The Power of the Masquerade: Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios and the Construction of Femininity

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This paper examines the construction of femininity in Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, Pedro Almodóvar, 1988), exploring the application of contemporary gender and feminist theory to the film’s representation of its female protagonists. Specifically, the paper focuses on Judith Butler’s identification of gender as both constructed and performative, and on Mary Ann Doane’s recuperation of the concept of the masquerade. As feminine excess exposes a gap between the self as subject and object, showing gender as a transitory performance, the very artificiality of female identity becomes a tool of potential resistance; Almodóvar’s women, highly stylized and self-consciously manufactured, may reveal the masquerade’s hidden power. This paper argues that by presenting complex female characters in a context of acknowledged artificiality, Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown actually destabilizes patriarchal positioning, exposing the ‘psychic excess’ behind feminine performance; at the same time, the film’s endorsement of traditional female iconography highlights the ambiguity of Almodóvar’s discourse.

Post-structuralist theories have aimed at demystifying meaning, by exposing it as subjective, unstable, and often received or imposed; specifically, assumptions about identity have come under critical scrutiny, in view of their fundamental role in a society largely structured around binary oppositions, as those between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, or East and West. In a practical application of these discourses to the field of cultural production, film theory has been concerned with the way cinematic representation both illustrates and produces meaning. Feminist film criticism has focused, among other issues, on the way femininity is created and objectified on the screen through and for a traditionally male gaze, and on cinema’s input in the corroboration of accepted gender patterns. In the light of specific gender and feminist film theories, this paper examines the construction of femininity in a film self-confessedly concerned with femaleness and its discontents: Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, directed by Pedro Almodóvar.

The equation between sex and gender has been challenged at various levels through different cultural and historical positions. Turn-of-the-century suffragettes were already questioning gender categories, but a radical critique of the assumptions underpinning
social gendering has taken longer to emerge, through the questioning of seemingly unassailable practices such as language and gender-defined identity.¹

The idea that a certain behaviour is ‘natural’, and therefore implicitly desirable, for one gender and not for the other, has been seen as particularly oppressive by two groups in society: women in general, and homosexual women and men. The justification for this prescribed behaviour has rested on the premises that accepted notions of femininity and masculinity, and the related heterosexual pattern, are the ‘normality’ against which every other behaviour must be measured; and that this ‘normal’ behaviour arises spontaneously in the well-adjusted. These assumptions can and have been disputed through different strategies: from a celebration of ‘difference’ to a questioning of ‘normality’ itself. As is well known, the latter approach is taken by Judith Butler (1991) in her hugely influential discussion of gender and identity.² Butler takes issue with the dogma of an original heterosexuality opposed to a derivative and deviational homosexuality: borrowing from Esther Newton’s study on drag (1972), which postulates drag not as an imitation of a prior gender, but as the enactment of ‘the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed’, she infers that ‘there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original’ (1991: 21). Gender is thus constantly in the process of producing itself, emerging as a performance behind which there are only other performances; its need for incessant self-elaboration points to its own provisional and threatened status. Identity, which is assumed to be ‘expressed’ through the appropriate gender behaviour, is in fact never fully accomplished this way: if it were, there would be no need for gender to construct itself through enforced repetition. From this Butler derives two conclusions: the first is that if identity is not self-identical, there must be some ‘psychic excess’ which exceeds and eludes the performance. Secondly, this psychic excess can be a site of insubordination and destabilization. Because heterosexuality relies on established and compulsory gender patterns, it follows that gender is always heterosexually determined: hence, Butler argues, homosexuality makes use of psychic excess by both destabilizing gender patterns and exposing their performative construction.³

To define gender as a construction and a performance means placing it within a three-dimensional structure: if there is a gender being constructed, there must also be an agent by which construction is carried out, and an audience for which the construction is performed. The analysis of the constructing agency implies yet another division, as the agent and the performer are not necessarily the same person. At one level we have the performance, constructing meaning, as in the case of a woman projecting herself as feminine by adopting a certain behaviour; but at a different level we can have someone reading her performance, literally constructing its meaning by assessing it in terms of femininity. In each case, a specific standard of gender is implied, which may be deliberately chosen or compulsorily adopted.

