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Sex Change and Cultural Transformation in Aranda and Abril's *Cambio de sexo* (1977)

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IN March 1997 I attended a sold-out screening of *Cambio de sexo* (1977) in Los Angeles that was part of a 'Vicente Aranda Tribute' within the American Cinematheque's annual series on 'Recent Spanish Cinema'—a screening which enabled me to see this film with new eyes. Recognizing many persons in the audience and overhearing conversations about the film, I realized this was not the typical crowd for the annual Spanish series, which usually has a particular interest in Hispanic culture. Rather, these enthused spectators were primarily gay males or fans of Victoria Abril, whom most of them probably came to know in Pedro Almodóvar's outrageous melodramas, such as *¡Atame!* (1989), *Tacones lejanos* (1991), and *Kika* (1993); or in the French nominee for the 1995 foreign-language Oscar, *French Twist*; or in Aranda's *noir* thriller *Amantes* (1991), his only box-office success thus far in the United States.

Seeing *Cambio de sexo* with this reception community made me want to address three issues: the relationship of this film to an international genre of subversive melodrama that takes sex seriously as a political issue; the casting of Victoria Abril as a transsexual, which helped launch a star discourse of eroticized sexual mobility that other film-makers like Almodóvar would later build on; and the use of sex change as an effective trope for cultural transformation, particularly within the specific context of Spain during the mid-1970s. While the American Cinematheque audience seemed attuned to the first two issues (which provided easy access into the text), they seemed less aware of the third. This essay will address these three issues as they are manifest in two different readings of the

film—one set specifically within Spain's period of political transition between the death of Franco in 1975 and the election of the Socialists in 1982, and the other a transcultural and transhistorical reading that helps explain why *Cambio* can still be a cutting edge text for an international gay audience in the 1990s.

Produced in 1976 and first released in 1977, *Cambio* tells the story of José María, an effeminate 17-year-old boy living with his bourgeois family in the provinces outside Barcelona. Tormented at school by fellow students who call him a 'maricón', he is unjustly expelled by the principal because his 'abnormality' is too threatening to the other boys. Although supported by a loving mother and sister, he is treated harshly by his father, who takes him to a Barcelona night club for his sexual initiation as a man. The plan backfires, for not only does the boy fail to perform with the whore hired by his father, but he also discovers a stunningly beautiful female impersonator (played by real-life transsexual Bibi Andersen in her screen debut) who provides a new imaginary of sexual transformation. Running away from home, he goes to Barcelona where he can experiment more freely with cross-dressing. Although inexperienced, he successfully rents a room from a sympathetic landlady (played by comic actress Rafaela Aparicio) and gets a job as a hairdresser in a salon. In these two feminine spaces his effeminacy is not only tolerated but appreciated. His sexual transformation from José María to María José is accelerated by a visit from his sister Lolita and a chance meeting in the salon with Bibi Andersen, who becomes his customer and mentor. After a violent incident with his first date, he tries to castrate himself. Once recovered, he returns to his family but is again rejected by his father. Back in Barcelona, he is recruited by Bibi to become a female impersonator in the night club where she performs. In an impromptu audition staged by Bibi for her boss Durán (played by Fassbinder veteran Lou Castel), these two gorgeous creatures do a tango that evokes the one performed by Dominique Sanda and Stefania Sandrelli in Bertolucci's *Il conformista* (1969). As María José undergoes rigorous training to become a convincing woman, she begins to rival Bibi both on stage and with Durán, with whom she falls in love. After overcoming several romantic difficulties, the couple flies to Morocco for the surgery that completes José María's sex change and enables them to fulfil their goal of heterosexual marriage.

Historicizing the Trope of Sexual Mobility

The year of *Cambio*'s release, 1977, was also the year when Spain held its first free elections, legalized its Communist Party, and officially abolished censorship. Despite these liberalizing changes, there was still good reason for caution, for radical left-wing films were still the target of right-wing terrorist bombing (as in the case of Gutiérrez Aragón's *Camada negra*, 1977) or even of government delays and harassment (as in the case of Miró's *El crimen de cuenca*, 1979). Partly because of the 1973 assassination of Franco's hand-picked successor Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco by Basque terrorists, many Spaniards expected the post-Franco transition to be violent. Thus it still made sense to filter political critiques through a discourse of sexual transgression, as had been done during the Francoist period.

Cambio was based on a news story published in the French journal *Le Nouvel Observateur* which Aranda's Catalan collaborator Carlos Durán had read in 1972, about a Belgian transsexual who died after the surgery that transformed him into a woman. Working with Joaquín Jordá, Aranda wrote a script called *Una historia clínica* (A Clinical History), which was rejected by the censors and which had to wait until the death of Franco before being transformed into *Cambio de sexo*. According to Aranda: 'When we went to present the script to the Ministry in 1976, we had no problems. We didn't have to make any cuts because, although censorship was still in force, it was already less rigorous' (quoted Alvares and Frías 1991: 103).

