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Transgression in a sentimental style

Audrone Zukauskaitė investigates the concept of sexual transgression in Almodóvar's *Talk to her* and *All about my mother*.

According to the official film criticism, Pedro Almodóvar makes salaciously romantic and unabashedly emotional movies, with an acknowledgement of the irrational potency of romantic kitsch. As Charles Taylor has put it, Pedro Almodóvar "has a keen eye for how the conventions and clichés of movies colour our expectations of the real world as well as our fantasies. Consciously going beyond the bounds of respectability, Almodóvar knows that movies are never more sensual or alive than when they defy those limits and venture into the forbidden."¹ This is why the transgression of gender conventions and norms is a constant theme of Almodóvar's films. These transgressions redefine what is considered as a norm and reveal its arbitral and performative character. However, as if this was not enough, he undertakes the transgression of aesthetical conventions and norms. The film director acknowledges that some critics have had trouble with the clashing colours and patterns he used in the movie's settings. "I think they felt I went overboard with the style and the art direction of the film," he said. "But the movie's jumble-sale aesthetic is a thing of beauty unto itself – as well as being the perfect backdrop for the story's emotional complexity."² We could conclude that Almodóvar is consciously playing with ethical and aesthetical conventions and norms, though not in order to abandon them, but instead to define what is counted as a norm. Slavoj Žižek, discussing the term of transgression in the ethical field, insists that

the ethical act proper is a transgression that, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate the legal norm, but redefines what is a legal norm. The moral law doesn't follow the good – it generates a new shape of what counts as good.³

If we take this definition for granted, we can presuppose that the transgression of ethical norms by necessity generates some kind of "new ethics". But does the same statement hold for the transgression of aesthetical norms? What do we find beyond the norms or conventions – the different kind of aesthetic or manifestations of a bad taste?

I suppose we should slow down with the answer and first try to define what norms and conventions are submitted to the dialectic of the limit and its transgression. The earlier film *Matador* (1986) follows the sexual transgression from the realm of pleasure to the realm of death drive. The last film *Talk to her* (2002) proceeds in the opposite direction: the crossing of taboo concerning the

(almost) dead reveals the ambivalent nature of very sexual relationship. The film *All About My Mother* (1999) visualises the transgression of binary gender models and reveals the performative character of gender identity. That is to say, Almodóvar is passionately attached to the theme of sexual transgression, to the problems of gender and sex, desire and death, and the eternal questions of how sexual relations are possible. It is interesting to notice that these exceptional, even scandalous models of behaviour are introduced not as something obscene or strange, but as a position with which we cannot but identify ourselves. Of course, we have some preconceived prejudices about what transvestites are; but what if this other is your neighbour, or, better, the father of your son? (here I am referring to the film *All About My Mother*)

Transvestites, as is agreed, cross the binary model of sexual identification and, at the same time, question the legitimacy of it. The arbitrary and mimetic character of transvestite's identity reveal that any gender position is of performative nature. To put it in the words of one of the film characters, the most authentic woman is the one which most actively performs the spectacle of imitation. Almodóvar's last film, *Talk to Her*, also has the same structure of "intimate transgression": it seems obvious that the sexual relationship with someone, who is half dead and half alive, is impossible; but what about if this person in coma, is a woman you are in love with? The film character Benigno insists that his relationship with the beloved in coma is perfect – ordinary couples rarely have such a good understanding of each other.

In what way should we interpret this position? Does Benigno intend to say that every "relationship with other" is just a reversal of inherent narcissism, whereas the "masquerade of gender" has to deny the simple fact that "sexual relations do not exist? The main character of this last film, peacefully resting in coma, leads us to a conclusion that maybe nothing would change if all women would take this position (of *Sleeping Beauty*). Couldn't we take the case of coma as a visual metaphor, figuratively referring to the fact that "woman doesn't exist?" Jacques Lacan's thesis "woman doesn't exist" means that "when any speaking being whatsoever situates itself under the banner "woman", it is on the basis of the following – that it grounds itself as being non-whole in situating itself in the phallic function. There is no such thing as Woman because, in her essence /.../ she is not-whole."⁴ Here the term non-whole means that Woman has no relevant forms of representation and expresses herself but in a form of exception. Even if she is a matador, as the film *Talk to Her* exemplifies, she is supposed to be driven by the irrational remnant, the feminine jouissance inside her. Lacan points out that "a woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words", and – a very interesting remark – "that means, we can't talk about Woman (*La femme*)".⁵ How in this context could we interpret the imperative "Talk to Her"? Benigno's suggestion to talk with women in coma covers the intention to reform an exception into the rule, to find some extra-space beyond the order of phallic representation. Benigno thinks that he knows something about women that they do not know about themselves: he is aware about the condition of their skin and hair and even their desire for fecundation. To put it in other words, he acts as if it would be possible to transgress the symbolical system of representation and to evade the institution of the Other. The imperative "talk to her" creates an illusion of the direct contact, the immediate relationship, which is not censored by the Other. On the diegetic level, the film clearly shows that immediate contact is impossible in partnership as it is impossible on the air.

