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Spectacularizing trauma: the function of costume design and makeup in the construction of leading female characters in Kika (1993)

Espectacularizar el trauma: la función del vestuario y del maquillaje en la construcción de personajes femeninos protagonistas en Kika (1993)

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Resumen:
Esta investigación analiza cómo el vestuario y el maquillaje contribuyen a la construcción de personajes protagonistas en *Kika* (1993) de Pedro Almodóvar, enfatizando la forma en que dichos recursos subrayan la subjetividad y el conflicto interno de cada uno. Se empleó una metodología cualitativa basada en el visionado del film, clasificando secuencialmente (1) los cambios de indumentaria de los personajes y (2) las variaciones de maquillaje y efectos especiales, como cambios de peinado, manchas, sudor, retoques cosméticos y cicatrices. Los resultados muestran que la espectacularización opera de distintas formas: (A) como dispositivo de vigilancia y exposición de la violencia en el discurso mediático, (B) como forma de exhibir los talentos creativos implicados en el *film* y (C) como un modo de creación con propósitos narrativos que articula los conflictos identitarios, traumas experimentados y los discursos elaborados por cada personaje. Se discute una oposición y convergencia de roles entre los personajes femeninos, atrapados entre victimización y regeneración, y algunos rasgos de masculinidad, que representan una mirada controladora a través de una institucionalización fantasmagórica. Estas diferencias destacan las tensiones entre el discurso público y privado según el aparato televisivo, el sistema moda y los modelos de belleza así como problematizan las fronteras entre dicha espectacularización femenina y su respectiva invisibilización.

Abstract:
This research considers how costume design and makeup contribute to character construction in *Kika* (1993) by Pedro Almodóvar. Focusing on the film's three main female protagonists this work demonstrates how these resources highlight the subjectivity and internal conflicts experienced by each character. Employing a qualitative methodology, the film was viewed to enable sequential classification of (1) characters' costume changes and (2) variations in makeup and special effects, such as hairstyle changes, stains, sweat, cosmetic touch-ups, and scars. Results show that spectacularization operates in three key ways: (A) to observe and expose violence in the media discourse, (B) to showcase the film's creative talents, and (C) as a narrative device to articulate identity conflicts, lived traumas, and the specific discourses of each character. *Kika's* female protagonists are trapped between victimization and regeneration under the controlling, masculine gaze of phantasmagorical institutionalization and this manifests in an opposition and convergence of feminine and masculine traits in their characterization. This serves to underline the tensions between public and private discourses shaped by the media, particularly television, the fashion system, beauty models and standards, while also problematizing the boundaries between female spectacularization and invisibilization.

Palabras clave: Pedro Almodóvar; vestuario; maquillaje; construcción de personajes; espectacularización; estudios de género.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; costume design; makeup; character development; spectacularization, gender studies.

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1. Introduction: context and rationale

The characterization of cinematographic characters through costume choices and art direction has long been an important strand of film studies research. Generally, this work has taken semiotic or cultural studies approaches, however, more recently, the field has broadened its perspectives to include, for instance, issues of gender and other intersectional axes that integrate the identities of celebrities (Pérez, 2018) and the characters they interpret (Navarro Gaviño and Muñoz Torrecilla, 2024). Through its consideration of character development and the meanings that emerge from their mise-en-scène and how the audience views them, this work has greatly enriched the filmic analysis of not only cinema but also other audiovisual productions where the power of image amplifies the narrative (Gilligan y Collins, 2021; Zurian et al., 2023).

The web of meanings and the dynamics emerging in the intersections between body, costume, identity and performativity reveal how costume choice in audiovisual discourses articulates narratives of gender and power surrounding the female body. The spectacularization of the feminine is conceptualized by Tasker (1993) as a scopic pleasure that transcends mere special effects by interlacing form and content in cinematographic spectacle. It has also been defined as the inscription of the female body into a logic of visual excess where costume choice activates a hypervisualized subjectivity and objectification under the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). This understanding of costume as a device for conveying extreme and conflicting meanings is especially important in the filmography of Pedro Almodóvar. Indeed, many scholars have observed how essential character creation is to his narratives, his films being organized around personalities—most notably women—who gain a subjective profundity that is quite unique (Durán, 2023, p. 54). As Pérez (2018, p. 3) notes, references to haute couture and fashion in Almodóvar's filmography have an active function in the visual and symbolic construction of scenes and identities. They are not ornamental. In works such as *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown*, 1988), *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my mother*, 1999), *Volver* (2006), and most explicitly in *Kika* (1993)—which like *Julieta* (2016) takes the name of its principal protagonist and reaffirms the centrality of the feminine—costume operates as a "spectacular

intervention" (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 15). That is, costume choices act as visual detonators, and designed to be disruptive, they leave their imprint on character subjectivity and reinforce the Almodovarian brand identity. In this regard, Davies comments that Almodóvar is "[…] the most fashion-conscious European director of his generation" (2017, p. 68), owing to how costume has played such an important part not only in the appearance of his filmography but also in the construction of his public persona.

