

# **Todas las madres: An Exploration of Diverse Cathartic Maternity in Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre***

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Following a brief introduction on the work of Pedro Almodóvar, this essay examines the diverse maternal figures in the Spanish director's film *Todo sobre mi Madre* with a focus on how the motherly actions of the main protagonist, Manuela, help her to overcome the traumatic loss of her child. This essay was written in the fall semester of the 2021-2022 academic year for Dr. Silvia Colás's class on Spanish culture which explored, amongst other themes, the colourful *movida madrileña*.

## **Introduction**

**P**edro Almodóvar is a world-renowned filmmaker and a pillar of Spanish cinema. His first humble movies appeared during the *movida madrileña* and reflected the freedom enjoyed by this 1980s movement in post-Franco Spain. Almodóvar's movies break taboos, exhibit a distinguishable ambience, and boast a "heady mixture of melodramatic emotion, comedy, sexuality, colour and sound" (Davies 12). His name often appears at the beginning of the credits, "so that the director's credit precedes that of the actors and implies that Almodóvar's is more of a commanding presence within his films than are his actors" (12). Almodóvar films have evolved dramatically since the self-taught artist produced his first feature film in 1980. As Mark Allinson notes in his book exploring the fundamentals of the Spaniard's work, Almodóvar's "career is an exercise in the art of the possible, from low-quality DIY to Oscar-winning mastery" (6).

The Oscar-winning mastery of which Allinson speaks begins with the film *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999). Almodóvar's thirteenth film follows the journey of single mother Manuela (Cecilia Roth) as she copes with the death of her son Esteban (Eloy Azorín) on his seventeenth birthday. Mothers are one of the most important characters in Almodóvar's films and "la figura de la madre siempre está representada dentro de un seno familiar derruido gracias a la ausencia del padre" (Gallegos Vargas 97). Consequently, Manuela's character is nothing out of the ordinary in the Almodóvar world. Following the death of her only child and the resultant destruction of her family, the independent mother figure moves from Madrid to Barcelona where she searches for Esteban's estranged father and forms a new family with unconventional mother figures. In this essay, I will explore the diverse maternal figures of *Todo sobre mi madre* with a focus on how Manuela's motherly actions help her to overcome the traumatic loss of her child.

### **Esteban**

Twelve minutes into the movie unfolds the scene of Esteban being struck down by a car as he runs after the actress Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes), a scene considered "the most powerfully dramatic in all of Almodóvar's work" (Allinson 167). Manuela's agonizing screams for her son are echoed when she interprets the theatrical character Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* later in the film. In his psychoanalytical book *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, Julian Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla describes Manuela's preformed screams to be "a compulsive re-enactment of the earlier traumatic experience" (70) of losing her son. I, on the other hand, interpret the distressing screams as Manuela expressing sorrow for Stella because she knows of the pain that awaits the character as she becomes a mother, the pain inherent to deeply loving and caring for another.



Fig. 4. Manuel screaming after Esteban is struck, *Todo sobre mi Madre*, 13:18 (image cropped).

Manuela has navigated the torment of her son's death and the shocking end of an invaluable relationship: the opening scenes of the movie portray a close bond between the mother and son. They watch movies and play together, and Manuela's heartfelt and enthusiastically received birthday gift for Esteban substantiates that their relationship is one of connection and understanding. Manuela loses an essential piece of her identity when her son is pronounced dead. Through this loss, the haunted mother learns that the more you allow yourself to love someone, the more intertwined your lives are, the more you expose yourself to tremendous anguish when that connection meets its end. Despite Manuela's knowledge of the risk inherent to building valuable relationships that are vulnerable to the perils of mortal existence, she goes on to care for multiple characters throughout the film and is in fact healed by these relationships.

### **Agrado**

First off, Manuela shows signs of healing through helping when she is reconnected with her old friend Agrado (Antonia San Juan), the film's comedic outlet. Agrado is a transgendered woman who works as a prostitute. The two are reunited when Manuela sees a woman being attacked and only realizes the victim is Agrado after saving her from the assailant. Manuela smiles for the first time since her son's death when she saves Agrado. Similarly, Manuela begins to wear colourful clothing again as she prepares breakfast for Agrado and does her laundry the next morning; these traditionally maternal tasks

bring her back from the darkness of her profound depression induced by the loss of her son.



