GENDER OPEN REPOSITORIUM

All About Love : The Materialization of a Foundational Concept of Christianity in Pedro Almodóvar's Queer Cinema

Knauss, Stefanie

2015

https://doi.org/10.25595/64

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Knauss, Stefanie: *All About Love : The Materialization of a Foundational Concept of Christianity in Pedro Almodóvar's Queer Cinema*, in: Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien, Jg. 21 (2015) Nr: 1, 11-26. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/64.

Diese Publikation wird zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit dem Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/fzg.v21i1.20862

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY ND 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung - Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/legalcode.de

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY ND 4.0 License (Attribution - NoDerivates). For more information see:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/legalcode.en

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Freiburger Zeitschrift für Geschlechterstudien 21/1: 11-26

Stefanie Knauss

All About Love

The Materialization of a Foundational Concept of Christianity in Pedro Almodóvar's Queer Cinema

Abstract: Pedro Almodóvar's reappropriations of religious concepts and motifs (especially of Catholicism) frequently provide the focal point for his critique of both the religious establishment and gender norms grounded in religion and reinforced in society. Tracing Almodóvar's critical and transformative representation of the central Christian concept of love in his cinema, in particular through the analysis of three films "about love", *Law of Desire*, *Live Flesh*, and *Volver*, this paper shows that the materialization of this concept in Almodóvar's œuvre goes beyond the citation of preconceived ideas, and represents the emergence of a new vision of love, potentially transformative of individuals and societies.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; Law of Desire; Live Flesh; Volver; love.

Alles über die Liebe

Die Materialisierung eines grundlegenden Konzepts des Christentums in Pedro Almodóvars queerem Kino

Zusammenfassung: Pedro Almodóvars Aneignungen religiöser Konzepte und Motive (vor allem des Katholizismus) sind häufig Brennpunkt für seine Kritik des religiösen Establishment und von Geschlechternormen, die in Religionen gründen und sozial verstärkt werden. Dieser Beitrag zeichnet Almodóvars kritische und transformative Darstellung des zentralen christlichen Konzepts der Liebe in seinem Kino durch die Analyse von drei Filmen „über die Liebe" (Das Gesetz der Begierde, Live Flesh – Mit Haut und Haar, Volver – Zurückkehren) nach und zeigt so, dass die Materialisierung dieses Konzepts in Almodóvars Œuvre über ein bloßes Zitat vorgefasster Ideen hinausgeht und das Erscheinen einer neuen Vision von Liebe darstellt, die Individuen und Gesellschaften verwandeln kann.

Schlagwörter: Pedro Almodóvar; Das Gesetz der Begierde; Live Flesh – Mit Haut und Haar; Volver – Zurückkehren; Liebe.

Introduction: The Many Facets of Love

A shrine with a small statue of Marilyn Monroe, a picture of St. Francis and a statue of the Virgin; a boy born on Christmas Eve on a bus in a silent, dark Madrid in a state of emergency; women chattering while cleaning the graves of their loved ones under the maddening winds of La Mancha; a queer Pietà of a man holding the dead body of his lover who just shot himself. In Pedro Almodóvar's films, the religious is materialized, becomes visible and audible in multiple forms and at many levels (Donapetry 1999), although often in play-

© 2014 Budrich Unipress. 10.3224/fzg.v21i1

ful, creative and critical transformations. In an interview, the Spanish director explains his fascination with religion saying: "What interests me, fascinates me and moves me most in religion is both its ability to create communication between people, even between two lovers and its theatricality" (quoted in Rennett 2012: 84).

The role religious motifs, rituals and stories play in Almodóvar's films varies: they are present as an integral part of the Spanish culture that Almodóvar reappropriates and reshapes in his films (D'Lugo 2006), such as the images of the Sacred Heart decorating the walls of the apartment where Marina is held captive by Ricky in his attempt to make her fall in love with him in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (*¡Atame!*, 1989). Religious references play a structural role as dramaturgical or narrative elements, for example the setting of the convent school and the story of abuse and coercion that happened there in *Bad Education* (*La mala educacíon*, 2004). Also, religious concepts and motifs are transformed and reinvented in Almodóvar's films, such as the motif of the holy family in *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999), when an HIV-positive nun and a pre-op transsexual wo/man have a child together, which then is raised by the ex-wife of the transsexual.

The materialization of religion in Almodóvar's films is part of his critique of traditional religious symbolic orders, their shaping influence on (Spanish) society and culture, and more generally, the ways in which social orders impose their norms on individuals. Among these, gender role expectations and issues of gender identity play a particularly central role in Almodóvar's cinema and are deconstructed in various ways. Most importantly, Almodóvar critizes the view that gender identity or gender roles are in any way "natural" – a view strongly supported by Catholic teaching (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004) –, uncovering instead their constructedness and underlining in his queer protagonists and narratives that authenticity is derived precisely through the individual performance and construction of identity (Knauss 2007). Interestingly, Almodóvar's treatment of religion and gender is both critical and constructive: he criticizes religious norms, such as the motif of the holy (heterosexual) family, in order to deconstruct the heteronormativity shaping religions and societies, but he also shows how religious values can acquire new life, albeit in different forms, by uncovering the potential for resistance present in religious concepts, but rendered impotent over the centuries of the institutionalization of religion, such as the concept of love, on which I will focus here.[1]