The search for the spectacular implies not simply constructing the female body as abstractly esthetic but also creating a narrative that transforms suffering, trauma or violence into high-impact visual components, that are, in general, stripped of critical content. This symbolic operation has been criticized by feminist cinema scholars (de Lauretis, 1987; Kaplan, 1983) and is connected with something that authors in the field of cultural studies have identified as the commercialization of trauma in the media. In the case of Almodóvar's cinema, this perspective is complicated since there is significant cross-over between his visual codes and narratives-of-the-spectacle, and his strategies of subversion and reappropriation which aim precisely to transgress traditional boundaries of genre and posit new ways to represent the female body.

Within this framework, the existing literature highlights the relevance of *Kika* (1993) as an inflection point in the relationships between cinema, fashion and costume design. This is due to the film's wide recognition and the success of the whole production team both in Spain an internationally at a key moment in Almodóvar's career (Dapena, 2013; Lev, 2013; Smith, 2002). Amaro Martos (2015) refers to the creative team supporting the director as "Almodóvar's factory", a concept that brings to mind Andy Warhol's iconic art studio: *the Factory*. In the feature film under analysis here, the "factory" comes into being thanks to the collaboration of many eminent figures from the worlds of fashion and cinematography whose unique individual styles give each one a strong visual and narrative identity in their own right and whose work has been individually recognized in museum exhibitions and numerous retrospectives (Gaultier, 2022). The end result of this confluence of acclaimed and experienced collaborators is to reinforce the visual identities of *Kika's* female characters and give power to the narrative impact of their costumes. This achievement was duly

acknowledged by the slew of Spanish awards nominations and prizes the film received at the time of its release, culminating in Verónica Forqué's coronation as Best Principal Actress at the Goya awards. The collective success of *Kika's* production team reiterates the critical acclaim the film achieved for its quality and relevance within the Spanish film industry. This latter, of course, lies in the film's risky conceptual proposition (Iturbe, 2016): transcending the traditional elements of art direction *Kika* frames itself as an incisive critique of the new genre of reality TV (Smith, 2002) which in turn provides an emphatic narrative on the relationships between the body and both television and everyday objects so initiating a range of discourses concerning the notion of the male gaze and violence in post-modern Spain (Iturbe, 2020; Lev, 2013; Jiménez de las Heras, 2010).

Thus, attention to costume choices and appearances takes a decisive role as the nexus between the visual dimension of the film and the social and production discourses woven through it. It also intervenes in the construction and dissemination of meanings—often contradictory—concerning the spectacularization of the female body. On one hand, under the male gaze the film might seem to reinforce gender stereotypes while on the other, viewed through the lens of certain critiques of the fashion system—where this understood not only as an esthetic but also as an institutional network of practices, discourses and aspirations—it articulates strategies of resistance and subversion. Approaching these tensions requires a solid theoretical framework that encompasses narrative theory as well as an analysis of audiovisual discourses (Chatman, 1978), gender studies concerning performativity and hegemony (Caballero y Zurian, 2016; Lev, 2013), contributions from fashion studies about the body in cinematographic and industrial contexts (Church Gibson, 2015; Entwistle, 2023; García-Ramos et al., 2024; Paulicelli, 2025; Pérez, 2018) as well as perspectives on the female-body-as-spectacle and media-related trauma (De Lauretis, 1987; Gilligan, 2021; Mulvey, 1975; Tasker, 1993; Zecchi, 2015).

2. Methodology

2.1. Hypotheses and objectives

The central hypothesis of this work is that, in *Kika* (1993), changes of costume and makeup in scenes depicting trauma or conflict are an esthetic device which intensifies the spectacularization of female suffering and help configure the subjectivity of the characters such that the visual narrative transmits the tension between their vulnerability and agency. Stemming from this hypothesis, the main objective of this work is to understand how costume and makeup choices intervene in the dimensions identified with special attention to representations of grief, conflict and violence in the audiovisual storytelling. Thus, the present article will:

1. Explore the relationship between the esthetic decisions of characters and the gender conventions present in the narrative, paying attention to their subversive or normative potential and whether or not they partner or enhance characters' emotional journeys.

2. Contextualize the results of this analysis with respect to the dynamics of, first, the shared authorship between Almodóvar and the film's costume designers, and second, the expressive possibilities of the fashion system within the framework of Almodóvar's cinema.

2.2. Design and method

The creation of fictional characters is articulated through the modification of an initial impression using changes in costume or makeup, and special effects. To understand how these modifications are related to audiovisual narratives, research in this field uses qualitative coding tables to help differentiate character/personality from the person (Guarinos, Sedeño-Valdellós, 2024). In this process, certain aspects are combined, such as indicative (appearance, physical size) and artefactual (costume, sexuality) traits and note is taken of how these elements come together to construct or fulfil different roles, archetypes, actions or layers of psychological depth and complexity. This said, Almodóvar is highly innovative in terms of his practices of character development and narration. This poses particular analytical problems since his characters are often extremely complex, multi-dimensional and break traditional molds, with multiple functions and traits being integrated into

characters of different genders and with distinct identities. Thus, research concerning the role of costume in his filmography requires special treatment since, while the appearances and interventions of certain characters may seem to be natural extensions of their personalities, fully integrated into the Almodovarian filmic universe, these same characters often do not express themselves with the same subjective intensity. Similarly, they tend not to fit with the accepted definitions, articulations, or impositions of either dominant or alternative stereotypes or categories with respect to gender and age and furthermore, not all characters will follow the same patterns in this respect. This gives Almodóvar's characters a naturalized capacity for improvisation regarding their own appearance which provides essential insights into themselves as well as other characters. In this way, costume changes often inscribe other elements of the dramatic action onto a character's surface so making perceptible/visible a range of practices—both subjective and regarding internal identity—that otherwise would remain hidden (Fernández y Jácome, 2018; Turnes, 2020).

