

**Bibí Andersen and Victoria Abril's Double Act: *High Heels* as the Consolidation of a Recurring Duo in the Star System during Spain's Transition to Democracy**

**El *double act* de Bibí Andersen y Victoria Abril. *Tacones lejanos* como la consolidación de una pareja recurrente en el *star system* de la transición**

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**Abstract:**

Victoria Abril and Bibí Andersen's double act in *High Heels* (*Tacones lejanos*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1991) is based on two earlier films that also featured the two actresses together: *Cambio de sexo* (Vicente Aranda, 1977) and *La noche más hermosa* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1984). These prior collaborations permeate Almodóvar's film, enhancing the intertextual quality of his work. With a methodological approach based on star studies and on concepts drawn from transfeminist studies, this article explores the significance of intertextuality in Almodóvar's filmography, in which actors and actresses also serve as vehicles for intertextual references. At the same time, it shows how Almodóvar takes up a narrative on the subversion of gender codes and the patriarchal order in *High Heels* that Andersen and Abril had in fact already begun to construct in the early years of Spain's transition to democracy.

**Resumen:**

El *double act* de Victoria Abril y Bibí Andersen en *Tacones lejanos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1991) se constituye a partir de dos películas en las que las dos actrices habían aparecido juntas anteriormente: *Cambio de sexo* (Vicente Aranda, 1977) y *La noche más hermosa* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1984). Estas colaboraciones previas permean el filme de Almodóvar, potenciando así el carácter intertextual de su cine. Partiendo de un discurso metodológico que se sustenta sobre los *star studies* y sobre conceptos de los estudios transfeministas, el artículo aborda la importancia del carácter intertextual en el cine de Almodóvar, donde también los actores y las actrices funcionan como vehículos para la cita. Asimismo, el artículo demuestra que, en *Tacones lejanos*, Almodóvar retoma un relato sobre la subversión de los códigos de género y el orden patriarcal que, en realidad, Andersen y Abril ya habían empezado a construir en los primeros años de la transición.

**Key words:**

Pedro Almodóvar; Bibí Andersen; Victoria Abril; intertextuality; trans body; star studies.

**Palabras clave:**

Pedro Almodóvar; Bibí Andersen; Victoria Abril; intertextualidad; cuerpo trans; star studies.

## 1. Introduction

Various authors who have written about Pedro Almodóvar's films stress that one of the distinctive features of his work is its intertextual character. In his book *Un caníbal en Madrid*, Alejandro Yarza explores this idea in terms of cultural recycling and a camp sensibility, as mechanisms or strategies that serve to "give new meaning to old forms" (1999, p. 17) and shape the way that Almodóvar appropriates historical remnants (specifically, all the Spanish iconography that the Franco regime had made synonymous with national unity) in order to invert its meaning. On the other hand, theorists such as Román Gubern (2005, pp. 46-51) and especially Daniela Aronica (2005, p. 57) have linked Almodóvar's intertextuality to the notion of postmodernity that is so often associated with his creative universe. Along these same lines, Peter William Evans defines the intertextuality in Almodóvar's films as "a mosaic of references in which each text is the assimilation and transformation of other texts" (2005, p. 155) and Pedro Poyato draws on Gérard Genette's narratology to point out that in every film by Almodóvar

the traces of the texts that preceded them, in addition to being numerous, are especially visible and identifiable because it is those texts themselves, either in whole or in part, which in most cases form part of the textual fabric of the film (Poyato, 2014, p. 103).

There is a broad consensus on the importance of the dialogue that Almodóvar's work engages in with previous films, either by referring to them explicitly or by incorporating them, to borrow an expression coined by Àngel Quintana, like "a spectrum that penetrates the story to testify to its continued existence" (2014, p. 38). One example of this approach is Julieta Serrano's spectacular arrival at the nightclub in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1980) dressed as Scarlett O'Hara after escaping through the stage door of the adjacent theatre where she was supposed to be performing in a production of *The Lady of the Camellias*. According to Genette's idea, as explained by Poyato, of the "fragment that transcends its immanence in one text to be incorporated into another that is theoretically foreign to it" (2014, p. 103), Serrano's appearance in the disco is the perfect expression of the

intertextual device: she is quite literally a character who has escaped from her story to enter another where she does not belong. The hypothesis underpinning this article is that this idea embodied by Serrano in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* could serve to construct a methodological framework for analysing the actors and actresses who have collaborated with Almodóvar over the years based on the same intertextual principles normally applied to the aesthetics of his filmmaking. In a well-known passage from his book *La rampe*, Serge Daney suggests that actors constitute “the essence of the dialogue between filmmakers” (1983, p. 165); it therefore follows that every actor or actress has an intertextual quality, at least potentially. Richard Dyer supports this idea in his book *Heavenly Bodies* when he points out that “star images are always extensive, multimedia, [and] intertextual” (1987, p. 3).