In this paper, I will discuss three main issues: first, I suggest that love represents a central theme in Almodóvar's cinema, and that all his films are, in some fashion, "about love". In Almodóvar's representation of love, this concept provides a focal point in which issues of religion and gender intersect and the ambivalent power of love for individuals and communities is embodied. Second, I wish to show that through the materialization of this concept in Almodóvar's films a new vision of love comes into existence which both criticizes and transforms the traditional Christian views of love briefly outlined below. Thus, third, my analysis of the theme of love in the context of religion and gender shows that materialization should not be understood simply as a process in which pre-

existing concepts take on a material form. Instead, the process of materialization occurs on many different levels – in stories, images, sounds, and characters – and it should be understood as the multi-dimensional creation of something new, a more or less radical transformation of concepts and ideas through their contextualization and the possibility to synchronously include diverse, even contradictory aspects.

Although it might sound reductive to limit my reading of Almodóvar's diverse œuvre to just one theme, I argue that this is not the case precisely because of the way in which he talks about love: in his films, love is a multifaceted phenomenon, it is permanently taut between fulfilment and failure, and indeed, perversion, and is tied to the community and context in which it is lived. Most importantly, perhaps, in Almodóvar's films love is wholly unpredictable and unenforceable, and nearly always different from what one would expect it to be: motherly love may occur between a transsexual woman and her foster child, but not flourish between that child and her biological mother (in *Law of Desire* [*La ley del deseo*, 1987]); friendship may overrule romantic love (in *The Flower of My Secret* [*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995]); love between husband and wife may be abusive or possessive (*Live Flesh* [*Carne trémula*, 1997]), whereas the love between a kidnapper and his victim might turn out to be redemptive (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*); supposedly loving relationships between father and daughter can be painful (*Volver*, 2006), but incest might also be represented as love (*Law of Desire*); sex may be transformed into love (*Live Flesh*), or confused with love (*Law of Desire*), or become an instrument of hatred (*Bad Education*).

This multiplicity of loves in Almodóvar's films echoes the many different ways in which love has been understood in Western Christianity, the context for my reflections in this paper. In the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, love appears in many facets as loyalty, obedience to the covenant, mercy, faithfulness, marital intimacy, forgiveness, characterizing both love between God and human beings, and love among humans, with the inseparable commandments of the love of God and neighbor central to both Judaism and Christianity (Jeanrond 2010: 31f.). Common to both parts of the Christian Bible is the notion that God is love, and that thus God's presence can be experienced in human love (1 John 4:8.12). In the Song of Songs, love – both divine and human – is famously described as passionate and ambivalent, experienced both spiritually and bodily as pleasure and pain, desire, fulfillment and disappointment: "for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (Song of Songs 8:6 [New International Version, NIV]). Thus the biblical images of love do not gloss over the dark sides of love: jealousy, abuse, death are a part of the human experience of love as well as joy, pleasure and fertility, and offer an idea of the often disturbing depth of this experience.

The various biblical images of love are by no means coherent and very much depend on their context: in the New Testament, for example, it is possible to distinguish a current that describes divine love as universal, a model for human love that is open to diversity and transgresses ethnic and social boundaries, expressed for example in Paul's Letter to the Galatians 3:28 (NIV) when he writes: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there

male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Yet there is also the Johannine "school of love" present in the New Testament that focuses on love within the Christian community as a means to protect it from hatred from within and without the community and understands it as the distinguishing characteristic of what it means to be Christian, e.g. in 1 John 4:8.12 (NIV): "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. […] if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." Thus in the biblical texts, love can be understood at the same time as inclusive and exclusive, as overcoming difference and creating difference (Jeanrond 2010: 35ff.).

Over centuries and millennia, mainstream Christian theology has reduced these diverse biblical images of love to focus on neighborly love (*agape*/charity), lived within the Christian community. It is symptomatic for this development that the numerous Hebrew terms for "love" used in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. *dôd, yādîd, hesed, 'āhēb*) were translated with just two terms (*agape, philia*) in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, and in English, the single word "love" is used to cover all of these varieties of love. Although sexual passion and embodied love are important aspects of biblical love, the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible and the writers of the New Testament avoided this term in order to discourage associations with the Greek god Eros. This however led to the exclusion of embodied dimensions of love, and disembodied, spiritual yearning or self-effacing care for the other have become the ideal of Christian love (ibid.: 31ff.). This split between embodied and spiritual love is reinforced by Augustine, for whom sexual love is associated with the original sin and the resulting confusion between good and bad desires. Only controlled by reason within the protective framework of marriage and with the finality of procreation can sexual love be considered good (Augustine 1887: 6). Drawing on the Johannine tradition and Neo-Platonic philosophy, Augustine sees the love of God as the highest, truest form of love which is experienced in the interiority of the human soul, and only secondarily expressed through actions such as neighborly love (Jeanrond 2010: 55).