¹ For a recent perspective on the role of language in constructing and perpetrating gender divisions, see Romaine (1999).
² As well as Butler (1991), which this paper refers to, see also ‘Lacan, Riviere, and the Strategies of Masquerade’, in Butler (1990).
³ A discussion of Freud’s theory on the genesis of jokes exceeds the scope of this paper, but it is interesting to note that just as he finds a saving of psychical expenditure at the base of jokes’ yield of pleasure, together with a suspension of inhibition (1991: 165–90), so female pleasure in the masquerade could lie in the unmasking, and thus lifting, of the repression of compulsory performance. His ‘saving of psychical expenditure’ would then correspond to Butler’s ‘expression of psychic excess’.
Because an audience is implicit in the concept of performance, the performance itself can never be neutral: gender will be constructed for someone’s benefit, and far from being ‘natural’ it will be a highly political act. The audience can of course be found outside the subject, but it can also importantly be located within the performer herself/himself: if the acquisition of subjectivity always implies a certain distance from oneself, the recognition and integration of oneself as ‘other’, then gender can be constantly performed as an act of self-definition, of self-validation.

We will return to the multiple dimensions of gender construction in the discussion of Almodóvar’s film; let us now look at the particular implications that gender performance has for the female sex. Having assumed that any gender is constructed, as Butler does, we can say that traditional femininity emphasizes this construction: the disproportionate role that make-up, clothes and appearance play, or are supposed to play, in women’s life compared to men’s, points to femininity’s intensely performative quality. At the same time, the fact that this performance is explicit and ritualized would indicate an awareness of potentially destabilizing psychic excess. This is indeed the line of thought followed by Mary Ann Doane (1991), who focuses on what she calls ‘the excess of femininity’ or ‘to foreground the masquerade’ (1991: 25). Doane structures her argument around the work of the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1966), who first introduced the concept of the masquerade. Using the real-life case of one of her patients as a model, Riviere defines the masquerade as a woman’s defence against exposing her appropriation of traditionally masculine traits; ‘assumed and worn as a mask’ (1966: 213), genuine womanliness and the masquerade are however one and the same thing. The implications of Riviere’s words, objects Doane, are that ‘normal’ femininity is a masquerade, but ‘masquerade [...] is pathological’ (1991: 33), a position which, apart from identifying masculinity as the only legitimate gender, abolishes any distance between the performer and her mask, and is likened by Doane to the ‘claustrophobic’ (1991: 37) view of femininity held by Luce Irigaray. By identifying a correlation between female anatomy and female psyche, Irigaray does indeed deny women the faculty of detachment, granting them instead ‘a nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible’ (1985: 31). For Doane, ‘to embrace and affirm the definition of femininity as closeness, immediacy, or proximity-to-self is to accept one’s own disempowerment in the cultural arena’ (1991: 37); what she proposes instead is a recuperation of the masquerade. Implying a certain distance from the self rather than excessive closeness, the masquerade shows femininity as a construction, and denies its permanence: it thus acts as ‘resistance to patriarchal positioning’ (1911: 25), as by pointing to its own instability it reveals the performer’s power of articulation, eventually of decision. Like Butler’s ‘psychic excess’, the gap between the woman and her femininity is a site of potential destabilization.

The next part of this paper will look at the representation of femininity in Almodóvar’s film, in terms of construction, masquerade, and destabilization. Keeping in mind the distinction between performer and agent, the film will be analysed on two levels: while looking at the way its female characters understand and enact their gender, and for what purpose or audience, their performance will also be assessed in terms of Almodóvar’s own vision and construction of femininity. The issue at stake is whether Mujeres al borde presents us with femininity as parody, or with the parody of femininity. In the first case we would have what Doane calls the ‘double mimesis’, where ‘the woman appears to produce a re-enactment of femininity’ (1988: 181), making the masquerade a dynamic,
creative and patriarchy-exposing force; in the second instance we would have a negative representation, in which ‘feminine’ traits are simply ridiculed.

Construction and artificiality are some of the film’s underlying themes; centred as it is upon female characters, it pointedly places them at the heart of a world whose fabrication is constantly made visible under the surface. The opening credit sequence, which sets the climate of the film and provides a reading key for it, shows femininity as literally being constructed: the juxtaposition of cuttings from women’s magazines, where women’s heads, lips and legs are accompanied by lipsticks and flowers, points to femininity’s laborious performance in a curiously violent way. Scissors are framed while cutting up eyes; female body parts are separated from their owners; shoes, jewellery, and make-up are given prominence over the women wearing them, who are reduced to unnatural-looking dummies. The musical commentary, Lola Beltrán singing Soy infeliz, stresses the suggestion of a dramatic meaning behind all the gloss. Men, on the other hand, are only present as a few low-key, darkened figures in the background. If Lola Beltrán’s voice is meant to be ‘like the voice of all the women in the film’, as Almodóvar has explained (Strauss 1996: 87), then we can see a deliberate parallel between this material construction of femininity and the presentation of Pepa’s character in the first sequence. While the camera stresses artificiality by showing us a cardboard model of a block of flats, Pepa’s voice claims her place in one of those flats, introducing herself through a reference to a man, Iván. Although it is her voice which initially sets the scene, Iván’s quickly takes over by mentioning again the song’s title, Soy infeliz, as the camera glides over the very first image of Pepa: a black and white photo of her with Iván. When real-flesh Pepa appears, it is only as a prostrate figure on the bed, whose face we cannot see; she may even be dead. Her image comes back intermittently on the screen while Iván, in the dubbing studio, asks a mute Joan Crawford to lie to him; soon after, it is again Iván’s voice on the answerphone that provides a commentary to Pepa’s still body. On one level we have an immediate identification of Pepa with her male love interest, while at the same time the unhappy song, and Iván’s answerphone message thanking her for ‘her understanding’ before asking her to pack his clothes in a suitcase, construct an image of patient, long-suffering femininity.