One clear manifestation of this intertextuality can be found in the character Pablo Quintero, the filmmaker played by Eusebio Poncela in *La ley del deseo* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1987), who recalls the film directors played by Poncela in two earlier films, *La muerte del escorpión* (Gonzalo Herralde, 1976) and *Arrebato* (Iván Zulueta, 1979), and who thus creates a kind of triangulation of meanings with these two films that seems far from accidental. Almodóvar's friendship with Zulueta is well-known, and the connections between their filmographies have been discussed by Brad Epps (2009, pp. 213-214) and others. Moreover, a comparative analysis of *La muerte del escorpión* and *La ley del deseo* reveals some remarkable similarities. A notable example can be found in their respective opening sequences: while *La muerte del escorpión* begins with a metacinematic sequence showing the shooting of a film in which a boy, possibly a sex worker, confronts a man and demands the money he owes him, *La ley del deseo* starts with the première of a film in which a man asks a boy, also probably a sex worker, to take off his clothes and masturbate in front of him. It is evident that Almodóvar had Zulueta's and Herralde's respective films in mind as references. However, it is also possible that these intertextual ploys may have effects somewhat beyond the filmmaker's control. For example, in a book of conversations with Frédéric Strauss, Almodóvar remarks that when he wrote the script for *La ley del deseo* he had imagined the

character of Pablo Quintero as his *alter ego*, but in the film it did not turn out as he had planned: “I would have liked to bring it much closer to the way I live and work. I wanted the director to be much more lively, but there was a problem with the actor, Eusebio Poncela, that prevented me from taking it where I wanted to go. It was almost like a chemical factor” (Strauss, 1995, p. 83). The trouble was that Quintero had more in common with what Poncela had developed in his two previous roles as a filmmaker than the *alter ego* that Almodóvar had envisioned. It was as if the actor’s intertextuality ultimately overpowered the filmmaker’s intentions.

The example of Poncela in *La ley del deseo* is far from an isolated case. The aim of this article is to analyse the “double act” of two actresses, Victoria Abril and Bibiana Fernández (or Bibí Andersen, as she was known at the time) in another Almodóvar film, *High Heels* (*Tacones lejanos*, 1991). Abril plays the protagonist of the melodrama, Rebeca, while Andersen plays a minor character of minimal importance to the plot who is not even given a name. She only appears in three scenes, although one of these is one of the film’s most memorable moments: the iconic choreography she leads in the prison yard in front of a stunned and bewildered Rebeca, who watches from a corner. Andersen’s character, anonymous and yet with a visual force that dominates all the shots in which she appears, has something in common with Julieta Serrano’s character in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, as she could also be understood as a character who has escaped from another film that we will never see, slipping momentarily into Rebeca’s story. What makes this intrusion particularly interesting is the fact that a sort of mutual recognition, albeit fleeting, seems to occur between the two characters. The aim of the analysis presented here is to demonstrate that this game of mirrors created between the two characters operates not only *within* but especially *outside* the film. Andersen’s appearance in *High Heels* serves to evoke two previous films in which she also appears with Abril: *Cambio de sexo* (Vicente Aranda, 1977) and *La noche más hermosa* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1984). In its own way, each film is notable for its capacity to construct unexpected discourses around transgender subjectivity and its representation. *High Heels* facilitates the consolidation of

the two actresses as a recurring duo in the Spanish star system. The argument put forward here is that by bringing Andersen and Abril together again in *High Heels*, Almodóvar revives the memory of an earlier narrative to enhance the intertextual power of his film.

## **2. Methodological framework and structure**

This research contributes to the field of star studies established by Richard Dyer in his landmark text *Stars*, which conceives of film stars as agents who contribute to the creation of the filmic text. According to Dyer, film stars are signifying images; in other words, they carry meanings (2001, p. 12) that need to be interpreted. In the introduction to his book *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer suggests that the study of actors or actresses involves searching for ways to assign meaning to their bodies (1987, p. 13). Drawing on Dyer's methodological principles, this analysis uses the concept of the "double act" recently introduced by authors such as Miriam J. Petty (2018) and Andrew Roberts (2019) to analyse different pairs of actors or actresses whose bodies engage in a dialogue that mobilise a series of meanings on screen in a logic of exchange or reciprocity. For example, discussing the performances of Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones in *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002), Petty argues that "together the two women magnify and reinforce one another in ways that are both direct and oppositional" (Petty, 2019, p. 116). This description could equally be applied to the double act of Andersen and Abril, whose pairing meets a requirement of complementarity identified previously by Arlene Croce in her book on Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (1972, p. 6). The complementary nature of the Andersen-Abril duo stems first from the fact that one is a trans actress and the other a cis actress, which triggers a subtext related to gender variability that seems to anticipate contemporary theories proposed by authors such as Jack Halberstam (1993, 2018) and Paul B. Preciado (2008, 2022, 2022). It is therefore unsurprising that their history as a recurring couple should find its culmination in an Almodóvar film. As Paul Julian Smith argues, "[i]n his celebration of fluidity and performance, in his hostility to fixed positions of all kinds, Almodóvar anticipates that critique of

identity and essence that was later to become so familiar in academic feminist, minority, and queer theory” (1994, p. 3).