In modern times the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren has again underlined the distinction between *agape* and *eros* (Nygren 1982). Platonic *eros*, for him, is selfish, egocentric love that is focused on human goals and desires, whereas *agape* has its origin in God and is given to humans, an originally Christian concept (ibid.: 48). For Nygren, the main issue is not with erotic sensuality (he acknowledges that the high form of Platonic *eros* is not about sensuality), but rather with the degree of human agency implied in these concepts. *Eros* is desire in the sense of a human ascent into the divine sphere and thus affirms human agency and subjectivity, *agape* is the recognition of God as the absolute subject and origin of love which is given to the human object of divine love as an undeserved, unconditional gift from the outside (Jeanrond 2010: 115, 119). Because of the divine origin of love, its embodied dimension is irrelevant, its experience and expression are again focused in human spirituality, separate from all other spheres of human life and embodied relationships. More recently, in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI has attempted to reconcile the split between eros and agape, underlining their unity in the common goal of leading

towards the divine. However, for this to be achieved, Benedict calls for *eros* to be purified from selfish desires and become ready for self-sacrifice, thus effectively turning into what traditionally is meant by *agape* (Benedict XVI 2005: 5f.). Unsurprisingly, then, the second, long part of Benedict's encyclical is dedicated to Christian *agape* as a "manifestation of Trinitarian love" (ibid.: 19).

However, the biblical notion of a unity of spiritual and sexual love and the view of the human being as the subject as well as recipient of love in the human-divine relationship has survived in Christian mysticism. The mystical union with God for which the mystic yearns, is described by Teresa of Avila, Gertrude of Helfta, Angela Foligno and others in highly erotic terms as a total, passionate loving union, often initiated by the loving human being and equally desired by God, a melting into each other, a penetration by divine light and love, experienced bodily as sexual passion. In many ways, these mystical spiritual-bodily experiences represent a return to the inseparability of embodied and spiritual love between God and humans as described in the Song of Songs (Furey 2012) and thus a contrast to the disembodied ideal of passive human love of much mainstream Christian theology. Apart from its theological significance, this mystical tradition of erotic love and the human-divine union achieved in it, especially as expressed in the tradition of the Beguines, also represents a form of social resistance. By becoming one with a God who is described in a variety of masculine and feminine images, the mystics cross both social gender boundaries and theological boundaries between the human and the divine in ways that are troublesome and critical. While suffering and self-annihilation were considered fundamental for the union of the female subject with God, these forms of mysticism also enabled women to establish their subjectivity and agency in medieval and early modern societies that considered women as socially and spiritually inferior. Thus Alison Weber concludes, "mysticism has been remarkably protean in its capacity to challenge and confirm traditional gender roles, to open and foreclose opportunities for women, and to uplift and denigrate them" (Weber 2012: 327).

In the Christian tradition, love has been imagined in a variety of ways, inclusive and exclusive of difference, embodied and disembodied, passionate and spiritual, self-affirming and self-negating. Over the centuries, it has been used both to stabilize a given social order (e.g. gender hierarchies through the association of spiritual love with the discipline of masculine reason and sexual love with the weaker rational faculties of women as more closely tied to the disordered desires of their bodies) and to transgress this social order (by crossing boundaries of who is considered "loveable", or when embodied, sexual love becomes an occasion for the experience of divine love and grace).

In the following analysis of three exemplary films "about love", *Law of Desire*, *Live Flesh* and *Volver*, I will show how Almodóvar uses the language of cinema in order to criticize the institutional (ab-)use of love as a means of discipline and coercion, and how love is materialized as a transformative power. I will draw in particular on Werner Jeanrond's reformulation of the Christian concept of love as historical, situated, gendered, embodied, social, emotional, and as a practice that presupposes and embraces difference and diversity (Jeanrond 2010: 2-23). I

will conclude with a reflection on how the materialization of love in Almodóvar's cinema provides an occasion for the emergence of a new vision of love with transformative potential.

Law of Desire: The Failure of Romantic Love and the Victory of the Queer Family

Made in 1987, *Law of Desire* is the first film Almodóvar produced through his own production company, aptly named El Deseo, the desire. It is also his first film to focus on homosexual relationships as a central theme, although earlier films already included secondary homosexual characters or relationships. Interestingly, in Almodóvar's vision of homosexual love, the lovers' gender does not really play a role: the homosexual protagonists face similar problems of jealousy, obsession and possessiveness as the heterosexual protagonists of *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (*¿Que he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, 1984) or *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995), clearly making the point that gender complementarity is not the criterion for fulfillment in loving relationships, as Pope John Paul II's "theology of the body" posits (John Paul II 2006).

The film describes the pains of unrequited romantic love, culminating in the moment when love can turn destructive, and develops a vision of love that is fulfilled in an alternative family. Pablo, a film director, is in love with Juan, who does not reciprocate his love to the same degree. Pablo therefore decides to break off their relationship when Antonio appears, a young man madly in love with Pablo. Because of fictitious love letters that Pablo wrote on behalf of his lover Juan to feed his own dreams of perfect love, Antonio presumes that Pablo and Juan are still involved and kills Juan in a rage of jealousy. When the police close in on Antonio, he asks for a last hour with Pablo, and then kills himself.

