

Peter CIACCIO

The Evidence of Bodies

"People call me Agrádo, because, for all my life, I always tried to make life agreeable to others. Apart from agreeable, I am very authentic. Look at my body; all made by measure. Almond-eyes: 80,000 [pesetas: approximately 480€]; nose: 200,000; tits, two, for I'm not a monster, 70,000 each. There's silicon in my lips, forehead, cheek-bones, hips and bottom: a litre costs around 100,000, so you may draw up the accounts; filing of the mandible: 75,000; definitive laser-depilation, 'cause women descend from monkeys just as men do: 60,000 per session – it depends how much beard one has, normally one to four sessions, but, obviously, there is a further need if one dances flamenco. What I mean is that it is expensive to be authentic, and you should not be tight because the more you resemble the idea you dreamed of yourself, the more authentic you are."

This monologue comes from an important supporting character of ALMODÓVAR'S *All about my Mother* (ALMODÓVAR Pedro, *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*. Starring Cecilia ROTH, Marisa PEREDES, Penélope CRUZ, Candela PEÑA, Spain, 1999.). *Agrádo* is a borderline character. She enters the movie while defending herself against a violent customer who assaults her while she is prostituting herself.

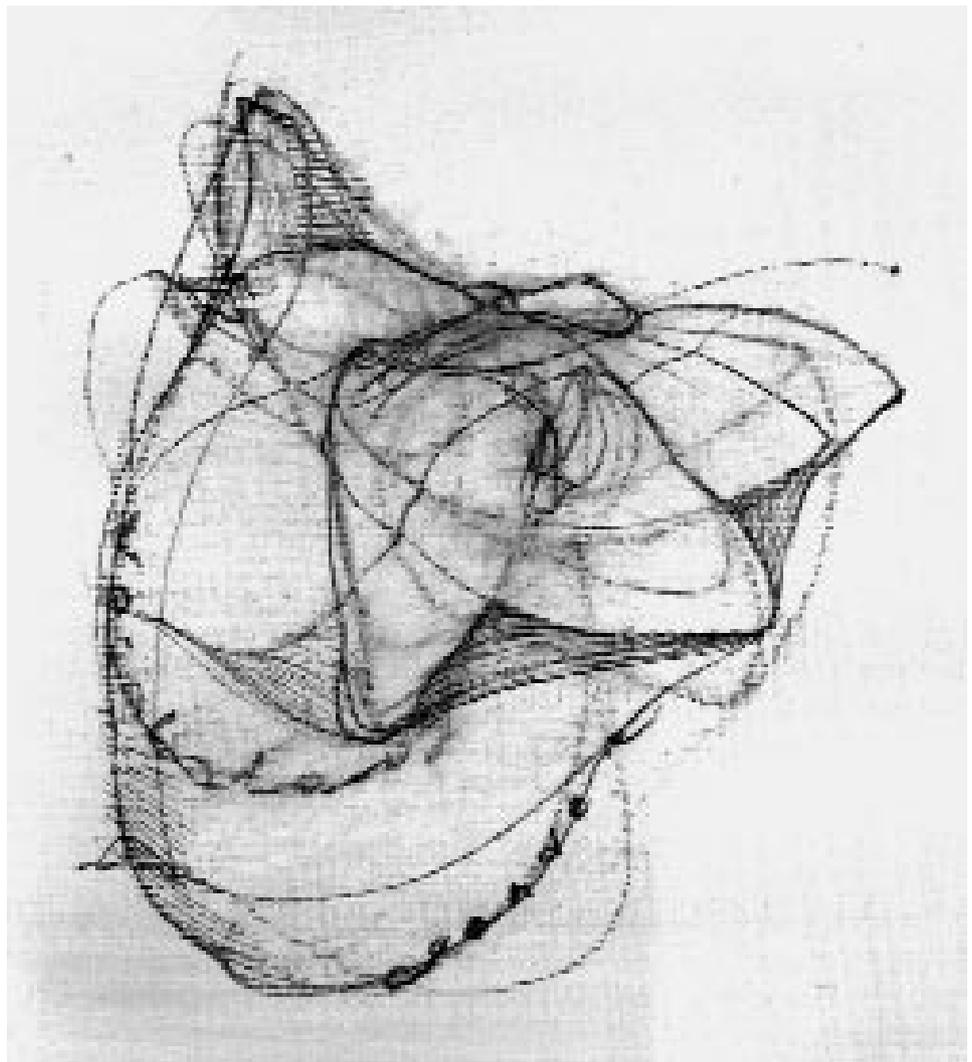
She has undergone various operations in order to transform her body into a woman's one, but she still keeps her male genitals, because "men like it like this". She acts as a comedian, but she is also able to play a dramatic role in Tennessee WILLIAMS' *Streetcar Named Desire*. She is very provocative, but also sweet and reasonable. ALMODÓVAR invented her character in order to be able to tell a difficult story with tough issues, because *Agrádo* makes the story "agreeable" (in Spanish, *agrada*).