Through the intertextual framework that connects *High Heels* to Bibí Andersen and Victoria Abril's previous two collaborations, this study also seeks ways of reconstructing a possible narrative around the trans body—as Preciado puts it, a body capable of “extracting itself from the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial genealogy through practices of discontent, resistance and de-identification” (2022, p. 27)—in Spanish cinema in the post-Franco years. To this end, this article is structured in three sections. The first one focuses on the connections between *Cambio de sexo* and the three scenes in *High Heels* that show the two actresses together, tracing the origins of their mutual recognition as a kind of symbiosis described (albeit only tangentially) by authors such as Marsha Kinder, who suggests that “[w]hen we see major stars such as Abril [...] performing such complex sexualities, particularly alongside a real-life transexual like Bibí Andersen, the iterative power of their sexual mobility is subversive, regardless of the specifics of the narrative” (1999, p. 144). The second section maps a trajectory from *Cambio de sexo* to *La noche más hermosa*, a film that can be interpreted in terms of its attempt to de-problematise Andersen's transgender subjectivity and to vindicate her place in the Spanish star system through a performative pact between the two actresses, reenacted according to the formula of role swap that foreshadows aspects of the intertextual device in *High Heels*. And the third section analyses the way *High Heels* absorbs the flow of discourses generated by Andersen and Abril's double act and the way the interaction between these two actresses contributes to the broader intertextual network that underpins the film.

### **3. Parallel lives: *High Heels* recovers the subversive memory of *Cambio de sexo***

In her article on intertextuality and the Almodóvarian universe, Daniela Aronica points out that through his work with actresses such as Victoria Abril and Bibí Andersen, Almodóvar seeks to evoke a memory of the disruptive films that characterised the early years of post-Franco Spain's transition to



democracy, such as *Cambio de sexo* (2003, p. 59). For Aronica, the actresses operate as a vehicle for intertextual reference. Drawing on this idea, Abril and Andersen's reappearance together in *High Heels* is analysed here as an evocation of Vicente Aranda's film. *Cambio de sexo* marked the screen début of Bibí Andersen, who at that time had been performing at the Ferrer chain of nightclubs in Barcelona. It was at one such performance that Aranda first saw her. "I decided to include her in the story, because she contributed a documentary value to the film that I found quite interesting," recalls the director (quoted in Castillejo, 2006, p. 33). This quest for documentary value explains why Andersen portrays a kind of fictional version of herself in the film: her character has her name, she works as a performer in a Barcelona cabaret and her signature number, an erotic dance that concludes with her revealing her male genitals, is the same one Andersen performed when Aranda first met her (Alvares & Frías, 1991, p. 108). Abril, on the other hand, was only 15 years old at the time; she had played a few supporting roles and starred as an assistant presenter on the game show *Un, dos, tres, responde otra vez*. Although it was not her first appearance on screen, *Cambio de sexo* marked her first leading role. In the film, she plays María José, a trans girl undergoing the transition process. As Marsha Kinder explains, "[t]he casting of Victoria Abril as a transsexual [...] helped launch a star discourse of eroticised sexual mobility that other filmmakers like Almodóvar would later build on" (1999, p. 128).



[F1] Victoria Abril walks behind Bibí Andersen outside the courts.  
*High Heels* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1991). El Deseo/Ciby 2000/Canal+/TF1.

Andersen and Abril's first collaboration thus marked the beginning of their respective careers as film stars. As Kinder suggests, this may be key to

understanding their reappearance together in the three scenes in *High Heels*, creating the illusion of two lives running in parallel. The first of these three scenes consists of a single shot showing the two women walking, one behind the other, handcuffed and escorted by two policemen, out of a courtroom and into the police van that will take them to prison [F1]. They say nothing, but the idea of their crossed fates implied in the framing produces a sensation of mirroring or simultaneity: Andersen is introduced in the film as if chance brought her together with Rebeca (Abril), who walks right behind her. A similar effect is achieved in Andersen's second appearance, in a scene in the prison cells that begins with the image of Rebeca crying into her pillow to the sound of the bolero number "*Piensa en mí*" being sung by her mother, Becky (Marisa Paredes, although the song is actually sung by Luz Casal), at the theatre where she is performing. Soon we will discover that the song is actually being played on a radio. Rebeca gets up and walks between the bunk beds, following her mother's voice to the bed where Andersen's character is locked in an embrace with her girlfriend. The two women stare at Rebeca. It is impossible to define the exact meaning of the looks exchanged at this moment—Andersen watches Rebeca with a penetrating gaze through to the end of the scene without looking away from her tearful face for a second—but they seem to suggest a glimmer of a past shared not by Almodóvar's characters but by the actresses playing them.