This confusing constellation of lovers and loving relationships – both fictitious (Pablo's letters of perfect love) and "real" – is made even more disorienting for the viewers by the use of discontinuity editing employed heavily at the beginning of this film: starting with the pornographic sequence of a young man masturbating on a bed following the commands of a voice in the off, it becomes clear only after more than 60 seconds that these scenes are part of the film-within-the-film made by Pablo and are being dubbed in the studio by two middle-aged, rather dispassionate voice actors. Almodóvar's editing makes the last image of the film-within-the-film, marked on the reel in the studio, coincide with the end of the film during its premier, with Pablo leaving the theater after the final film image. The viewers' disorientation continues when Antonio, after seeing Pablo at the theater, goes to the bathroom to masturbate, a scene that starts with a rather unusual shot out of the toilet bowl, then cuts to Antonio unzipping his trousers, followed by a series of three close-ups of his upper body, his face, and then his mouth as he starts moaning, echoing the voice actors from before, but now with real passion. This obvious, and disconcerting, use of editing and perspective establishes the nature of the film as a construction through framing, camera-angle and editing, and briefly introduces in these first few minutes the themes and relationships that the film is going to talk about. The

disorienting effect of these formal means foreshadows the equally disorienting effect that Almodóvar's subversion of gender norms and identities might have on the viewers (Smith 1997: 186). Their expectations about who should love whom are overthrown together with their expectations with regard to conventions of film making, framing or editing.

The film's vision of love highlights the need for mutuality in love as well as the freedom to love (or not to love, as it may be the case) in order for a relationship to succeed. While Pablo painfully grants this freedom to Juan, Antonio presumes that Pablo could be coerced to love him if they just knew each other better, sexually and otherwise, anticipating a theme that Almodóvar will further develop in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, in which the same actor, Antonio Banderas, plays a young man who kidnaps a young woman in order to convince her that to love him is her destiny – and succeeds. In his immature love, Antonio sees his rival Juan as the obstacle to a successful relationship with Pablo and so chooses to kill him, rather than recognizing the lack of mutuality as the real problem.

This failure of romantic love is juxtaposed with the success of love within the family in the story of Pablo and his sister Tina, who used to be his brother but had a sex change at her father's request with whom she had an incestuous, apparently happy relationship until he left her for another woman. Tina is a foster mother to Ada, whose mother left her to pursue her own (romantic and professional) interests. Together with Pablo, Tina and Ada form a kind of family unit in which emotions are shared, individuals take care of each other and help each other to flourish: a space where love is experienced as an affirmation of life, relationship and personhood. While this might appear to be a relatively conservative image of the family as a "school of love," it is of course anything but conservative, because Tina is not a biological woman (although played by one, Carmen Maura), Ada is not her biological child, and Pablo is neither her husband nor Ada's father. And further, Ada's biological mother (played by the popular Spanish transsexual Bibí Andersen), who is supposed to "naturally" love her child, puts her own interests first and leaves Ada. Thus expectations with regard to "natural" gender roles, which provide the basis for Christian theories of the complementarity of gender and are used by political and religious groups to reinforce heteronormative social structures (Viefhues-Bailey 2010) are overthrown, and a vision of alternative roles and relationships is developed.

The caring relationships within this queer family are associated with religious motifs that are used to both criticize religious traditions and redefine them in order to express Almodóvar's queer ethics of love. In Tina's and Ada's apartment, a house altar is positioned prominently, including a mix of religious and popular icons, such as Marilyn Monroe, St. Francis and the Virgin, decorated with candles and flowers. Foster mother and child are shown praying for their own concerns, but most of all for the well-being of their brother/father Pablo. Once, Ada vows silence in order to convince the Virgin to help Tina find a job, and when her prayer is fulfilled, Ada rushes over to the altar to express her gratitude to Mary. In the film's concluding sequence, when Antonio kills himself, the altar is shown to go up in flames, with Pablo holding Antonio's body like a Pietà, an image of love, suffering and forgiveness in which Antonio's destruc-

tive love (destructive of others as well as of himself) is healed and transformed through his self-sacrifice and the cleansing fire, providing through his death the opportunity for Pablo to recognize and repent his own responsibility for his lovers' deaths. Pablo's acknowledgement of his responsibility is further underlined when he throws his typewriter, the instrument of deceptive fiction, out of the window and it goes up in flames – fire being both a destructive and purifying power, much like love in this film.

As in many of Almodóvar's works, the drama of this film is expressed to a large degree through music which – far from being mere background – has a twofold function: first, it is a comment (much like a Greek chorus) on the story and the protagonists' emotional states, adding an extra layer of complexity to the already rather complicated fabric of Almodóvar's films. And second, through the use of music, the film communicates on an emotional level with the viewers, enabling a holistic, emotional-affective-intellectual reception of the film (Willoquet-Maricondi 2004: xii). In *Law of Desire*, Jacques Brel's chanson "Ne me quitte pas" expresses the protagonists' basic fear of being left, and the concluding song, "Déjame recordar" by José Sabre Marroquín, comments on the image of Pablo holding Antonio's dead body by singing about love made of blood and pain and lost love.