For these reasons, the sample for this work has been assembled with reference to the methodology established by Mida and Kim (2015, p.12) which can be summarized into five steps: (1) reading costume items; (2) observing patterns of repetition or normalization within the sample; (3) establishing direct and indirect relationships of equivalence or hierarchy; (4) reflection and deduction (5) interpretation through stranding or grouping. Recently applied in the field of fashion studies (García-Ramos et al., 2024, p.132), Preciado's Somatheque model was also used in developing the methodology for the present work. This model conceives of the body as an archive comprising multiple biological elements, body techniques and power practices inscribed in various verification devices. From this perspective, a garment may be analyzed as an artefact that reveals and applies tension to normative discourses of medicine and technology demonstrating how stylization and haute couture impose conflicting esthetics on the body: an assemblage of somatic experiences wherein we find a coalescence of gender norms, symbolic violence and latent resistance.

2.3. Unit of analysis and inclusion criteria

The formal object of this study is the narrative and visual universe of *Kika* (Almodóvar, 1993), where this is conceived of as a closed corpus since the film develops along one unique storyline in space and time. The unit of analysis comprises the specific costume changes made by the three principal female characters accompanying key emotional and dramatic changes throughout the feature. These costume transformations not only reinforce diegetic coherence and articulate on-screen identity but also reconfigure relational and power dynamics among characters. In dialoguing with the action and the set, each costume change transmits specific contextual information and alters the audience's perception of the character demonstrating how costume design acts as a central signal in the narrative and visual construction of the film. Limiting analysis to the consideration only of female costume changes prioritizes the discussion of female spectacularization. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of the costume design for the male characters in this film is beyond the scope of the present work; however, it should be recognized that it follows very discrete and conventional lines and this contrast between male and female styling serves to underscore the spectacularized nature of the feminine.

2.4. Fieldwork and data analysis

The film was viewed several times to access images for later analysis and work focused on the three central female characters. The greater number of female compared to male leads is in keeping with Almodóvar's general tendency to include a plurality of female voices, and in the case of *Kika*, this choir is swelled by an array of other women who, while not named explicitly in the script, have a crucial role in the narrative dynamic. To address costume changes throughout the film, a sequential analysis of time-blocks was undertaken to identify key moments in character or plot development.

For the analysis of time-blocks an *ad hoc* methodology was developed based on the synthesis of and overlap between two distinct approaches, specifically, those represented by (1) Caballero and Zurian (2016, p.857) and (2) Zurian et al.(2023, p.11). These offer a solid foundation from which to interpret costume changes throughout the film by considering how outfits evolve within the plot

and how costume design interacts with the film's cinematographic storytelling and the discourses it references beyond the screen.

Approach (1), takes into account the context, in terms of both the structural elements of costume (garment patterns, selection of fabrics, accessories, etc.…) and their cultural and social meanings. Through reflective interpretation, (2) analyzes the influence of costume design and audiovisual media in fashion on the bodies of actors and actresses (makeup, acting techniques, etc…), enabling an in-depth evaluation of the meanings that emerge from their interaction. Concerning the interpretation and discussion of results and the final structuring of time-blocks, the perspective taken is founded in various articles about the Almodovarian universe (Iturbe Tolosa, 2020; Gómez Gómez, 2012; Navarro Gaviño y Muñoz Torrecilla, 2024; Smith, 2002; Zecchi, 2015). Together, these works offer a broad theoretical framework within which to analyze discursive elements adjacent to the functions of costume and makeup under investigation here.

3. Results

3.1 General principles

In considering these results, to start, it is necessary to establish a key distinction between two analytical strands: one, fashion as an aspirational discourse and the other, costume as a narrative tool. Fashion responds to extra-diegetic cultural imaginaries, functioning as a meaning-horizon that expresses tensions about desire, status or subversion. As such, it acts from outside the film's storyline as a field of meaning influencing the perceptions of the characters in the film. In contrast, costume constitutes the diegetic wardrobe manifested by the film's characters and is intimately linked to their identity construction and the evolution thereof within the drama. This distinction is essential considering that, while fashion projects meanings that illuminate or distort characters from outside the plotline, costume provides internal cohesion to the narrative through the way it reveals dramatic practices, modulates diegetic consistency, and reconfigures diegetic power dynamics. However, both fashion and costume act as masks or screens that at once hide and reveal to form part of the film's critique of media sensationalism.