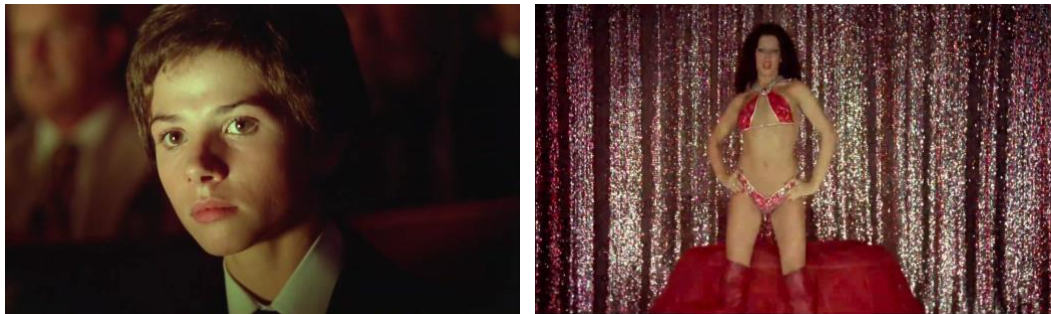


[F2] Bibí Andersen leads the dance in the prison while Victoria Abril watches from a corner.  
*High Heels* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1991). El Deseo/Ciby 2000/Canal+/TF1.

This idea is confirmed in Bibí Andersen's third and final appearance in *High Heels*, when she leads the collective dance in the prison yard, with other inmates joining in, while Rebeca, standing up against the wall, watches like a mere onlooker with a bewildered expression [F2]. This sequence references



*Cambio de sexo*, a film in which Andersen's imposing body constantly attracts Abril's impressionable gaze. Indeed, Andersen's dance in *High Heels* could be interpreted as a reenactment of one of the crucial moments in Aranda's film: on the cabaret stage, Bibí performs the striptease number that culminates with her exposing her genitals, while María José (Abril), still a boy named José María at this point in the story, sits in the audience and watches every detail from the shadows, with a look of admiration and confusion [F3].



[F3] María José watches Bibí's striptease number from the shadows.  
*Cambio de sexo* (Vicente Aranda, 1977). Impala/Morgana Films.

This relationship between Bibí's body and María José's eyes reaches a climax in the dressing room scene where Bibí reveals her vagina after having undergone sex reassignment surgery [F4]. In the background of the shot is the diminutive figure of María José, while Bibí's buttocks appear in the foreground at the moment when she removes her underwear. The distance from which María José stares at her contributes to the impression of an oversized sculptural body. This reaffirms Bibí's status as a role model or mentor in the story, which concludes with María José herself entering an operating room to undergo a vaginoplasty. María José constructs her new identity in Bibí's image and likeness, taking her as an inspiration and following in her footsteps. This may be the reason why Almodóvar has Rebeca walk directly behind Andersen in the latter's first appearance in *High Heels*. The fact that the two women are prison inmates underscores the idea that their relationship can only occur beyond the limits of the norms of society and the law, in those spaces of social exile to which all who challenge the patriarchal order are condemned. Only in a place like a prison, a setting for the outlawed, could their paths cross once again.



[F4] Bibí's imposing sculptural body captures María José's gaze.  
*Cambio de sexo* (Vicente Aranda, 1977). Impala/Morgana Films.

On 1 June 1987, Bibí Andersen interviewed Victoria Abril on the Spanish television program *La Tarde*. Talking about their collaboration on *Cambio de sexo*, Abril, referring to the years that had passed since the film was made, remarked: “I was very small and you were too.” Andersen replied: “I was never very small. I’ve always been very big, unfortunately.” Andersen’s retort, while obviously tongue-in-cheek, could be interpreted in relation to her ability to dominate the space of the film frame thanks to her imposing physique and decisive movements that allow her to seize control of the image. This is evident, for example, in the tango scene between Andersen and Abril in *Cambio de sexo*, a climactic moment in the actresses’ double act, “a collaborative number now performed in synch” (Kinder, 1999, p. 138), in which Andersen leads and Abril follows, imitating her dance partner’s determination. This creates a connection between the two bodies that suggests an exchange or transfer from master to disciple.

At certain points in Aranda’s film, Bibí even takes on a maternal role, such as when she visits María José in the hospital after the latter has tried to cut off her own genitals with a razor. It is thus no surprise that in *High Heels*, in the prison cell scene, it is precisely the voice of her mother that leads Rebeca to Andersen’s bed, which fits perfectly into the film’s narrative framework: as Kinder argues, *High Heels* transforms the relationship between a mother and a daughter into a long succession of impostures and impersonations (1995). Nor is it surprising that Rebeca should feel out of place in the scene of Bibí’s dance, when she recognises the power of attraction and leadership that this

anonymous woman is able to exert on those around her—and perhaps on Rebeca herself.