While romantic love, with its expression through or substitution by sex, is depicted as the ultimate desire of the protagonists, it remains an unrealized dream or fiction for all of them. The imperfect love they experience is one-sided and, as such, destructive and hurtful. However, this does not mean that the protagonists' reality is empty of love and its benefits: Pablo, Tina and Ada experience love within their queer family.

Live Flesh: The Destructive and Redemptive Power of Love

Live Flesh, an adaptation of the eponymous Ruth Rendell novel, and released in 1997, represents a more hopeful image of love, without denying its dark sides. This film begins with Víctor's birth on Christmas Eve on a bus driving through a deserted Madrid in a state of emergency at the end of the Franco era. The obvious parallel with the story of the birth of Jesus in a manger, "because there was no guest room available for them" (Luke 2:7 [NIV]), establishes Víctor – *nomen est omen* – as a kind of saviour figure, although by no means an unambiguous one, as will be seen. The film then fast-forwards 20 years to a grown-up Víctor in love with the drug-addicted prostitute Elena. An attempt to convince her to keep a date with him ends in violence and Víctor (apparently) shoots the policeman David who was called in at the incident, and who remains paralyzed. Again, fast-forward four years, Víctor is released from jail. He begins a relationship with Clara, the wife of Sancho, David's former colleague. Víctor plans to take revenge on Elena, now in a relationship with David, for having turned him down years ago and having been, as he sees it, the cause of his imprisonment by making her fall in love with him, and then leave her. But his plan turns to naught when they spend a single night of extraordinary love-making together and truly fall

in love. In his jealousy, David tells Sancho of Víctor's relationship with Clara, apparently hoping that Sancho will kill Víctor for him. Instead, Clara and Sancho shoot each other. In the epilogue, Víctor and Elena have become a couple, and their child is about to be born, again on Christmas Eve, this time in a Spain that has nothing to fear, as Víctor explains to the unborn.

The film weaves together a complex network of both destructive and transformative love relationships, all of which have an impact on each other, showing that love is social and lovers never love in a vacuum (Jeanrond 2010: 19). There's the couple Clara and Sancho, whose relationship is marked by Sancho's physical abuse of his wife, his possessiveness and jealousy (at one point he says: "As long as I love you, you are not going to leave"), and by Clara's unfaithfulness, both with Víctor and, as we learn in the course of the film, with David before his accident. Several close-ups of the door mat in front of their apartment which says "Bienvenida" ironically disrupt the expectation of a married couple's welcoming home because we know by then that this home is marked by violence, distrust and unfaithfulness. Unsurprisingly, this love is equally destructive for both partners, culminating in murder-suicide when Sancho shoots his wife and then, merely hurt by her shot, holds her hand over the gun and kills himself. Only then – too late – does he realize that neither one's life nor one's lover belong to oneself, but can flourish only in freedom.

But David's and Elena's love is equally tainted. When they meet for the first time during the shooting, the use of slow-motion and editing, interlacing long looks into each other's eyes, suggests that it was love at first sight between Elena and David, and it seems as if their relationship was happy and fulfilling. But when Víctor appears on the scene, it becomes clear that Elena confused love with being needed, out of a sense of guilt or pity as David suspects, and that David was happy to exploit these feelings in her. Again, Almodóvar underlines in this couple the need for equality in love, and while pity or being-needed may well be some of the many facets of love, it cannot be based on only these feelings because they do not allow for the free mutuality that is fundamental to love. While their separation is painful for David, being forced to acknowledge the reality is also a possibility of healing and new beginnings for him, as he states in a letter to Elena at the end of the film.

But this is not all the film says about love. It also develops a vision of the healing power of love that can turn the desire for destruction into life, as happens in the case of Elena and Víctor. Interestingly, it is the experience of life-changing sex (a hyperbole that in this film is literally true) that silences Víctor's wish for revenge and allows the partners to experience the fullness of sexual love beyond pity, beautifully rendered in the scene when Elena is under the shower after her night with Victor, smelling him on her skin, hesitant to turn on the water and wash his scent off. As his extraordinary birth on Christmas Eve suggests, Víctor is indeed the saviour of both himself (from the destructiveness of revenge) and Elena so that she is able to live true love, although in order to be able to play this role, he has to pass through a period of violence and hatred. The promise of this love is impersonated in Elena's and Víctor's child: in contrast to Sancho and Clara's as well as Elena and David's relationships, theirs is

creative, containing a future not just for the couple and their child, but – read in the larger social context suggested by Víctor's words to his unborn child – also for Spanish society.

In this film, as also in *Law of Desire*, *Volver* and other films, Almodóvar heavily uses color symbolism to establish and trace these love relationships. His dominant color of love is red, used for costumes, settings or accessories in situations when passion arises, such as when Clara visits Víctor to make love or when Elena comes to spend the night with Víctor. But in Almodóvar's cinema, red is not only the color of love as fulfilling, but also as destructive power: when Clara and Sancho shoot each other in the end, Clara is wearing red earrings and a red top that match the spots of dark red blood on her neck when she is shot. Red, the symbolic color of passion, love, blood, death and new life (when starting labor, Elena again wears a red dress), perfectly expresses the ambivalence of love with its creative and fatal powers that Almodóvar materializes in his films.