For the analysis of *Kika*, the two dimensions discussed above are addressed using a sequential classification for costume changes (1, 2, 3…) and an alphanumeric coding system to denote variations (1A, 1B, 1C…) thereby encompassing both general costume changes as well as more subtle, nuanced alterations in a character's appearance. This system enables first, the observation of complex identity construction for each character studied, second, the identification of relationships between costume changes and narrative development and third, the detection of repeated patterns that reinforce the symbolic coherence of the story. The variations referred to include minor but meaningful costume modifications (denoted as, for example, 1A- 1B-1C) observed in specific scenes that highlight physical or emotional changes and which are often strengthened by additional alterations to makeup or special effects.

3.2. Costume changes for the main female characters

3.2.1. Kika, Verónica Forqué

The main character, Kika's wardrobe was designed by Gianni Versace using a combination archive items in addition to original creations for the film. In total, Kika has fifteen costume changes manifesting different dimensions of her identity in several spheres: the public, professional and the domestic.

Kika's first appearances occur in the public and professional spheres (changes 1-2-3-4), here costume choices with floral motifs, spots and vibrant colors reflect her sunny disposition as well as her aspiration to be seen as a modern woman. The additional inclusion of both traditional and retro influences is designed to show both her versatility and her optimistic nature while also demonstrating her esthetic competence. The use of a blonde wig in specific scenes (changes 2 and 3, especially 3A-3B) not only suggests a time shift or flashback but also emphasizes Kika's dedication and commitment to her image: changing her look with every new job and sometimes taking things to an extreme, as for example, when she works in the funeral parlor (3A-3B). Outside of the public sphere, in domestic or intimate contexts (5-6-9-10-12), Kika's costumes are simpler and less fussy; her clothes are informal and comfortable to underline the everyday-ness and, indeed, vulnerability of this character. In these domestic environments which are, *a priori*, private, Kika appears dressed in a bathrobe (6-12), lying down naturally in a state of undress (change 9) or wearing Ramón's

shirt after a sex-scene (change 10), all of which reveals an emotional honesty at odds with Kika's public face. This contrast between Kika's public-professional and private face—the former full of color and ornament, the latter marked by comfort and intimacy—are fundamental to understanding this character's multiple dimensions.

F1. A collection of Kika's costume changes (1/2). Source: author's own work using stills from the film.

Change 7 (7A-7B-7C-7D-7E-7F) is articulated around a costume comprising an off-the-shoulder top decorated with orange ribbons and a yellow, floral print, pleated skirt, both of which were designed by Gianni Versace specifically for the film. This outfit melds perfectly with Almodóvar's vision of Kika as an optimistic personality who has no issues with her body image and does not hesitate to show off her curves. Versace's esthetic, well-known for the boldness of its tailoring—figure hugging and designed to reveal or enhance certain body parts—

and its fusion of eye-catching patterns with undeniable sensuality, all contribute to Almodóvar's construction of Kika as unself-consciously feminine. Indeed, the Italian designer's style demonstrates a focus on women who assume their sexual power without complexes unlike other designers who tend to emphasize a more understated elegance.

When Ramón asks Kika to marry him (7A), this combination of classic styling with a vivid print and provocative cut is used to project an image of self-assuredness and optimism which is at the core of Kika's identity. On one hand, this costume symbolizes the mature femininity of a woman who knows herself, demonstrated in her coquettish disposition and the way she seeks—albeit somewhat surreptitiously—external approval.

On the other hand, her small indications of discomfort and changes in hair-style (7B- 7C-7D-7E-7F) suggest Kika's internal insecurity, especially due to the age differences between herself and other characters and the various emotional triangles she is embroiled in: with Amparo (7B), Susana (7C) and Nicolás (7D-7E). In this way, that Ramón proposes marriage while Kika is wearing this outfit suggests a conflict with her apparent firmness of purpose and reveals certain private doubts hiding behind her characteristically positive outlook.

Some of Kika's insecurity is channeled into her relationship with Juana as is apparent in a scene of female bonding (7F) in which Kika, safe in her sense of professional superiority chides the younger woman affectionately for being "cardo" *grumpy* and tells her she needs to sort herself out looks wise. Juana's reaction is to state bluntly that she does not wish to be a model but rather a prison director. This response astonishes Kika with its authenticity and is, to some extent, a statement of independence that alters the power dynamic between the two women. From the personal point of view, it reshapes their relationship as boss and employee while from the professional perspective it represents Juana's defiance of Kika's expectations concerning what would be in her best interests.

The following changes and variations (F2) reflect important narrative transitions: from a place of affective stability or everyday monotony to a state of deep emotional conflict. Examples include the sex scene with Ramón (9) and the scene in which she is raped by Paul (changes 11A-11B) in which a red dress is

used to symbolize the trauma of her rape and the extreme vulnerability she feels in response to this event. After her rape, as seen in Figure 2, a bathrobe (change 12) is used to reinforce the idea of purification and survival. In this way, costume contributes to the plot helping to illustrate how the character confronts and processes the violence committed against her.

F2. A collection of Kika's costume changes (2/2). Source: author's own work using stills from the film.