It is important to note, as Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz points out, that the roles Bibí Andersen plays in Almodóvar's films are cisgender women, or at least, they are not explicitly identified as trans women (2008, p. 142). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that Andersen's media image, especially in those years, was founded on her status as a trans woman, a status that the audience would associate with her characters. The impact of her dominant, sculptural presence in *High Heels* contributes to the construction of a labyrinthine narrative on identity whose various pathways might be understood to anticipate Jack Halberstam's characterisation of trans identity as a notion that challenges "concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions" (2018, p. 22). As Acevedo-Muñoz explains in his description of *High Heels*:

[T]he genre (in)definition of the film, along with the presence of the 'transitional' body of Bibí Andersen, the many and colourful transitional phases of Femme Letal/Eduardo, and the identity confusions between Becky and Rebeca present us with a Russian dolls effect of identity crises that demand compromise rather than resolution (2008, p. 145).

The confusion of identities described here by Acevedo-Muñoz in the mother-daughter duo formed by Becky and Rebeca could be extended to all three on-screen encounters between Andersen and Abril. Through its intertextual references, this second line of confusion of identities that the film only hints at replicates the dynamics of interchangeability of roles enacted by the two actresses in *Cambio de sexo*. This interchangeability also draws on *La noche más hermosa*, where the Andersen-Abril double act reshapes the conventions of vaudeville, introducing transgender subjectivity as a destabilising element in the traditional comedy scheme of romantic entanglements.

#### **4. From *Cambio de sexo* to *La noche más hermosa*: de-problematising trans identity**

In one of the few academic articles published on Bibí Andersen, Patrick Paul Garlinger suggests that “Andersen’s transgendered body--transitioned as it were into womanhood--has come to stand as a material emblem of Spain’s own transition to democracy and postmodernity” (2003, p. 6). The idea of exploring the representation of transgender identities as transgressive images in contexts of political change is something of a tradition in studies of the cultural history of Spain’s transition to democracy. For example, in his research on the underground scene in 1970s Spain, Jordi Costa argues that “the transsexual body is the perfect countercultural icon because it crystallizes [...] a radical transformation and a challenge to the imposed codes” (2018, pp. 15-16). More recently, Pablo Romero suggests that after Franco’s death, the trans body “functions on the symbolic level as a metaphor for democratic Spain precisely because it is a body in transition” (2021, p. 151). In this sense, *Cambio de sexo* could be understood as Garlinger describes it, as “a silent example of the use of transsexualism to reflect social change” (2003, p. 7). At the same time, it is worth noting that according to Rosa Alvares and Belén Frías, Aranda decided to make the film because he “felt that transvestites and transsexuals were used shamelessly in denigrating spectacles that were more like freak shows than artistic performances” (1991, p. 109), an idea alluded to by Aranda himself when he refers to “the exploitation to which transsexuals are subjected” (quoted in Castillejo, 2006, p. 33). Herein lies a kind of paradox similar to the one identified by Anto Rodríguez in his analysis of the role of theatrical variety shows featuring transgender cast members in those years: “Those party halls became the site of a very Spanish contradiction: laughter, mockery and astonishment in reaction to the Other was turned into attraction, desire and admiration” (2024, p. 190).

The character of Bibí Andersen in *Cambio de sexo* exemplifies this contradiction. On the one hand, there is no doubt that she embodies the idea of an extravagant otherness, as effectively underscored by the epithets “a mystery of nature” or “the biological enigma of our century” used to present

her. On the other hand, the sophistication that characterises her appearance on screen (the dresses, the visits to the hairdressers, the bottle of champagne she brings with her to María José's dressing room, the roses she takes to the hospital) enable her to arouse a fascination that distances her from any notion of marginalisation. This idea would be picked up again seven years later in Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón's *La noche más hermosa*, which begins with a sequence shot panning over a television set. A voice coming from a loudspeaker is calling the cast for the next day: "Miss Bibí Andersen at ten, make-up." At that moment, the camera pans up slightly over a room divider to offer us a glimpse of a private dressing room. There we see Andersen, who, with the help of an assistant, is stripping off the various pieces of a white habit until she is almost completely naked. Like she did in *Cambio de sexo*, Andersen plays a character with her own name. In her uninhibited movements and her way of displaying her monolithic figure dominating the middle of the shot, she inevitably invokes the striptease show she performed in Aranda's film. At the same time, all the elements that surround her in this first scene—the dressing room mirrors, the assistant helping her undress, her name being spoken over the loudspeaker—form a backdrop evoking the notion of stardom, as if one of the film's key aims were to underscore the position that Andersen had established for herself in the the star system of Spanish cinema.