It is not by chance that the great Spanish filmmaker chose a transgender to be the "narrative glue" of the story. The entire movie is full of references, provocation and presentations of different aspects of the body. For this

reason, a transgender role is the main ring of the narrative chain.

A MOTHER'S PHYSICAL RESEARCH IN MEMORY

The main character of the movie is Manuela, the young mother of Esteban. She co-ordinates an organ transplantation centre, while her son dreams to become a great playwright like Tennessee WILLIAMS or Truman CAPOTE. On his 17th birthday, they go to the theatre to watch WILLIAMS' *Streetcar*, with a great actress, Huma Rojo, starring as Blanche. After the show, Esteban tells his mother that the most yearned gift he expects is to be told about his father, whom he never met and never was told about. Manuela promises to tell him the truth about his father when they get home. Suddenly Esteban is killed by a car while he is running behind Huma for an autograph. Now, Manuela is alone and empty and, after Esteban's organs are transplanted, she does not feel at ease anymore with her job and leaves it. She



reads Esteban's diary and discovers that he felt half human knowing nothing about his father.

The missing father is represented by a photograph torn vertically, with the right side missing and a younger Manuela on the left side. The missing father is a physical loss, not spiritual. It is a missing body. One of the reasons Manuela does not tell Esteban about his father is in that missing body. The truth on his father is also the truth on his mother.

In fact, at the beginning of the movie, Esteban writes in his diary the words *Todo sobre mi madre* as a title for the next story he wanted to write. This may be the reason why Manuela leaves Madrid and goes back to Barcelona, where his son was conceived in a situation she had been escaping from. In this journey through memory, she is also searching for herself.

Manuela suffers a physical loss. She misses the presence of her son and she misses herself. She tries to fill this loss by searching for the people who were part of her life in Barcelona. In particular, she looks for Esteban's father, himself called Esteban, who ignores the fact that he ever had a son. Esteban is a transgender person, best known as *Lola*. This is the secret not to be told to their son. Agrádo helps Manuela search for Lola, who has apparently disappeared.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE BODY

For ALMODÓVAR, the body is so important to look at as a recurrent issue. In some of his movies, this may degenerate into an obsession. Instead, in *All about my Mother*, there is a kind of balance in the story for what concerns the body, perhaps because in this movie there is an overview of many bodies. The film is like a XVth century fresco, like a panorama. We may say this is symbolised by the view from the *Tibidabo* sanctuary, shown to symbolise Manuela's return to Barcelona.

Tibi dabo (Latin for "I will give you") recalls Satan's second temptation to Jesus, showing all the kingdoms of the world and saying "If you worship me, I will give you this" (Luke 3:5-8). This means that the whole city of Barcelona, which can be seen by the *Tibidabo*, represent the entire world. In other words, it represents the whole of humankind—every-body.

ALMODÓVAR presents the issue of the body in this movie like this: one cannot talk of the body in an ideal way, so one must describe the different bodies, like a city from a mountain, like Barcelona from *Tibidabo*. When one watches

a *panorama*, one knows it remains a partial view, because there are places that remain invisible, hidden by buildings, and there are things that are worth a closer look. Likewise, ALMODÓVAR, through the eyes of Manuela, goes in the heart of the city, to search for different kinds of people, for different kinds of bodies.