However, if we agree that sexual transgression is a constant theme of Almodóvar's films, we still do not have the answer what norms and

conventions get into his sight. We have noticed that in his films a situation constantly reappears whereby the relationship is impossible, but is replaced by other relationships due to the strange logic of miracles, resurrection and death. It seems as if Almodóvar is making comments on contemporary theories of gender and sexuation, following the Lacanian motto "there is no sexual relation". Here we should introduce the distinction between gender and sexuation: according to Richard Klein, "gender implies a sexual relation between the man and the woman, and sexuation is based on the impossibility of establishing the sexual relation between the two sexes".⁶ In this context gender has two effects in the dialectic of being and having the phallus, which is a function that makes up for the absent sexual relation. Having the phallus is the centrepiece in Freud's doctrine of masculinity. Being the phallus is Lacan's invention, based on Riviere's notion of masquerade. Masculinity and femininity are different positions in relation to the same signifier. Klein points out that

the fundamental trauma is no longer castration... Traumatic is the sexual non-rapport in that the sexual relation is a hole in the real. The sexual relation does not exist, and it is the source of symptoms. If gender can be counted amongst these symptoms, then the non-rapport may also be a source of gender, which is, in any case, a prosthetic device as all identifications are."⁷

For Lacan the exemplary case of the missing sexual relation is courtly love.

What is courtly love? It is a highly refined way of making up for the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto. Courtly love is, for man – in relation to whom the lady is entirely, and in most servile sense of the word, a subject – the only way to elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship.⁸

According to Žižek, the same role has the personage of *femme fatale* in the context of *film noir*: she is an inhuman partner, the Thing with whom no sexual relation is possible. On our behalf we could ask if taking care of woman in coma couldn't be considered as a modern version of chivalric love? Isn't coma a comfortable position, which at the same time, evades the masquerade of gender and makes up for the absent sexual relation? In *Talk to Her* coma is an obstacle for the (missing) sexual relation and the condition of its possibility, while otherwise the relation between the two characters would hardly be possible. In short, in this film, as well as in examples of chivalric forms of love, the obstacle is not external, – it is the internal condition of sexuality.

However, it is not only the dialectic of lack and desire that causes this primary impossibility; here the horizontal play of psychoanalytical motives intervene with theological reflections on God. According to Lacan, desire always strives to the One, although in the symbolical order desire is mediated by the Other. The desire for the One is, for Lacan, the desire for the Other, which intervenes between the subject and the other. It is the theme of the Other where the psychoanalytical and religious discourses interface: therapeutic practice as well as religious rests on the relation of transference to the Other, which is supposed to know. In this context the forms of courtly love could be considered as an attempt to put the Other in the place of other.⁹ This is why the Lady has no individual features in the forms of chivalric love – it's pure incarnation of psychoanalyst or God. As Lacan has put it, God always intervenes between the

subject and its other creating some sort of "philosophical *ménage-à-trois*".¹⁰ The last films of Almodóvar have the same structure of impossible sexual relations, mediated by the Other. In the film *Talk to Her* the relation between Benigno and Alicia (which is in fact no relation at all, because of her coma state) is intervened by Marko – the one supposed to know (he gives Benigno a tourist (life?) guide as a present). *All About My Mother* for example presents the relation between the heroine and the father (which transforms himself into a woman) of her lost child, which is substituted by the relation with the young woman waiting a child from the same man (or woman). Both films have the same logic of sacrifice, death and resurrection: someone passes away and someone miraculous comes back to life. And yet the death and failed relationships still have the meaning: it is the message addressed to the Other.

It seems as if Almodóvar is following Lacan once again, trying to show that in a certain context, sexual relation is analogous to the religious one. As Lacan pointed out,

the good old God exists. The way in which it exists not necessarily please everyone, especially not the theologians[...] I deal with the Other. This Other – assuming there is but one all alone – must have some relationship with what appears of the other sex."¹¹

A bit later Lacan develops his idea asking, "why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine *jouissance*?"¹² Žizek, interpreting Lacan's claims, goes even further saying that "since Woman is one of the names of God, would it not be logical to conclude that, in the same way that there is no sexual rapport, there is also no religious rapport? Perhaps, the uncanny fact of Christ's Crucifixion stands for the silent admission of this fact."¹³ Following this line of thought, we could say that sexual transgressions in Almodóvar's films acquire an additional meaning and could be considered as profane representations of lost sacred experience. Some references to the iconography of his films prove this statement: the way in which Alicia's body is presented makes clear hints to the Crucifix (woman as Crucifix?); or, for example, in film *All About My Mother* constantly reappears the image of Madonna (ironically, it's always a transvestite). Are these cinematographic allusions profane references to the lost sacred experience or just manifestation of a bad taste? I think that both answers are right.