Again, Almodóvar's treatment of love is complex and disrupts expectations: married love is shown to be abusive and destructive, an example of the perversion of Paul's command of mutual love between husband and wife, which has all too frequently been used to justify masculine dominance in gender relations: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. […] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:22.25 [NIV]). In contrast, life-giving, romantic love occurs between persons who were first enemies, and is brought about by a healing, transformative sexual experience. Almodóvar underlines the importance of this embodied dimension of love against the tendency to spiritualize and disembody love present in the Christian tradition. Yet he also shows that in order to develop these life-enhancing possibilities, sexual love must be mutual – to love enough for both, as Clara says she does, is not enough and leads to death. While this positive image of love dominates the last scenes of the film, it also acknowledges the pain that love created for Sancho, Clara and David.

Volver: The Community of Love

Volver depicts yet a different facet of love: the film focuses on love between women, between mothers and daughters, between sisters, and among a socially and ethnically diverse circle of friends. Heterosexual love and husbands either disappear or are dismissed when they threaten these relationships; this film is not interested in how gender relations are negotiated in romantic heterosexual relationships, but rather removes the issue together with Raimunda's husband. *Volver* begins with Raimunda, her sister Sole and daughter Paula cleaning the graves of the sisters' parents who died in a fire, a popular tradition in rural Spain that is occasion for both the rememberance of the dead and gossiping about the living. Back in Madrid, Paula kills her father when he attempts to rape her. Raimunda, although shocked, pragmatically cleans up around the body and puts him in the freezer of a friend's restaurant until she can properly get rid of him later with the help of another friend. Then the sisters' aunt dies, and Sole goes

back to their village for the funeral. When she returns to Madrid, she's surprised to find her mother, Irene, in the trunk of her car: returned from the dead, as rumors in the village had suggested, or always living? Sole decides to hide her from Raimunda because the two had been estranged, a situation that provides ample opportunity for comic relief in this film noir. In the meantime, Raimunda uses her friend's restaurant to cater for a film crew, supported by her friends who pitch in without much ado, helping out with a chunk of meat or sweets. Eventually, Raimunda and her mother meet, and it is revealed why their relationship had deteriorated: as a teenager, Raimunda was abused by her father resulting in her pregnancy with Paula. When Irene discovered this, and then also found her husband in bed with a neighbor, she set fire to the place, killing both, and went into hiding, living as a "ghost" with her sister until her death. Mother and daughter reconcile, and all four women return to the village, where Irene decides to take care of a fatally ill neighbor, Agustina, a friend of the sisters and the daughter of her husband's lover. Caring for Agustina can be understood as both an act of repentance because Irene killed Agustina's mother in the fire, and an expression of *agape*, the selfless care for one's neighbor.

The form of love at the center of the film is love between women, especially mothers and daughters. But Almodóvar underlines, as in *Law of Desire*, that this love is not a natural law; instead it is a relationship that can be broken, but also healed – again a critical comment on the problematic naturalization of gender roles and identities. Raimunda's love for her daughter – and her daughter's love for her mother – is strong even when put to the test: without hesitation, Raimunda is ready to lie for her daughter and pretend that she killed her husband, should the murder ever be discovered, and to get rid of the body. But Paula is equally supportive of Raimunda, encouraging her to seek reconciliation with her own mother. Being given a second chance in the "resurrection" of her mother is a real gift to Raimunda, which helps her to come to terms with her troubled past and gives her the courage to imagine a new future for herself and her daughter when she decides to take over her friend's restaurant. Love between mother and daughter is shown to be self-giving and life-giving, enabling the growth and development not just of the child, but also of the mother.

But mothers and daughters are not alone in their struggles and relationships of love. Instead the film develops the idea of a network of sustaining loving relationships between women that spans across generations as well as social and national boundaries. This is expressed through the predominance of shots that show several women together in one frame, in groups of three or four, and establishes a sense of community through this framing that contrasts with the close-ups or shot-counter-shot sequences focusing on the individual and his/her emotional states that are more conventionally used in love scenes. This sense of communal love, the role that community plays in the development of the capacity to love and to establish loving relationships, is further underlined in the motif of the village to which Raimunda, Sole, Paula and Irene return again and again. The village is both the source of pain (Raimunda's abuse by her father, or Irene's betrayal by her husband), of encouragement by family, friends and neighbors,

and of support provided by traditions and communal rituals, such as the cleaning of the graves or the wake for Raimunda's and Sole's aunt.