The rape catapults Kika into various states of rage, incomprehension and frustration. This is demonstrated symptomatically in changes 13A—13F in which Kika alters her hairstyle and manifests her distress in certain behaviors: she drinks alcohol to excess (13A), she has a confrontation with Amparo (13B) and she is exposed in the media (13C-11B2) becoming literally sick (13D) when she

sees her suffering broadcast on television barely hours after the traumatic event itself (13E). This spectacularization of her suffering drives her to uncover the other lies in her life; she dismisses Juana (13F) and confronts the falsity of other people in her circle leading her to have a nervous breakdown (13G). In the final scenes of the film (changes 15A–15H), the acts of taking off the ring and cleaning the blood from her dress (15G) show she is ready to leave behind her traumatic past and turn over a new leaf onto a more tranquil future (15H).

Kika's identity as a savior is apparent at several points in the film, specifically when she "revives" Ramón on two occasions (3A-3B-15C-15D). This facet of her character is strengthened towards the close of the film when Kika rescues a young man whose car will not start. By helping this unknown young man, Kika once again adopts the role of protector, aiding those around her and, to some extent, this places her within a discourse of female empowerment in which she is a source of strength in the face of adversity. Her savior trait, however, is no impediment to Kika imposing her own world view onto others, including Juana and even Amparo. In fact, her constant interventions concerning how to dress, wear makeup or behave reveal the way in which she internalizes or reproduces the male gaze, depending on the context: oscillating between a certain complicity with other women and imposing the mandates of patriarchal society. In the scene with the stranded young man, the coincidentally matching prints on their clothes: Kika's dress and the young man's shirt (15F) symbolize a point of connection between the two characters. This visual detail reinforces the idea that some kind of equilibrium has been reached in these final moments of the story since, despite Kika's tendency to impose her vision of the world on others—evidenced, as discussed, in her advice about outfits, makeup and behavior—this encounter contains a kind of reciprocity. Thus, more than imposition or imitation, this scene suggests sharing and hints at a moment of harmony and the possibility of balance.

Ultimately, the Kika's costume changes are articulated principally around two outfits: the variators of "look 7" (similar to changes 1, 8 and 14) and those of "look 11" (present in changes 3, 4, 10, 13 and 15). These are supported by more subtle transformations (changes 6, 9 y 12), in which the character appears in a bathrobe or even naked to show her intimate side. The way in which costume

changes are organized demonstrates Kika's internal and external transformations: she starts out as joyful and sure of herself in her professional life, she later becomes vulnerable in the domestic and everyday sphere through suffering the trauma of rape, and finally enjoys the good luck to be reborn as represented by her coincidental meeting with a new man in a confluence of vulnerability and strength. Thanks to the esthetic gradations accompanying these emotional changes this film turns costume into a fundamental narrative resource making the audience aware of otherwise hidden elements, translating Kika's various emotional changes and evolving relationships into a clear, visual language.

3.2.2. Andrea Caracortada, Victoria Abril

F3. A collection of Andrea Caracortada's costume changes. Source: author's own work using stills from the film.

Andrea Caracortada's wardrobe was designed by Jean Paul Gaultier and comprises seven costume changes all custom made for the film. As with the

main character, Kika, Andrea's costumes correspond to different contexts in either the public or private-personal spheres.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the film, this character keeps a clear division between her televisual persona (1A-1B-2A-3A-3B-6) constructed largely on the exhibition of her personal trauma, and the private individual who hides behind this (4-5-7). Andrea is the lead presenter of "Lo peor del día" (*Today's worst*), a sensationalist television program which takes a somewhat flexible attitude to ethics in its dedication to exposing the most sordid stories. The program encapsulates the media obsession with getting a scoop and the eternal search for the most sensational and attention-grabbing headline. Thus, Andrea's journalistic focus is not truth or ethics but rather the generation of the greatest possible impact as a result of which she crosses multiple moral boundaries and manipulates reality to suit her own interests. As the film unfolds, Andrea's implacable search for "a good story" turns her into someone who allows their ambition to blur the boundaries between news and spectacle.

A key element in Andrea's characterization is the scar from which her name derives: "Caracortada" *Scarface*. This scar becomes the emblem of her traumatic past, and far from being something she tries to hide, she uses it unashamedly to reinforce her televisual image (1A-1B). This image is authoritarian and martial—traits linked to her unmeasured, almost vengeful, exercises of power over other character she interacts with, especially women (1B-2C-2D)—and is strengthened with every broadcast and every costume change.

The military jumpsuit is repeated on several occasions (2A-2B-2C-2D-2E-2F) and the use of outfits with prosthetics, shiny materials and other provocative elements communicate Andrea's willingness to push limits and impose her presence regardless of the consequences. Her progressive involvement in the trauma of others—for instance, in Kika's rape—seemingly brings her close to the role of a witness; however, her prime interest is in dramatizing events to enthrall her audience. Andrea's work outfit, the military jumpsuit, presents her as a hybrid figure: part reporter, part recording device she is a fusion of body and machine like something from a science fiction film with the armored fabric of her suit functioning as a prosthesis and an extension of her constant

aggressivity. The suit's integrated camera, beyond its obvious professional use, is clearly phallic and may be read within Mulvey's theory of the male gaze as a prolongation of active looking and an instrumentalized means of invading the intimate spaces of others.