Femininity would thus be associated with silence and suffering; but Pepa’s dream of Iván shifts the focus onto the artificiality of femininity as constructed by men. In an unreal black and white setting, Iván’s empty, trite, sentimental phrases are directed to women who look like female caricatures, cartoon-like expressions of male desire: a smiling air stewardess, a submissive geisha, a traditionally dressed African to whom Iván speaks of ‘esa noche en la selva’, a dominatrix armed with whip, a nun. While we are shown male-conceived relationships between the sexes as artificial and ridiculous, the continuing presence of Iván in the next sequence with Joan Crawford, and the close shots of Pepa’s body, make a connection between that artificiality and female suffering; a gap is thus introduced in the equation of woman with resignation and heartbreak. It is one of the many instances in which Almodóvar is asking us to step back from the too obvious, and question its meaning. Despite being essentially a story of lost love, with a suffering woman at its centre, Mujeres al borde exposes itself as a narrative about love narratives: this is especially apparent in the way written messages, of a romantic or intimate nature, are dealt with. When Pepa leaves a note for Iván at Lucía’s flat (‘ha sucedido algo imprevisto que nos afecta a los dos. Es necesario que hablamos de ello antes de irte de viaje’), this is first picked up by Lucía, who by reading it informs the spectator of its content; later on, the same note will be read out by the garbage collector. When Carlos’s
photo of Iván falls into Pepa’s hands, she recites its inscription: ‘de tu padre que no te merece’. At Pepa’s flat, Carlos finds and reads a postcard written by Pepa and Iván to themselves; the photograph of Pepa and Iván is seized by the policeman, whose reading of its dedication (‘te quiero, te necesito, te deseo’) is completed by Lucía (‘tu Iván’). What we are being shown is the skeleton narrative behind the full-on melodrama of Pepa and Iván: reduced to a few common utterances, read somewhat detachedly by other people, their relationship is exhibited as a clichéd text. While Iván’s deployment of commonplace phrases, in the dedications to Pepa and Carlos, stresses the hollowness of his own construction of human relationships, the lives of both Iván and Pepa are presented as part of a wider but standard plot. The vicissitudes of desire and love sound as familiar as if they had already been written by the time the film’s action unfolds, making Pepa and Iván actors in a metanarrative of the love story.

The rhetoric and artificiality of traditional images of femininity are exposed throughout the film. The contraceptive advert, dubbed by Pepa and featuring Candela as the innocent bride, points to the phoniness of institutionalized marriage: after having married the virginal female and the reluctant groom, the priest places a condom in the bride’s flowers, warning her against ‘todos los hombres’. While mocking the stereotype of chaste femininity, through an overpowering bride whose white veil initially fills the frame, and who cannot wait to lay her hands on her nervous-looking husband (‘¿podemos besarnos ya Padre?’), the wedding sequence also divides treacherous virility from the non-threatening, non-sexual maleness embodied by the catholic priest.

Advertising is again used by Almodóvar to denounce another female stereotype, that of the devoted mother who is unconditionally proud of her son: Pepa here plays the mother of a murderer, whose ‘famosísimos’ crimes she covers by washing his blood-stained clothes whiter than white. As in the contraceptive advert, the absurdity of the concept, and its inscription in a narrative within the narrative, make detachment possible and thus stress its artificiality; Pepa accentuates this distance by switching her television off after having watched it, and by smiling wearily when identified as ‘la madre del asesino’ by the taxi driver.

This gap between real-flesh Pepa and her TV self underlines the gap between female self as subject and as object; at the chemist’s, Pepa is recognized by two beauty-mask-wearing women, who comment on how different she looks in real life. While one finds that she is not as imposing as on the screen, the other quickly points out that she is however much slimmer; as Pepa’s identity is thus being discussed in terms of appearance, the two onlookers themselves wear masks, in a literal allusion to both feminine self-construction and social pressures on beauty, to which that construction is subordinated.