*La noche más hermosa* sparked a degree of controversy upon its release, as summed up by the headline of an article written by Diego Galán that year for the San Sebastian Film Festival: "Bibí Andersen claims she made the film believing she was playing a woman, not a transvestite" (1984). Ever since *Cambio de sexo*, Andersen's star image had been constantly associated with her status as a trans woman, as reflected in decisions such as her participation in a special issue of *Lib* magazine titled *El libro de los trasvestis* (Rodríguez, 2024, p. 197). However, in the early 1980s she sought to leave this image behind in favour of one more in line with the standards of normative women. It may have been possible to conceal from her the fact that her character in the storyline to *La noche más hermosa* was a trans woman because she is only identified as such in dialogues between other characters when she is not

present. On the other hand, perhaps as a consequence of this mismatch between what was stated in the script and what Andersen understood, one of the most transgressive aspects of the film is the fact that Bibí's status as a trans woman does not seem to be of any importance—at least, not to the other characters in the story. For example, Bibí has a relationship with Federico (José Sacristán) that includes a rather explicit bed scene, and at the end of the film she shares a passionate kiss with Luis, played by Fernando Fernán Gómez, an actor who at the time was already viewed as a sort of patriarchal figure in Spanish cinema. Under an idyllic starry sky that plays with the codes used to represent the union of the heterosexual couple in Hollywood cinema, the kiss between Andersen and Fernán Gómez can be construed as definitively de-problematising transgender subjectivity in the economy of desire. Concepts such as extravagance or Otherness are completely nullified in a conclusion that seems to constitute a deconstruction of the patriarchal value system.

These are the terms that define Andersen and Abril's double act. Andersen plays Federico's lover, while Abril plays his wife, Elena. This constitutes the first level of a game of mirrors that will be developed over the course of the film. Although Bibí and Elena only cross paths in the final scene, the illusory notion of a shared experience between the two women revives the memory of *Cambio de sexo*. For example, after they sleep together, Bibí tells Federico that when a woman is in love she will stare at the moon for hours on end. Arriving home that night, Federico finds Elena on the balcony, gazing fixedly at the moon. This marks a connection between what one character says and what the other does, as if their bodies were secretly synchronised. In the end, it is revealed that the two women had actually made a pact together to stoke Federico's jealousy so that he would take an interest in Elena once again. This reveals another important aspect of the relationship between Elena and Bibí: the solidarity established between them overrides any rivalry they might have over the love of a man. Bibí helps Elena recover her husband, thus positioning Andersen once again in a protective role. In the final sequence, Elena thanks Bibí for her help, in a dialogue that begins with an intimate tone but is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a group of workers with the national TV



network who also want to thank Bibí for helping them secure a new labour agreement. The scene ends with a crowd of people lifting Bibí up and cheering her, making an idol out of her, while she slaps them from on high with her fan. The resulting image constitutes another demonstration of Andersen's ability to dominate the space of a crowded shot [F5], foreshadowing her leading role in the dance in *High Heels*.



[F5] The workers lift Bibí up while she slaps them with her fan.

*La noche más hermosa* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1984). Luis Megino P.C. S.A/RTVE.

*La noche más hermosa* adopts the structure of a romantic comedy of errors, the origins of which are identified by Stanley Cavell as Shakespearean (1999, pp. 11-12), where the theme of swapping identities by means of disguises facilitates a wide range of reflections on the unstable nature of gender. The film's plotline unfolds in the context of a trouble-plagued television adaptation of José Zorrilla's play *Don Juan Tenorio*: Bibí is cast as the leading lady, Doña Inés, but they are unable to find an actor to play her leading man, Don Juan. At the end of the film, Elena agrees to take Bibí's place in the role of Doña Inés on the condition that Bibí plays Don Juan. This identity swap constitutes a queer resignification of a character who for centuries has been the literary mythical archetype of the Spanish heterosexual man. In addition, it revives the double act between the two actresses, in terms of their complementary nature. There is even a moment when Elena, bewitched by Bibí's charms, approaches her and says: "You're so magnetic... not even Don Juan himself could be so seductive." This evokes a similar scene in *Cambio de sexo* that Almodóvar would also recreate in *High Heels*: Abril watching Andersen admiringly, recognising something in her that is powerful or overwhelming. Although in

*La noche más hermosa* (in contrast to *Cambio de sexo*), Abril's character represents a conventional notion of femininity, her connection with Andersen hints at a potential destabilising of the norms of gender and sexuality. As Marsha Kinder suggests, when actresses such as Victoria Abril are placed next to Bibí Andersen, the iterative power of her sexual mobility is subversive (1999, p. 44). This is something that we do not get to see in *La noche más hermosa* because it is only posited as a possibility in their performance of *Don Juan Tenorio*, which is only just beginning when the film ends.

### **5. *High Heels*: the image multiplied**

In *Cambio de sexo*, the relationship between Bibí Andersen's and Victoria Abril's characters suggests a kind of mother-daughter bond. In *High Heels*, the collaboration between the two actresses takes place in the context of a film that focuses precisely on exploring the ties between mother and daughter. Teresa Vilarós argues that in many films made during the Spanish transition to democracy, the mother was also associated with the notion of the motherland (1998). Similarly, in his book *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco*, John Hopewell (1986) opens a chapter titled "Saying a Long Goodbye to Mother" with a quote by Carlos Saura comparing the Spanish censors under Franco with his mother. A relationship is established between the mother and the nation, and between the mother and the repressive system. In her article on the mother in Almodóvar's films, Lesley Heins Walker takes a similar line when she argues that under the Franco regime "the mother, as 'head' of the household, is made to 'stand in' for the father/Franco" (1998, p. 273). Walker raises this point to discuss how Almodóvar's cinema transgresses this construction of the mother as a pillar of the system, turning her instead into a disruptive figure.