Andrea's attempts to penetrate the privacy of others—once again, Kika's rape is a case in point—can be understood as a form of aggression that obscures the boundaries between observation, spectacle and symbolic violation. Her need to keep feeding her morbid fascination with pain and her automating of the recording process lead her to invade intimate spaces (2D) and force events in order to obtain exclusive material. In the case of Kika (2E), for example, she attempts to interview her—against her will—and goes on to provoke Nicolas's death (2F). The more she gets involved in the misfortunes she covers, the more intense becomes the representation of her own pain, real or fake. Thus, she uses resources that challenge standard codes of beauty such as her scar and bandages (3A). She also reveals parts of her body that would, generally, be covered or are considered inappropriate for public display like her un-shaven arm pits (3B) or her bloodied breasts (1A) and sports orthopedic elements decorated with sequins (6). Meanwhile her aggressive on-screen presence serves to underline her alignment with suffering as well as highlighting her own trauma.

In the public sphere, Andrea exhibits iron control, however, in private contexts she occasionally reveals chinks in her armour-clad identity (4-7). At home she is shown as obsessive compulsive, unable to rest, as if she struggles to free herself from her television persona. Her rare moments of apparent relaxation with Nicolás (5) are marked by very distinct choices of attire, which while lacking any trace of ferocity or scandal of her work outfits are nonetheless marked by symbolic forms of the authoritarianism she displays in public: the bold sailor stripes of her top. This suggests that her personal life and her televisual life are interwoven to the extent that the boundary between them is almost non-existent. Although it might seem that in her encounters with Nicolás her costume is light on aggressive posturing, its design intentionally and consistently includes elements of her obsessive connection to the bellicose. It is as if, deep down, Andrea could never—or does not want to—escape the version of herself that explodes onto the television screen like a human bombshell, a

body-weapon that threatens to turn on itself, embodying a personality that is as captivating as it is dangerous to let loose in everyday life.

Andrea's identity, thus, depends on a double game: on one hand she is a television presenter who transforms pain and violence into a spectacle (1A-1B-3A-3B-6); while on the other she is trapped by the very news-spectacle dynamic she herself has helped to create because her own past contains an unresolved, real-life trauma (4-5-7). Furthermore, the dividing line between these two facets of her character becomes gradually less clear throughout the film. In the name of getting her scoop, Andrea insists on taking her camera wherever the violence is at its most extreme making herself physically vulnerable all (2C); however, although this appears to reinforce her image as the instrument of media justice, in reality, she is consolidating her desire to manipulate the truth.

As the film progresses, Andrea's various disguises and different personae become more confused to the point that they are fused into a single character trapped in the world of "telebasura" (literally *television-rubbish*) that she herself feeds. Ultimately, her unstoppable search for the most salacious news item turns on her. This process of character collapse culminates in the scene in which Nicolás dies (2F)—a variation of change 2 due to the addition of blood stains and mud from the ground—and she can no longer escape from the vortex of violence that she has created. In this way, Andrea is transformed into yet another victim of the media "terror-fest" instigated by her own actions.

The construction of Andrea Caracortada's identity, then, is founded on a televisual project that spectacularizes her own life, and voluntarily or otherwise, those of others. Throughout the film, she is trapped in a game of headline seeking to the extent that she puts her own life at risk ultimately causing her own downfall. Ironically, her audience-chasing approach to journalism is precisely what eventually, and tragically, seals her fate.

Speaking of the importance of Andrea's on-screen appearance, the designer himself, Jean Paul Gaultier said: "… the wardrobe drove the drama" (Gaultier, 2022, p. 94). Her outfits with their military styling and extravagant details underline how she is always armed and ready for combat—physically or via the media—regardless of ethical boundaries. Meanwhile, her scar, far from being something to hide, becomes another weapon of fascination that captures and

disturbs in equal measure. Fabricated using an esthetic that combines masculine aggression with the sensationalism of "telebasura", each of her outfits reinforces her obsession with spectacle identifying her as a television presenter with an insatiable appetite for other peoples' pain, or for manipulating her own. Although these are not the only factors at work, without her traumatized body and without the context in which it appears, that is, without her scar and the televisual space she inhabits, her costumes would lose all their power, their esthetic value and their meaning.

3.2.3. Juana, Rossy de Palma

F4. A collection of Juana's costume changes. Source: author's own work using stills from the film.

Juana acts as a realistic, folksy counterpoint to the other female characters in the film. From the start she is always portrayed as part of the domestic sphere: she is shown ironing while watching one of Andrea Caracortada's programs or cleaning the television while the program airs (1). Her wardrobe is dominated by Vichy prints and checks that are reminiscent of the patterns generally seen on kitchen tablecloths. Similarly, her hairstyles bring to mind a kind of everyday quaintness. Speaking about Juana's esthetic, Jean Paul Gaultier notes how it contains a declaration of intentions, and understanding her conflicting

motivations is fundamental to the contrast between her apparent docility as a housekeeper and the subversive force that she harbors in her heart.

