads an extravagant musical dance number in the women’s prison yard. This statuesque beauty plays an authentic “idealized” mother, who has broken into prison (by nearly killing a cop with a brick) so that she can protect her beloved daughter. Thus (like Busé) Bibi performs a triple impersonation—of a woman, a mother, and a criminal. It is a performance that mocks the symbolic order of the patriarchy and dissolves the boundaries between allegedly incompatible genders and genres (the women’s prison picture and the musical). It also implies that the opposition between outlaw/lawman is as arbitrarily constructed and gendered as that between female/male and that the boundaries between both sets need to be transgressed as thoroughly as those between genres.

Although the genres hybridized in Tacones lejanos are limited primarily to the maternal realm of melodrama, the film’s intertextuality is pointedly international. There is an explicit reference to Autumn Sonata when Rebecca tells her mother how much they resemble (Ingrid Bergman’s talented mother who is an artist and her mediocre daughter. There are also parallels to Hollywood’s celebrity versions of that genre like Mommie Dearest and Postcards from the Edge and many implicit allusions to classical mother/daughter weepies like Mildred Pierce, Imitation of Life, and Stella Dallas and to Hitchcock’s latent lesbian thrillers, Marnie and Rebecca (particularly through the doubling of the name for mother and daughter). There are even a few allusions to Spanish classics, like Juan de
Orduña’s popular musical melodrama, *El último cuplé* (The Last Song, 1957), where an aging popular singer makes a comeback and collapses on stage in midsong; and Edgar Neville’s *El crimen de la calle de Bordadores* (Crime on Bordadores Street, 1946), where the mother similarly saves the daughter she once abandoned by falsely confessing to a murder on her deathbed. And, of course, there are echoes of earlier Almodóvar hits, like *Entre tinieblas* (Dark Habits, 1983), where extravagant Mexican boleros are similarly used to fetishize an erotic passion between two women, a torch singer doing Gilda and a smitten Mother Superior, or ¿*Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (What Have I Done to Deserve This? 1984), where another woman who kills her husband is united in the end with an androgynous love (in this case, her homosexual son rather than the impotent cop whom she tries to fuck in the opening comic sex scene), or even *La ley del deseo*, where Bibi Andersen plays not a “real” model mother (as in this musical interlude) but a real bad mother model who (like Beckey) runs off to a foreign country with a lover, leaving her daughter behind.

The other comic musical performance in *Tacones lejanos* is the most brilliant sequence in the film. It is the scene in which Rebecca takes her mother and husband to the Club Villa Rosa to see Femme Lethal do an impersonation of Beckey. The chain of simulations is dazzling, for the impersonator is really a male pop star (Miguel Bosé) doing an impersonation of an ordinary man (Eduardo) doing an impersonation of a detective (Judge) doing an impersonation of a female impersonator (Lethal) doing an impersonation of a female pop singer (Beckey), who is there in the audience with her daughter Rebecca, who has been impersonating her mother all her life. When the camera cuts to a reverse shot of the spectators, we see that Becky watches the performance with narcissistic fascination, Rebecca with erotic desire, and Manuel with hostility and contempt. Meanwhile, three other anonymous female spectators sing along with Lethal, imitating his every gesture and taking great pleasure in impersonating the impersonator.

Whenever we cut back to the transvestite, we notice that he is performing against a painted backdrop decorated with images of
gypsies and matadors—the old espafiolada stereotype of Spain promoted for foreign consumption, which Almodóvar's postmodernist transsexuals have come to replace in the post-Franco era. This image takes on even greater irony when we recall that Bosé is the offspring of the famous union between Italian actress Lucia Bosé (the beautiful star of Muerte de un ciclista, which mocked that bullfighting stereotype) and Spanish matador Luis Miguel Dominguín, who embodied it, as well as the godson of Pablo Picasso, who helped popularize it worldwide. As in a palimpsest, one national stereotype (or generation or genre) is grafted over the other—just as the sound fetish is mapped over the visual fetish. This constant slippage of meaning evokes both the endless chain of simulations that characterizes postmodernism and the endless chain of substitutions and fetishization that characterizes primary process thinking.

After this dazzling performance, when Lethal finally meets Becky, he proposes that they exchange mementos—her earrings (like the earrings made of horn that she had earlier given little Rebecca in the primal scene from the preti les prologue) in exchange for one of his falsies. This exchange of falsies reveals that their referents come from the mother's body, which is the point of origin for all falsies (a revelation that contradicts the co-optive phallocentric theories of Freud and Lacan). Consistent with Bataille's emphasis on exchange as fundamental to eroticism, this act empowers the extraordinary nonpalpable sex scene between Femme Lethal and Rebecca that immediately follows in his dressing room. It begins with a wild gymnastic form of cunnilingus (a sex act that could just as easily occur between two women) and ends with impregnation and a proper proposal of marriage (even though the petitioner is still partially in drag and the petitionee is already married). What is most remarkable about the encounter is that it is simultaneously very erotic and hysterically funny, a combination that is very difficult to achieve but that Almodóvar consistently masters.