According to Walker, given that for the Franco regime the family was a political symbol, the depiction of incest in cinema could be used as a tool for transgression. As an example of this she points to *High Heels*, where Abril's character, Rebeca, "seeks an erotic identification with her mother" (1998, p. 284). The mother-daughter relationship suggests a new intertextual approach

to the film, in which different images, situations, roles and voices overlap. *High Heels* begins with Rebeca waiting for her mother (Marisa Paredes) at the airport. This opening sequence includes two flashbacks that define the relationship between the mother and her daughter. The first shows Rebeca as a child on a trip to the Antilles, where her mother buys some earrings. The girl then asks her mother for some just like the ones she has bought, suggesting that even then she had a desire to resemble, match or overlap with the maternal figure. With her new earrings on, the girl asks her mother: “Do you like me?” Thus, the daughter’s desire to please her mother is made explicit. The motif of the earrings will appear again later in the film, in one of the various games of correspondences introduced by Almodóvar. In the second flashback, Rebeca switches Becky’s boyfriend’s pills. This is followed by an ellipsis, and then a scene showing the boyfriend’s death being announced on television. Did the child kill him? Again, in a game of mirrors, this mystery will come back later in the film, when the murder victim is Rebeca’s husband and Becky’s lover. The intertextuality of the multiple reflections proposed by the film is disruptive, as is the question of the murders, which can be interpreted in terms of Jack Halberstam’s argument that “[p]ostmodernism invites new and different conceptions of violent resistance and its representation” (1993, p. 190).

Walker suggests that there is something incestuous about Rebecca’s relationship with her mother, as her need to become like Becky is conflated with a kind of desire for her. In this sense, to Marsha Kinder’s argument that *High Heels* “provides a new erotic fantasy for empowering a strategic alliance among straight women, lesbians, gay men, transvestites, transsexuals and all other forms of nonpatriarchal androgynes” (1995, p. 152), we could draw on Walker to add another element that takes an axe to the patriarchal system: the subversion of the mother-daughter relationship based on the overlapping of the figures of mother, daughter and lover. This is evident, for example, in the fact that the two women share the same man: Manuel, Rebeca’s husband and Becky’s lover. Rebeca’s desire to emulate her mother through a third figure, the lover, evokes the relationship established between Abril’s and Andersen’s

characters in *Cambio de sexo*, in which María José follows in Bibí's footsteps even to the point of falling in love with Durán, the same man with whom Bibí has had a relationship. This in turn is echoed in *La noche más hermosa*, where Andersen and Abril play the lover and wife, respectively, of Federico (José Sacristán). In *High Heels*, the idea of imitation is taken a step further with the figure of Femme Letal (Miguel Bosé), Rebeca's friend who imitates Becky in his drag show, and later, having stripped off his women's clothes, has sex with Rebeca in the dressing room. Rebeca even remarks to Letal that she "loves" the fact that he imitates her mother. Once again, the figures of lover and mother overlap in a new, subversive intertextual reference.

Throughout the film, the transvestite body of Bosé's character overlaps with Paredes's, and another figure is superimposed over both: Luz Casal, who provides the vocals for the song performed by both Letal and Becky. It is precisely while this song is playing that Andersen's and April's characters interact for the first time. Andersen stars in the film's second musical number, which is striking in particular because it momentarily breaks up the cohesion of the narration. The *mise-en-scène* is highly revealing in this sense, as the scene begins with a shot of Abril's character sitting in the corridor of the prison yard, but the camera quickly leaves her behind to follow Andersen's character. The camera thus seems to ignore its protagonist (April) to give the central role to a supporting actress (Andersen). The number is articulated using a tracking shot and a wide shot showing Bibí's character surrounded by the prison's other inmates. The wide shot serves to frame Andersen's curvaceous figure: a body that engages in what Preciado identifies as practices of discontent, resistance and de-identification (2022a, p. 27).

Andersen's character in *High Heels* forms part of a system of multiplying images. Her dance gives rise to a kind of symmetry with the film's first musical number, in which Letal imitates Becky on the stage of the Villa Rosa, lip-syncing to her song "*Recordarás*" ["You Will Remember"]. Vilarós suggests that this scene is "multiplied in a series of composite mirrors, reflections of reality or of historical memory that portray the future recollection referred to in the song" (2018, p. 283). The camera tracks Bosé's character's movements

from the moment he bursts into the hall until he reaches the stage. When he does, a frontal wide shot provides a view of his transvestite body in all its splendour while he performs. Bosé's character is one and many. As Rebeca remarks, he is Hugo, he is Letal, and he is the judge responsible for the investigation into her husband's death. These multiplications propose a new intertextual approach in which gender expression plays a key role. It is not only that the character cross-dresses as a woman to imitate Becky: as Preciado argues in a letter of admiration addressed to Almodóvar, in his films the male characters "dress as 'men', putting on the military or ecclesiastical uniforms to harm or to lie. They stick on moustaches to represent the law, like Miguel Bosé does in *High Heels*" (2024). The multiplication of the image disrupts the patriarchal order.