Throughout the film, Juana maintains a constant internal battle between her domestic role and her rebellious impulses. She first stakes her claim in the quest for a different reality in the moustache scene—in which she declares that "the moustache is not simply the heritage of men" (2A)—making it clear she seeks to escape the world of family trauma that privileges men and keeps women like her in their place. Later, in a scene of female intimacy (2B) she reasserts this claim to authenticity as the embodiment of a dissident femininity that, paradoxically, adopts masculine traits: Juana wishes to control rather than be controlled stating that she wants to be a prison director and not a model. Her desire to police other women rather than live alongside them highlights the complex network of power and submission that molds her identity in which different forms of femininity are trapped between admiration and persecution: on catwalks or in prisons. Juana prefers to be the one watching, not the one who is exposed; yet, while her functional housekeeper's outfit may be nothing more than a disguise that protects her from her past at the same time, it condemns her to remain on the borders of the freedom she so desires.

In the scenes following a subtle rearrangement of hair and makeup (2B), despite Ramón's flattery and Kika's admiration (3A), Juana is clearly uncomfortable about her face being more exposed. However, returning to her more accustomed servile, functional role, the domestic space literally robs her of a voice: she tracks down her brother (4A) and, to hide their connection and protect her own reputation, she helps him stage the robbery of Kika and Ramón's apartment (4B) making the ultimate sacrifice by allowing him to bind her and gag her with a kitchen rag. Even when she interrupts the rape scene, she remains trapped by her own impotence, incapable of breaking the chains of her environment (4D). This is also a symbolic indication of how, although she desires autonomy, she belongs in a sphere that makes her invisible or taken for granted.

At the end of the film, Juana appears in the same outfit as she did in the engagement supper scene (3A) reprising a single fleeting moment of happiness—celebrating her bosses' good news—however, this time she leaves her hair loose (3C) and wears no makeup as a way to show the sincerity of her

feelings for Kika, the only person who has ever shown her genuine empathy (3D). In this scene, she acknowledges her guilt for having lied and leaves the apartment dragging with her several check-patterned shopping bags symbolically carrying herself and with her the weight of her domesticity and the contradictions it continues to generate for her (3E).

4. Discussion: from artifice to witness

Costume and its integration with the screenplay and plot development accomplishes a diegetic function that reinforces the narrative evolution of each character under analysis here. The work of *Kika's* costume design team should, thus, not be understood simply as the creation of some form of designer wardrobe or as a fetishist seduction, rather it is a narrative weapon of the first order (Pérez, 2018). The apparent disconnection between designers on the team—each one with their own distinctive high-profile brand—and the drama becomes unimportant if we consider how essential the role of costume is in constructing the identities of characters as diverse as Kika, Andrea Caracortada and Juana.

On one hand, many costume changes and variations in the film fulfil naturalistic, almost ordinary, functions. However, even in these instances they are redolent with the color and detail characteristic of the Almodovarian universe where even the everyday has a distinctive dash of style. On the other hand, several costumes stand out for their exaggerated styling and are quite unprecedented in Almodóvar's filmography prior to *Kika*. This represents an intentional rupture with immediate reality and underlines a feminine theatricality running through the film. In addition, it brings to the fore Almodóvar's latent pursuit of depictions of extreme violence apparent in some of his previous work, most notably in *Tacones lejanos* (*High heels*, 1991) and *¡Átame!* (*Tie me up! Tie me down!* 1989) (Lev, 2013).

In *Kika*, Almodóvar tries out new modes of visual expression through experimentation with costume contrasts. What these lack in terms of subtlety they make up for in their immense symbolic power and contribution to the staging of particular scenes. Furthermore, far from being anchored in a realist representation of gender conventions, the film seeks instead to project an

exaggerated reality saturated by the media in which a kaleidoscopic gaze questions the boundaries between the intimate and the public spheres. Thus, Almodóvar's proposition for *Kika* comes full circle: it is an ironic and critical portrait of Spain in the post-modern era, a Spain where a degenerate, hegemonic media has created a system of spectacularization in which fashion and makeup are used to screen or mask. What is more, this is a system in which everyone has a role—voluntarily or otherwise—be this as an observer, the observed, or, as in the cases of the characters studied here, a combination of the two.

The scopic drive (Zecchi, 2015) of *Kika's* main characters—both active and passive—is completely excessive to the point of pathology pushing some characters into exhibitionism or voyeurism. Characters are, thus, exposed to forms of physical and psychological violence which serves to demonstrate their humanity as they become trapped in compromising circumstances that define dynamics of power, control and desire. In this way, social hierarchies are not only established but also solidified and reinforced as characters exhibit visibly different ways of being in and engaging with their immediate surroundings. Concerning makeup specifically, beyond its role in nuancing certain changes in costume, it is among the film's key narrative devices. Indeed, Kika's exercise of her profession as makeup artist precisely demonstrates how this element of presentation can be a source of intimacy and confession, as well as a means of manipulation. More widely, the film's discourses on cosmetics and fashion suggest that makeup is rather more than mere camouflage or a form of emancipation, rather it articulates the bonds of (mis)trust between characters: women obsessively police the looks of other women creating an atmosphere of constant female-on-female observation which, paradoxically, perpetuates these character's internalized sense of male control. The act of putting on makeup and variations of this process have the feel of a maternal gesture of care or protection, but they are also forms of covering up and thus, effectively reveal characters' internal suffering.