It is this eroticized exchange, not only between two bodies but also between opposing genders and sexual orientations, conflicting tones and genres (screwball comedy, maternal melodrama, and soft-core porn), that finally fulfills Rebecca's subversive dream of maternal plenitude, of becoming the powerful sexual mother she so ardently desires. By celebrating the love between mothers and daughters and giving new meaning to the epithet "Mommie Dearest," Tacones lejanos provides a new erotic fantasy for empowering a strategic alliance among straight women, lesbians, gay men, transvestites, transsexuals, and all other forms of nonpatriarchal androgynes. And it adds new maternal resonance to Almodóvar's ongoing project of
making the "marginal" central to mainstream cinema, not only in Spain but worldwide.

In these subversive Almodóvar Oedipal narratives, where the tone slides fluidly between grand passion and parody, all boundaries are called into question—not only between genders and genres but also between religion and pop culture, holy communion and crime. We are no longer so sure what the Oedipal myth is reproducing, for the symbolic order teeters on the verge of an ideological breakdown.

**READING BILBAO AS A POST-FRANCO STORY OF OEDIPAL LOVE** Finally we come to *Bilbao, a Story of Love* by Catalán filmmaker Bigas Luna, which carries us over the brink. Here, the stunted protagonist Leo is trapped in an Oedipal drama with his uncle and with his middle-aged mistress Maria, who has been hired by his family to replace his dead mother. Like a matriarchal trinity, she serves Leo as mother, nanny, and whore. As in *Burton*, the kind of incest they practice is tolerated by the patriarchy because it keeps the son infantilized. Not only has his uncle stolen his inheritance (like Creon) but his sausage factory vividly reminds Leo that his patrimonial legacy is butchery and murder. To escape his family and his patriarchal destiny, Leo fantasizes about kidnapping a prostitute named Bilbao and making her float like Jesus but "accidentally" kills her in the process.

You might wonder why a feminist would devote so much attention to a film that depicts such obscene crimes against women. On the one hand, *Bilbao* exploits the sexual freedom of the post-Franco era by portraying this perverse sexuality in graphic detail. It could easily be called soft-core and even includes an excerpt from hard-core pornography. Indeed, in the post-Franco period, Spain was immediately inundated with pornography once censorship bans were lifted. On the other hand, *Bilbao* uses such representations to demonstrate that the post-Franco era is not really so free, that even in the superliberated city of Barcelona, Spaniards still retain an internalized repression that cultivates a taste for perverse sexuality.

This aspect is in marked contrast to the films of Almodóvar, which seem optimistic and almost innocent by contrast. The contrast is most apparent in Almodóvar's X-rated *Atame* which is an erotic captivity narrative like *Bilbao* and which also reworks William Wyler's *The Collector* (1965), one of the most seminal films in the genre. While Almodóvar's comical happy ending celebrates the transformative power of l'amour fou (even between the kidnapper and his captive), Bigas Luna focuses on adapting Wyler's class discourse and the repressed infantile sexuality of its death-obsessed captor, reversing the class positions of kidnapper and victim and politicizing their perverse sexuality so as to comment on the legacy of Fascist repression in post-Franco Spain.

Beyond the Spanish context, what may be of particular interest to feminists is the way *Bilbao* reveals the inherent misogyny and perversion in the so-called normal resolution of the Oedipal conflict. We watch the son transfer the incestuous erotic desire he feels for the mother figure onto a younger woman, whom he can call his own and whom he can manipulate with pleasure within his own private space. Like a colonized new world, this space is apart from yet subject to the patriarchal family; it is a privileged site for the projection of home rule. The woman's body is used to negotiate the terrifying gap between self and other and the paradoxical taboos against the violation of both domestic and foreign territories. Yet, as both the myth of Oedipus and Samson demonstrate, misogyny offers only an illusory escape from incestuous desire. Moreover, like the reflexive thriller *Peeping Tom* (1960; a film with which *Bilbao* has frequently been compared), "it deploys the film-within-a-film trope . . . for dramatizing the displacement of lack from the male to the female subject."

To fully understand its treatment of the Spanish Oedipal narrative, *Bilbao* must be read intertextually against three other contexts. First, it can be contrasted with other erotic captivity narratives from other cultures, such as William Wyler's *The Collector* (1965), based on the John Fowles novel, which has the victim die off screen but only after a bloody struggle against her sexually repressed captor; Yasuhiro Masumura's *Blind Beast* (1969), which ends with the blind kidnapper and his captive model killing his mother and then hacking each other