Volver is a film of *philia* and *agape*, if one wants to label these relationships with classical terms: *philia* between Raimunda and her friends, where no questions are asked and mutual support is freely given, and *agape*, the loving care for the neighbor, when Irene decides to look after Agustina. *Agape* is also expressed through the motif of food and eating, frequently used in this film: in a Christian context, *agape* is quite literally a meal of love, the sharing of food as an expression of loving communion and fellowship, which later developed into the ritual meal of the eucharist (Bernas 2003: 169ff.). In *Volver*, sharing food is used repeatedly as a way to express relationship and care, for example when Irene prepares food for her daughters to take home, each package lovingly labeled with their names to underline the personal character of this form of care-taking, although at that point, her daughters are not yet aware that their mother is still alive. Here, *agape* expresses a concern for the whole well-being of another person, both in their bodily and spiritual dimension.

These multiple facets of love are again expressed through Almodóvar's typical color symbolism: this time, the red of passionate love, again used ambivalently to express life-giving love (Raimunda and her daughter are frequently dressed in red) and death (in a fascinating close-up of a paper towel slowly soaking up the red blood of Raimunda's murdered husband in a delicate, lacey pattern), is complemented by costumes and settings in blue, expressing the calmness and reassurance of love, and in green, the color of hope and promise.

In *Volver*, love between women is imagined as nurturing care, support and companionship. It is freely given, never owed, and equally freely accepted. Neither is it a burden for the lovers nor for the loved ones, instead it evokes lightness, joy and happiness; it is truly life-giving and life-enhancing love.

The Materialization of Religion in Almodóvar's Cinema of Love

As the analysis of three films by Almodóvar has shown, the director's discourses on love are embedded in their socio-cultural context through the reappropriation of elements of Catholicism, the religion that most shaped the culture in which his films are set: how Spanish men and women love clearly cannot be separated from their socio-historical context infused by Catholicism. Love is social, historical and situated (Jeanrond 2010: 9ff.), an insight that Almodóvar both presupposes and further develops, not least through the ways in which the religious is materialized in his films in the shape of motifs, story lines or rituals.

Almodóvar uses these references to Catholicism to criticize those who legitimize their loving (or more often, their failure at loving) with a presumed divine law that prescribes whom to love and how. For Almodóvar, institutionalized religion in the form of Catholicism is not a space where love is truly lived. Instead the institution is represented as betraying its own ideal of love, for example when priests abuse children (e.g. in *Law of Desire* and *Bad Education*), or when a monastery is closed by the ecclesial authorities precisely because it

takes seriously the commandment to love God and neighbor equally without attention to the neighbor's – prostitutes, drug addicts, social outcasts – social standing or moral qualities (in *Dark Habits* [*Entre tinieblas*, 1983]). Almodóvar also gestures towards the ways in which theologies of love have become instruments of discipline, normatizing and naturalizing gender relationships and roles when he criticizes the ideal of the submissive wife in his stories of abusive marriages, when the "naturally" self-sacrificing love of mothers is practiced by a transsexual, or when sex is experienced as transformative and thus challenges the supposedly higher ideal of disembodied love.

This critique of religious models of love and their role in the enforcement of gender and social orders is an integral part of Almodóvar's development of a new vision of love that is at the same time socially transformative and spiritually nourishing. In Almodóvar's cinema, love is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon; it is unpredictable, and cannot be captured by theories or ideologies (Smith 1997: 194). It is not "natural" to love somebody, even one's own child, but love is always freely given and in order to flourish, it has to be freely received and reciprocated. Social expectations about where to find love are regularly thwarted; instead it emerges in situations where it is not expected and in forms that it is not expected to take, and sometimes this can be shocking or troubling, such as in his references to a loving incestuous relationship in *Law of Desire* or the idea of a kidnapping that turns into a love affair in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*. Almodóvar uses these disturbing extremes to make his basic point that love cannot be forced, neither by social norms, nor by individual needs or desires.

Almodóvar's disappointment of expectations also extends to the contemporary social tendency to associate love with romance and sex. In his films, both sexual and romantic love have the potential to succeed or to fail: in *Live Flesh*, sex is transformative and healing, but in *Law of Desire*, it is used to manipulate. Romantic love that has become possessive leads to destruction in *Law of Desire*, whereas in *Live Flesh*, it is the beginning of a new life. Almodóvar does not deny the possibilities of romantic, sexual love, but shows, again, that one cannot count on them to "naturally" develop, especially not within the socially and religiously acceptable framework of marriage, and that the positive, transformative effects of love cannot only be experienced in romantic or sexual love, but also in non-romantic friendship or caring love.

It is essential for Almodóvar's vision of love that human attempts at loving can fail, sometimes in spite of the lovers' best intentions, that love can become abusive, obsessive, possessive and manipulative, that it can lead to death and destruction. Love is always ambivalent, both pure and impure, at the same time dark and light, life and death. Almodóvar's insistence on this ambivalence is maybe his greatest contribution to the further development of the ideal of love in societies where love is overburdened with romantic expectations and its dark sides or failures are ignored.

But if freely given and truly mutual, love – no matter between whom and under which circumstances – can have transformative effects for the lovers and their communities. As seen in *Live Flesh*, it has a redemptive potential for Víctor and Elena, and in *Volver*, it promotes not just the well-being of a person through

taking care of them, but it allows that person to become fully who she is meant to be. Love instills in the protagonists hope for the future in spite of dire circumstances, and faith in themselves and others. Thus Almodóvar's representation of love reminds of the Apostle Paul's praise of love as the greatest among the Christian virtues: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13 [NIV]).