In this way, *Kika's* female characters expose and embody various different expressions of gender and sexuality from models of conventional femininity to types of masculinity or dissident sexualities. These expressions are subject to

constant negotiation via elements and devices—the camera lens, the eye-lid—that frame and reiterate the various constructions of gaze and the dynamics of acquired masculinity that the film plays with. Thus, while the characters sometimes seem passive and conforming, innocently and easily allowing themselves to be deceived or carried along by circumstances, at other times, they make their own wrong decisions or are influenced by their surroundings to the point that they actively harm others or themselves.

Similarly, Kika, has something of a "saviour complex" which could be read in two ways: as a form of empowerment on one hand but on the other as a way for her to impose herself on others, for instance, recommending a particular esthetic ideal for Juana and advising Amparo on her behavior. Juana and Amparo, in contrast, manifest facets of a less privileged femininity which implies a greater need to be recognized in the mirror of an external gaze. In Juana's case this means asserting a masculinized authenticity while Amparo mimics her more successful friend despite her sometimes old-fashioned femininity. Andrea stands in opposition to these characters taking on a hybrid role that combines certain masculine attitudes of domination and aggression with a strongly feminized image somewhere between fetish- and military-chic. This feminine side is used to reveal the internal trauma which her masculine posturing seeks to keep hidden and private.

Turning to some of *Kika's* other female characters, these include Susana and a vast number of anonymous women who have no definite role in the plot. These women appear predominantly as victims—of murder or domestic abuse—and are united by the single on-screen trait of being tragic. That their names are not even mentioned—as in the case of the cemetery murder victim—serves to underline the systematic nature of the violence exercised against their bodies. Nevertheless, some of these unnamed women have a more ambiguous role, remaining trapped between guilt and social pressure unable to attain an identity of their own within the narrative: the makeup students or the murderer's mother who is called to testify against her son. A further set of female characters represent—almost paradoxically—the limits that femininity can be taken to: the mother who cannot read and yet presents a program about reading, a contradiction that is highlighted in the banter and artifice surrounding this

character's media presentation. Alongside the three main protagonists, this collection of characters, embody a wide and bi-modal range of female presentations: they swap obscurity for a spectacularized media world; they oscillate between virtuous abnegation and unbridled sexuality; they may be astute at some times while at other they are entirely naïve; in one scene they may appear unashamedly naked and in another dressed in the most modest attire imaginable. This array of ambiguity underscores the complexity and, at the same time, the vulnerability of *Kika's* anonymous women; they are at the margins of full identity and exposed to a society that would spectacularize their lived-experience for pleasure.

Among *Kika's* gallery of women characters, Andrea functions as the most institutionalized authority figure. Her masculinization (in attitude and, on occasions, costume) makes her a bridge between the world of men, which she aspires to be part of, and that of women which she approaches opportunistically for the purposes of media exploitation as when, for the sake of an exclusive, she offers to interview Kika immediately after her rape. In contrast, Kika's character development—as the eponymous heroine and narrative backbone of the film—sees her apparent naivete first problematized and later transformed to solidify her as a complex personality who, despite certain insecurities and missteps, uses costume and the avenues of expression this enables to rescue both herself and also those who cross her path. In this way, Kika reaffirms her own subjective reality both as a saviour and trauma survivor.

5. Conclusions

The present analysis demonstrates the key narrative role of costume in Almodóvar's *Kika* (1993). This resource not only makes a deep imprint on the subjectivity of the film's characters but, at the same time, consolidates the director's unique brand identity. Far from being a straightforward esthetic device, the use of costume varies according to the narrative context and drives a profound dialogue between discourses of fashion and those concerning gender norms and their forms of spectacularization. Thus, results show how the spectacularization so amply featured in *Kika* functions on many levels: (1) to reflect or demonstrate internal character development, see, for example,

Andrea's scar; (2) as a means by which televisual devices impose their masculine influence of control and observation and (3) as a form of creative ostentation and mutual recognition—for the purposes of publicity—among the film's director, the big fashion brands, the creative talents involved in Almodóvar's *factory* and the associated *star-system* both on and off the screen.

Nevertheless, the main stem of this analysis is not rooted so much in the fetishised opulence of the apparel worn by *Kika's* protagonists or its aspirational performativity. Rather it springs from the way in which traces of the body, either of the characters themselves or others (a stubborn blood stain on a dress or the mustache that refuses to remain hidden), reinforce the testimonial nature of appearance and give narrative meaning to each character's history of trauma. In this way, Almodóvar shines a spotlight on how the authentic dramatic force of costume does not come from the use of luxury brands, or the pooled talent of its many creative contributors or even from its critique of the fashion system as a place of spectacularization and violence against the body. Far from it, Almodóvar's *Kika* shows how the power of costume—alongside makeup and hairstyling—lies in its narrative capacity and the way in which tiny but significant details can reveal the fascinating layers of conflict or trauma response constituting each character's essence. The creative synergy at the heart of this film, as unprecedented as it was productive, brings to light uncomfortable truths about the desire to see oneself and to be seen in contemporary culture. Furthermore, it underlines the gaps, the repressed desires and human contradictions in a collective imaginary where the boundaries between victim and aggressor, violence and its reporting are overlapped or blurred with disturbing frequency.

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