As the leading character in Mujeres al borde, Pepa can be read as an important statement in Almodóvar’s discourse on femininity. In a film where no woman ever wears trousers, her highly stylized look and constant changes of outfit make her a paragon of conventional womanhood; the very excess of her appearance, however, has the effect of ‘foregrounding the masquerade’, thus introducing a gap between Pepa and her performed feminine self. The boldness of her red outfits, her high heels and huge glittering earrings signify, at first, a strong identification with the iconography of femaleness; but the very strength of their visual impact points to a conscious use of that iconography, and to the performer’s intention of being seen as both by it and behind it, as the controlling agent of her own performance. As Koivunen points out, ‘the act of putting on femininity with a vengeance suggests also the power of taking it off’ (1990: 257). Initially introduced as the dishevelled, puffy-eyed casualty of male-induced sleeping pills, Pepa
quickly reacquires dominance over her external appearance and, gradually, over her emotional self: ‘the perfect order of the outer self registers the assertiveness and dynamism of a woman who will eventually triumph over present woes’ (Evans 1996: 70). Her stubborn hold on her own theatrical presence, even when drenched in gazpacho, transforms make-up and clothes into an armour: however, the armour is not there to hide stolen ‘masculine’ traits, as Riviere would have it, but rather to provide a frame and vehicle for her subjectivity. It is significant that Pepa should deem a change of outfit necessary before meeting Paulina, the feminist lawyer; it demonstrates how her looks, rather than simply a means to express her availability to men, are part of a fighting strategy aimed at both imposing herself on others and maintaining self-control.4

Female obsession with fashion is literally exposed as constructed, in the scene showing the policemen’s arrival at Pepa’s flat. Trying to find a suitable excuse for Candela’s crying, and thus avoid her discovery as the Shiite terrorist’s accomplice, Pepa promptly pretends that the cause of so much distress is Lucía’s unfashionable outfit, an explanation which, being fabricated for a representative of male authority, underlines both the patriarchal origin of women’s supposed preoccupation with clothes and women’s awareness of its construction.

A significant detail in the construction of Pepa’s image is her use of glasses; according to Doane, ‘glasses worn by a woman in the cinema do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking [...] in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation’ (1991: 27). Pepa wears glasses only at the dubbing studio, for the contraceptive advert and for playing her part to Iván’s recorded voice: this change of role, from blind victim to appropriator of the gaze, marks her confrontation with Iván’s hopelessness as a partner. It is also a moment in which the contrast of Pepa’s real tears with cinematic images, and with the lie-within-a-lie of Joan Crawford’s words, separates her subjectivity from the role-playing of her dubbing self, and of her real-life relationship with Iván.

Lucía is the only other character in Women on the Verge who ever wears glasses, and she does so when she tries to shoot Iván: it is her final attempt to appropriate the gaze, to free herself from one of the various men who have both driven her and constructed her as mad. Precipitated into psychosis by the betrayal of her lover and the birth of her son, Lucía’s acquisition of subjectivity is heavily regulated by patriarchal manipulation: official psychiatry has classified her as insane for twenty years, Iván’s voice on the television has given her back her memory, and her father, a domestic tyrant, validates and fosters her own 60s-style re-construction. The extent to which Lucía literally is her image, and her relationships with men (¿hay algo más importante?), is shown by her maniacal identification with bygone fashion, and by the pivotal role played by Iván in her life; Riviere’s equation of ‘genuine womanliness and the masquerade’ would therefore seem to describe her appropriately. While Lucía identifies with her own constructed femininity, however, the fact that we are shown the process by which she does so highlights this construction; the discrepancy between her 60s vision and present-day reality becomes the space in which her performance can be exposed as such.

Lucía’s complexity is revealed by her own account of her illness, in her last dialogue with Pepa. Having first related how, thanks to accidentally hearing Iván’s voice, she had ‘recuperado la memoria y la razón’, Lucía then confesses not to be ‘cured’ at all: she has

4 Pepa’s choice of outfit here is also significant: for the first and only time in the film, she abandons her favourite reds for a more sober blue suit.
only pretended to be, in order to be discharged by the clinic and be free to murder Iván. Her ‘psychic excess’ is thus revealed through her capacity to look at herself detachedly, to discriminate between her performance and her mental state; at the same time, the fact that she insists on not being ‘cured’, while admitting being able to remember and think rationally, introduces ambiguity into the very concepts of insanity and normality. Defeated by patriarchy’s deadly intrusion in the construction of her subjectivity, Lucía is at least able to disrupt patriarchal logic; through her, the masquerade’s destabilizing potential remains acknowledged yet unfulfilled.