Fig. 5. Agrado directing the violent man to help, *Todo sobre mi Madre*, 23:35 (image cropped).

Agrado herself is a unique maternal figure. She mentions multiple times throughout the movie that she goes by Agrado because she has always tried to make life enjoyable for others (*agradar* meaning “to please”). The truth of this statement is shown in the aforementioned scene when Manuela and Agrado are reunited. After Manuela debilitates the man attacking Agrado, the injured Agrado sends the assailant off with instructions on whom to see for medical aid. This scene represents a mother’s ability to forgive even the most abhorrent of human acts. While having no children of her own, Agrado cares for Huma and scolds her lover, Nina (Candela Peña), for her drug use in a motherly way. She not only provides Manuela with someone to care for, returning more purpose to her traumatized friend’s life, but Agrado also mothers those in need of support or guidance. Agrado is also the character who brings Manuela to meet Sister Rosa (Penélope Cruz), a relationship that benefits both characters immensely.



Fig. 6. Sister Rosa helping sex workers, *Todo sobre mi Madre*, 21:52 (image cropped).

### **Sister Rosa**

Sister Rosa is another nurturing, maternal figure in this Almodóvar production. She is first shown aiding sex workers and continues to perform altruistic acts in following scenes. She “spends her life helping those who have been either expelled from or aggressively assimilated into the body of Spanish society in the late 1990s: prostitutes, transgendered subjects and illegal immigrants” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 83). Rosa is incredibly vulnerable: she must be on bed rest due to a high-risk pregnancy and is dolorously infected with the HIV virus. She is the first Almodovarian character to suffer from AIDS (Allinson 62) and represents one of many subtle comments on societal issues within the film. Rosa’s pregnancy could be seen as an “event with catastrophic consequences ... or ... as the condition of possibility for Rosa giving birth to a child who will live on after her who will succeed, however implausibly, in completely neutralising the HIV virus” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 82). Once again, growth and healing bloom from pain and loss. Sister Rosa's pregnancy not only creates a miracle child that allows Manuela to continue in her maternal role, but also contributes to the research on AIDS.



*Fig. 7* Manuela caring for Sister Rosa's son and smiling, *Todo sobre mi Madre*, 1:27:40 (image cropped).

As her own mother is frigid and “embodies a conventional notion of maternity within a patriarchal, bourgeois, heteronormative social and symbolic order,” (83) Sister Rosa seeks Manuela’s gentle, alternative mothering. The two live together and Manuela even facilitates a connection between Sister Rosa and her unsympathetic mother. Manuela benefits from mothering Rosa in three ways. First, this relationship gives Manuela a fulfilling reason to stay in Barcelona while freeing her position as Huma’s personal assistant for Agrado; this allows Manuela’s friend to step away from her dangerous position as a sex worker. Second, Rosa’s death and subsequent funeral reunites Manuela with Lola (Toni Cantó), a transgendered woman who is the biological father of both Manuela and Sister Rosa’s children. Manuela is finally able to tell Lola about their son’s existence and his death. This emotional encounter brings Manuela closure as she can indirectly fulfill her son’s wish to know about his father. Finally, Sister Rosa dies in childbirth, but her son survives and becomes Manuela’s charge. While this mimicked mother-daughter relationship brings further heartache to Manuela’s life with the death of the young, compassionate Sister, it also brings her purpose, closure, and a surrogate son.

## Conclusion

Manuela transforms from a biological mother to a replacement maternal figure, and the film closes with her acting as an adoptive mother. Following these transitions, Almodóvar represents diverse modes of maternity that stray from the societal norms in *Todo sobre mi Madre*. The broad spectrum of motherhood is glorified in this Oscar-winning film and characters without children or, in Manuela's case, characters who have lost their children are allowed access to the rewards of altruistic maternal actions. These characters are "entes netamente maternales por las actividades que desempeñan: son madres por sus actividades realizadas" (Gallegos Vargas 100). The diverse and non-traditional maternal figures support each other and are cared for in return. The network of support Manuela creates does not replace her son nor heal her entirely. However, the transformation of Manuela from a bereaved, colourless woman to a vivacious, colourful woman with dear friends and an adored, adopted son represents life-changing convalescence.

## Works Cited

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