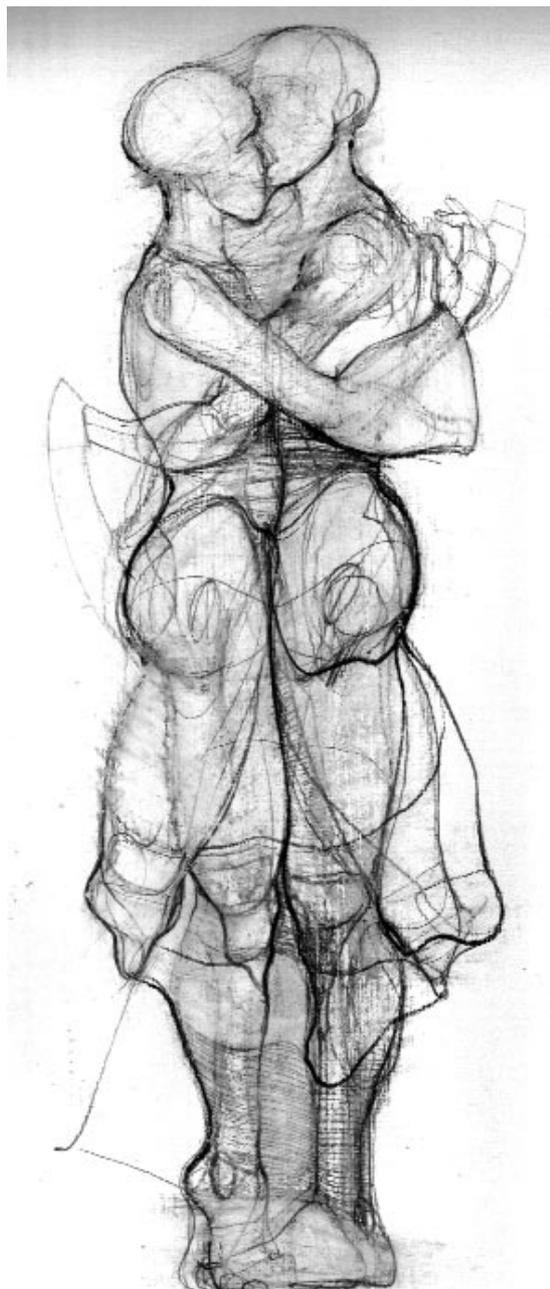
What we discover, thanks to Manuela's journey through her own story, is a plural humankind: the loving body of a young nun who believes that Christian compassion means giving herself wholly to the needy ones; the disabled body of an old man who lost his capacity to interact with others; the destroyed body of a drug-addicted actress who breaks the heart of her lover; the insensitive body of an upper class mother who is blind to what happens to her daughter; the unreliable body of an old actress who is afraid of her body getting older; two dying bodies of two people ill with HIV-AIDS.

NARRATIVE REINCARNATION

When Manuela's story is written, when the missing parts of the drama Esteban wanted to write about his mother are told, the movie finishes with a sort of "narrative reincarnation". Manuela goes back to Madrid with a new born child, just as seventeen years before. This child is called *Esteban* and is Lola's son. Thus, another aspect of the body is told by ALMODÓVAR: one body substituting another.

ALMODÓVAR talks about these bodies in a descriptive way. Even if some characters speak very badly of others, the spectator should not judge the people in the story. This is resumed in the character of Lola. When Manuela talks about him she says, "he took the worst from a man and the worst from a woman". In this way, the spectator is carried to hate this character, until Lola shows up with his own body, his pain, his tears, his joy, his humanity. Then, it is no longer possible to hate him.

The characters of ALMODÓVAR's movie are real, they are physical. The only ideal aspect is what they dream of themselves. The main message, which sounds even Platonic, seems to rely in Agrádo's statement, "the more you resemble the idea you dreamed of yourself, the more authentic you are".



Peter CIACCIO was born in Belfast in 1975. He is a Methodist student at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology in Rome. He is a member of FGEI, the Italian SCM, he is also one of the founders of the "Protestant Association for Cinema Roberto SBAFFI", a member of Interfilm. Currently, he serves in WSCF Europe as vice-chairperson.