While all the women in the film find themselves, at some point, in the role of the victim, Candela is the one who is unable and unwilling to challenge it. Her pathetic self-image is maintained by her deliberate and constant re-construction of both herself and external events. Viewing the world as one big conspiracy of wicked men, Candela regards her relationship with the other sex as a fatal attraction, magnifying in the process the abuse received; when she realizes how her Shiite lover has exploited her, she complains about her mistreatment by ‘el mundo árabe’. Despite her emancipation from her patriarchal Andalusian background, Candela identifies with a self-effacing, powerless version of femininity, whose masquerade is exposed by the film but remains invisible to its performer. If hers were the main character in Mujeres al borde, the film’s dominant discourse would be one which reiterates women’s frailty, dependency and negative self-perception; as it happens, Candela is dependent not on a man but on the leading female, Pepa, to whom she is deliberately contrasted. Following Candela’s attempted suicide, an angry Pepa deplores ‘la gente joven no sabéis luchar por las cosas’; it is a reflection on Pepa’s strength, but also an allusion to the older woman’s capacity to control her own performance. Emphasizing the construction of femininity through make-up and clothes, rather than foregrounding beauty and youth, the film actually vindicates female self-fashioning against the strict dictates of the catwalk. When Pepa lets Candela have her black dress, because ‘queda mejor’ on her slim model figure, we feel that whatever Pepa may have lost in terms of waistline she has gained in experience and independence: by the film’s end, she has indeed ‘learned from Julieta [Lucía] and Candela that there are some things one shouldn’t do and certain traps one shouldn’t fall into’ (Almodóvar, quoted in Vidal 1988: 231). While Lucía is fatally caught in her generation’s patriarchal structure, Pepa has developed into a matriarchal figure, endowed with authority and wisdom.

In his analysis of Mujeres al borde, Paul Julian Smith argues (1994: 95) that, despite the film’s challenge to ‘classic’ diegetic positioning which would objectify the woman by placing her at the interior of the narration, ‘Pepa’s voice and body remain confined within the internal spaces of the film and are intermittently ironized or pathologized by its “abstract” discourse on love’. While Pepa is convincingly portrayed as a winner by the end of the film, her victory could indeed be temporary, more like a well-earned respite between stormy relationships; by the same token, the film’s exposure of the female masquerade could be seen as its (male, gay) director’s laugh at the expense of women, whose heterosexually determined performance remains limited by patriarchally imposed patterns. As Rowe points out (1995: 7), the masquerade’s destabilizing distance remains, ‘created by the subject between herself and various forms of representation available to

5 Almodóvar’s inclination to favour a matriarchal order, rather than a patriarchal one, is visible in his choosing his own mother, an elderly woman, for the part of newsreader on television.
her’. The subject thus moves outside the range of pre-adjudicated gender roles only insofar as she exposes their construction, without actually renouncing them by abandoning the masquerade in favour of new modes of self-representation. While destabilizing patriarchy by revealing the ‘psychic excess’ behind their performance, Almodóvar’s women are still caught within a web of representations which have been chosen for them; they are still not able or willing to face the world without make up, earrings or high heels. However, the film’s sympathetic and strong portrayal of femininity points in another direction: it highlights female awareness of ‘patriarchal positioning’ as the prerequisite for a freer, subject-controlled self-representation, in which ‘femininity’ expresses only what each individual woman recognizes as hers.

WORKS CITED


Este artículo examina la construcción de la feminidad en *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, enfocando la representación de los personajes femeninos desde el punto de vista de teorías contemporáneas del género y del feminismo. En concreto, el artículo se centra tanto en el concepto de Judith Butler del género como algo construido y performativo como en la recuperación de la idea de Mary Anne Doane de la ‘mascarada’. Ya que el exceso femenino revela una distancia entre el yo como sujeto y objeto, subrayando el género como performatividad transitoria, lo artificioso de la identidad femenina se convierte en estrategia de resistencia; las mujeres de Almodóvar construidas de forma extremadamente autoconsciente, pueden revelar el poder escondido de la ‘mascarada’. Este artículo argumenta que mediante la presentación de complejos personajes femeninos en un contexto abiertamente artificioso, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* cuestiona lo patriarcal, revelando el exceso psíquico detrás de la performatividad femenina; simultáneamente, la reincidencia de la iconografía tradicional pone en evidencia la ambigüedad del discurso almodovariano.