These visions of love developed in Almodóvar's cinema are a materialization of religion that goes beyond the affirmative or critical citation of religious motifs. Instead, in the playful interaction of traditions, theories and ideas with colors, bodies and sounds, it develops new facets and dimensions. Thus an abstract concept becomes a lived reality for the protagonists, it is contextualized in their embodied existence, and potentially also in that of the viewers of Almodóvar's films who are touched by his stories in their own material relationships of love. Materialization thus means contextualization: theories, ideas are made concrete and in this process, they forgo any pretensions at absolute, universal meaning. What love is, how it is lived and experienced, depends on the concrete, material situation of the lovers and is known in its depth and complexity only in this situation. While theoretical reflections can help to circumscribe the phenomenon, it is really captured only in its lived, material experience of which the films offer a glimpse. Furthermore, the analysis of Almodóvar's films also shows that materialization means synchronicity: the possibility to include multiple, even contradictory aspects of meaning in the multi-dimensionality of the filmic form, consisting of narratives, images, movements and sounds, such as the life-giving and death-dealing powers of love, expressed in different story lines within the same film or the symbolic use of the same color red. This renders Almodóvar's views of love certainly more complex, but also richer than many theological tracts about love, as they transform abstract ideas into embodied experience. Whether this creative materialization of a religious theme can find an echo in the religious institution, which Almodóvar clearly criticizes, and its theologies, is a different matter, but it can potentially provide a transformative and healing vision for individuals and communities struggling with love and its ambivalent potentials.

Korrespondenzadresse/correspondence address

Dr. Stefanie Knauss
Theology & Religious Studies,Villanova University
800 Lancaster Ave, Villanova, PA 19085
stefanie.knauss@gmail.com

Anmerkungen

1 I presented first thoughts on this topic at the International Conference on Film & Religion, Omaha (Nebraska), 10-12 April 2014. I am grateful to the participants in this conference for their questions and comments that helped me further develop these ideas.

Literatur

Filmography

All About My Mother (*Todo sobre mi madre*, Pedro Almodóvar 1999).
Bad Education (*La mala educacíon*, Pedro Almodóvar 2004).
Dark Habits (*Entre tinieblas*, Pedro Almodóvar 1983).
Law of Desire (*La ley del deseo*, Pedro Almodóvar 1987).
Live Flesh (*Carne trémula*, Pedro Almodóvar 1997).
The Flower of My Secret (*La flor de mi secreto*, Pedro Almodóvar 1995).
The Flower of My Secret (*La flor de mi secreto*, Pedro Almodóvar 1995).
Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (*¡Atame!*, Pedro Almodóvar 1989).
Volver (Pedro Almodóvar 2006).
What Have I Done to Deserve This? (*¿Que he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, Pedro Almodóvar 1984).

Bibliography

Augustine (1887): Of the Good of Marriage, translated by C.L. Cornish, revised by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm> (accessed 17 January 2015).
Benedict XVI (2005): Deus caritas est. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html> (accessed 18 January 2015).
Bernas, C. (2003): Agape. In: New Catholic Encyclopedia. 2nd ed. Detroit: Gale, vol. 1, pp. 169-171.
Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2004): Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html> (accessed 17 January 2015).
D'Lugo, Marvin (2006): Pedro Almodóvar. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Donapetry, María (1999): Once a Catholic…: Almodóvar's Religious Reflections. In: Bulletin of Hispanic Studies 76, 1, pp. 67-75.
Furey, Constance (2012): Sexuality. In: Hollywood, A./Beckman, P.Z. (eds.): The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 328-340.
Jeanrond, Werner (2010): A Theology of Love. London: T&T Clark.
John Paul II (2006): Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body. Boston: Pauline Books.
Knauss, Stefanie (2007): Authentizität und Ambiguität: Körper, Identität und Gender in den Filmen von Pedro Almodóvar. In: Martig, C./Karrer, L. (eds.): Eros und Religion: Erkenntnisse aus dem Reich der Sinne. Marburg: Schüren, pp. 108-129.
Nygren, Anders (1982): Agape and Eros. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rennett, Michael (2012): The Color of Authorship: Almodóvar's Labyrinth of Red.

In: Matz, M.R./Salmon, C. (eds.): How the Films of Pedro Almodóvar Draw Upon and Influence Spanish Society: Bilingual Essays on His Cinema. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, pp. 67-93.

Smith, Paul Julian (1997): Pornography, Masculinity, Homosexuality: Almodóvar's Matador and La ley del deseo. In: Kinder, M. (ed.): Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 178-195.

Viefhues-Bailey, Ludger H. (2010): Between a Man and a Woman?: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-sex Marriage. New York: Columbia University Press.

Weber, Alison (2012): Gender. In: Hollywood, A./Beckman, P.Z. (eds.): The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 315-327.

Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula (2004): Introduction. In: Willoquet-Maricondi, P. (ed.): Pedro Almodóvar: Interviews. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. vii-xv.