When we make reference to the profane fusion of sexuality and sacredness, we are thinking, of course, about the excessive writings of George Bataille. He was the first to introduce the themes of externality and excess, sacrifice and sacredness, guilt and sexuality into the field of philosophy. Together with Lacan he could be considered as the first thinker of transgression. His famous formulation – "transgression does not deny the taboo, but transcends and completes it"¹⁴ – asserted the interdependence between transgression and the law. Put differently, the transgression is not possible without the law: in Lacan's words, "without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and to return to Saint Paul, that that is precisely the function of the Law. Transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law."¹⁵ The notion of *jouissance* in fact covers both movements: the movement of transgression and pleasure, and the opposite, which comes from the constraints of law. Michel Foucault in his *Hommage à Georges Bataille* points out that after the "death of God" was announced, modern sexuality was not emancipated, but, on the contrary, "denatured" (we have already discussed this referring to the term of

phallic signifier) and acquired a form of universal prohibition. In this condition sexual transgression acquires a positive meaning: sexuality has become "the only division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings, and spaces to desecrate". "Profanation in a world, which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred – is this not more or less what we may call transgression?" – Foucault asks.

In that zone [...] transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating. From the moment that Sade delivered its first words [...] the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression.¹⁶

Foucault insists that the importance of sexuality in our culture derives from nothing else than this correspondence, which connects it to the death of God.

What, indeed, is the meaning of the death of God, – Foucault asks, – if not a strange solidarity between the stunning realization of his non-existence and the act that kills him? But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed*? The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it.¹⁷

The analogous function has the myth of the murder of the father in psychoanalytical discourse: according to Lacan, "the myth of the murder of the father is the myth of a time for which God is dead. But if for us God is dead, it is because he always has been dead, and that's what Freud says."¹⁸ At the root of this discourse on God which Western culture has maintained for so long a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression. "Undoubtedly, it is excess that discovers that sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience", – points out Foucault.¹⁹ This definition clearly shows how transgression is intervened with excess, surplus, and abuse. Nevertheless, this definition is highly positive, because Foucault tries to detach the notion of transgression from "its questionable association to ethics".

At the beginning I have referred to Žižek's definition of transgression, which claims that transgression redefines what counts as a norm. However this definition is still negative; while Foucault insists that transgression "must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations. Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations... Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time."²⁰

Interpreted in this way, transgression is associated neither with ethics, nor with aesthetics and can manifest itself in all possible forms of excess, sentimentality and even bad taste. Interpreted in this way, transgression is a means to read the message of Almodóvar's films. These films visualize and submit forms to the

excessive experience, which could persist only if it is supported by the law. The theme of sexual transgression, constantly reappearing in Almodóvar's films, reveals the constraint of universal law, which descends upon in the moment when we realize the death of God. This is the way transgression can be interpreted as the only possible mean to reconstruct the experience of sacredness. In this respect the message of Almodóvar's films is very ambivalent: it reveals the excesses of sensuality in the situation, where the sexual relation is no longer possible, and speaks about the transformation of religious experience after the awareness of the God's death. This ambivalence could explain why these films follow the logic of the miracle: decline and resurrection, sacrifice and reward. The experience of sexuality and sacredness replace each other in a way that sexuality acquires the forms of miracle, while the experience of sacredness is expressed in the forms of sentimentality and romantic kitsch. When we are thinking about the cinematography of Almodóvar, we should have in mind not only the limits he crosses, but the realm he enters: the realm of sensual excessiveness, romantic kitsch, and sentimental abuse. Is it a transgression in a sentimental style? Yes, and I approve it.

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- ¹ Charles Taylor. "Sex, violence, passion and death come to a raging boil in Almodovar's paean to romantic kitch". <http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/tayl/1998/07/14tayl.html>
- ² Stephanie Zacharek. *All About Almodovar*. <http://archive.salon.com/ent/log/1999/09/24/almodovar>
- ³ Slavoj Zizek. Melancholy and the Act. *Critical Inquiry* 26 (summer 2000), p.672.
- ⁴ Jacques Lacan. *On Feminine Sexuality*, book XX Encore, New York, London: 1998, p. 72–73.
- ⁵ Op. cit., p. 73. (my emphasis)
- ⁶ Richard Klein. Gender and Sexuation, *lacanian ink* 18, <http://www.lacan.com/frameXVIII3htm>
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Jacques Lacan. *On Feminine Sexuality*, book XX Encore, p. 69.
- ⁹ Elisabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 137–38.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, book XX Encore, p. 70.
- ¹¹ Op. cit., p. 68–69.
- ¹² p. cit., p. 77.
- ¹³ Slavoj Zizek. *Il n'y a pas de rapport religieux*, *lacanian ink* 18. <http://www.lacan.com/frameXVIII6.htm>
- ¹⁴ George Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986, p. 63.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Tavistock: Routledge, 1992, p.177.
- ¹⁶ Michel Foucault. A Preface to Transgression. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: selected essays and interviews by M. Foucault Bouchard, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, p.30–31.*. Ed. D.
- ¹⁷ Op.cit., p. 32.
- ¹⁸ Jacques Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 177.
- ¹⁹ Michel Foucault. *A Preface to Transgression*, p. 33.
- ²⁰ Op. cit., p. 35.

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