In the same way that Abril and Andersen's double act invokes other collaborations between the two actresses in films such as *Cambio de sexo* and *La noche más hermosa*, Andersen's presence in *High Heels* also alludes to another Almodóvar film she appeared in previously. In *La ley del deseo* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1987), Carmen Maura plays Tina, the protagonist's transsexual sister, while Andersen plays her ex, with whom they share a daughter. Andersen is presented, again quoting Preciado, as "the cis woman", "the 'normal' woman" and "the 'mother'" (2024). In a scene from *La ley del deseo*, Andersen's character returns to talk to his daughter, Ada. This reunion occurs almost in the middle of the film and reveals some mechanisms that will be used more explicitly in *High Heels*. Standing in the wings at the theatre, Ada sings "*Ne me quitte pas*" to herself, the song playing while Tina is on stage. Once again, there is an overlap between two figures (Tina and Ada in this case) through a third voice (the version of the song playing is by Maysa Matarazzo). As in *High Heels*, where Luz Casal provides the vocals for the theme song, the voice we hear does not belong to either actress. The intertextuality is thus revealed through bodies, roles and voice. In both *La ley del deseo* and *High Heels*, Andersen is understood to be a cis woman while Maura plays the trans woman. Almodóvar's subversive casting is based on what Preciado describes as a transgression of "normative attributions" (2024) comparable to that

“deep, underground revolution” that questions the epistemology of sexual difference to which he alludes in the foreword to the latest edition of his *Countersexual Manifesto* (2022b, p. 22) and which has constituted the gravitational centre of his theoretical perspective.



[F6] Bibí Andersen emerges naked onto the balcony and sings *Luz de Luna*. *Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1993). El Deseo/Ciby 2000.

Two years after *High Heels*, Andersen and Abril worked with Almodóvar again on *Kika* (1993). Although the two actresses do not share any scenes together in this film, a connection is established with the previous film related in particular to Andersen's supporting role. Her presence is minimal, but her scene, performing a new musical number, is one of the most fascinating scenes in the film. Naked on a balcony, she sings the Chavela Vargas song “*Luz de Luna*”. The scene unfolds with the camera panning from below (where Verónica Forqué is watching) upwards (to where Andersen stands on the balcony), capturing Andersen's body in its entirety, passing over her genitals and up to her breasts [F6]. While in *Cambio de sexo* Bibí's first show ends with the momentary revelation of her male genitals, in *Kika* the camera movement reveals the actress's female genitals. Andersen looks down over the world from her balcony, suggesting a mythical space perhaps equivalent to the “apartment on Uranus” overlooking the gardens of Rome where Preciado says he is writing his chronicles of the crossing and where, as if he had transcended into another dimension, he tells us: “I am waiting for you. Even if only in dreams” (2019, p. 28). By placing a body that blurs gender categories at the heart of a musical daydream scene, Almodóvar, like Preciado, upends the codes of the hegemonic gaze.



## 6. Conclusions

Within the intertextual parameters that characterise Almodóvar's filmmaking, actors and actresses can often act as vehicles for intertextual references. This analysis has demonstrated that the scene of Bibí Andersen's dance in the prison in *High Heels* operates as an evocation of the relationship established between Andersen and Abril in *Cambio de sexo*, in which Bibí's imposing sculptural body constantly captures María José's gaze. In this way, she becomes a role model for the protagonist to imitate. *Cambio de sexo* thus creates a symbiosis between these two characters, whereby Bibí Andersen's and Victoria Abril's bodies both participate in the destabilisation of gender conventions. This connection between the two women is reactivated in *La noche más hermosa*, a film that returns to some of the themes previously explored in *Cambio de sexo*, such as the representation of Andersen's star image or her protector role, while adopting a vaudevillesque comedy structure to orchestrate a swapping of roles between them that results in a deconstruction of the patriarchal order. When Almodóvar brings these two actresses together again in *High Heels*, he consolidates their journey as a recurring duo capable of evoking a whole range of transgressions enacted in their previous collaborations with a mere exchange of glances. *High Heels* feeds on these previous interactions between Abril and Andersen to construct an intertextual architecture that Almodóvar uses to configure a succession of impersonations, multiplied images and role swaps. This ultimately serves as further confirmation that intertextuality operates as a constituent element of subversion in Almodóvar's films, which in many ways anticipates the theories developed by trans figures such as Jack Halberstam and Paul B. Preciado. Through his films, Almodóvar also expresses a persistent desire to construct what Preciado would later describe as "an experimental imaginary that would give shape to some minority contexts that were not considered in the democratic project of the late twentieth century" (2022b, p. 40).

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