The economic sphere also provided good reasons for using sexually explicit material. After the suspension of censorship, Spain was flooded with foreign films that included big-budget Hollywood movies as well as soft-core porn, which drew Spanish spectators away from the domestic product. Moreover, partly because of the growth of home video and the diversification of Spanish television, movie attendance drastically declined (from 331 million spectators in 1970 to 101 million in 1985), with the Spanish percentage of this shrinking market also decreasing from 30 per cent in 1970 to 17.5 per cent in 1985. The use of outrageous sexual material was one way for Spanish film-makers to compete for the liberated Spaniard's attention within this unstable market.

Cambio was not the only Spanish film of the mid-1970s to use sexual mobility as a trope for post-Franco cultural transformations or to feature a protagonist who 'comes out' both sexually and politically. But whereas other key works (such as Jaime Chávarri's *A un dios desconocido*, 1977, Eloy de la Iglesia's *El diputado*, 1978, and Jaime de Armiñán's *Al servicio de la mujer española*, 1978) tended to emphasize the past (shown in flashbacks or dramatic reconstructions) and to restage familiar Oedipal scenarios in this new arena of political instability, *Cambio* was the first to focus on the actual process of sexual transformation itself. Nor did these other films deal with transsexualism or even cross-dressing, except for *Al servicio*, where the protagonist only pretends to be homosexual to entrap a reactionary female radio star, on whom he displaces the rage he feels towards his dead mother (whom he impersonates with the aid of his nanny). Another notable exception, besides *Cambio*, is Ventura Pons's fascinating 1978 documentary about a well-known Catalan artist who was also a transvestite, *Ocaña: retrato intermitente*. I do not mean to suggest that *Cambio* was necessarily more 'progressive' than these other films from the 1970s, for it does not deal with the political realities of the gay movement (which were addressed by *El diputado* and, to a lesser degree, by *Ocaña* and *A un dios desconocido*) and, more significantly, it does not even include any homosexual characters. According to Stephen Tropiano,

The unprecedented popularity of gay-themed films by a mass audience during Spain's democratic transitional period (1975-1978) was due to de la Iglesia's ability to link homosexuality as a marginalized form of sexuality to current sociopolitical issues . . . De la Iglesia, a committed Marxist, is equally concerned with other forms of 'difference'—economic, political, and social—which marginalize individuals in patriarchal Spain. Thus by politicizing homosexuality, the writer/director broadens the appeal of a subject matter that had been virtually absent from Spanish cinema until the early 1970s. (1997: 158)

The fact that heterosexual directors such as Aranda and Armiñán turned to transsexuality as a trope for political change demonstrates this process of 'broadening', even if it cannot be traced so directly to de la Iglesia as Tropiano claims, for these same dynamics were also used in Armiñán's earlier film *Mi querida señorita* (1971), which provides the most interesting comparison with *Cambio*. Perhaps one reason these straight directors turned to

the gay world for the sexual trope was the 1970 passage of the Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law, which 'criminalized homosexual acts and empowered the police to arrest any man suspected of homosexuality because of the potential threat he posed to society' and which 'included a reeducation component . . . to "guarantee the reform and rehabilitation of the dangerous with more technical means of purification"' (Tropiano 1997: 158). According to Tropiano, by 1972 this law, 'the most severe anti homosexual legislation in modern Spanish history', helped launch the Spanish homosexual rights movement. It was in this gap between the passage of the law and the birth of the gay movement that *Mi querida señorita* was produced.

Played by José Luis López Vázquez, the protagonist of *Mi querida señorita* is a bourgeois middle-aged woman from the provinces who, after being surgically transformed into a man, moves to Madrid where he is free to work and pursue his desire for his former young maid across traditional barriers of class and generation. Made during the Francoist era, this remarkable film was nominated for a foreign-language Oscar, partly because it was able to use sex change as an effective trope for political transformation, particularly within a nation that supposedly consists of 'the two Spains' (those dedicated to preserving the nation's cultural and moral purity versus those committed to the ongoing project of modernization). The 'free man' trapped within the ageing body of a repressed provincial spinster was analogous to those libertarians who were suffering an 'inner exile' under Franco, waiting to be reborn in a modern, urbanized, post-Franco Spain. The film implies it is simply a matter of an essentialist core being trapped in the wrong body or within the wrong government, waiting to be freed. Thus, when the doctor (played by Armiñán's producer and co-writer José Luis Borau) tells the protagonist, 'You are strong and courageous, but you are *not* a woman!', his diagnosis might be essentialist and highly problematic on the register of gender, but within the political subtext it was, indeed, strong and courageous. Instead of witnessing the surgery, we see the long train ride to Madrid and through the new eyes of the transsexual the streets of this bustling urban centre where the process of cultural transformation is already well in progress. Ironically, although the film celebrates the liberation that the transsexual finds in the city and although it grants a desiring gaze to both genders, neither the male

nor female body is eroticized. The representation of sexuality remains very discreet, not only because of the censorship norms of the times but also because the political subtext is the primary source of the film's subversive power.

In contrast to *Mi querida señorita*, *Cambio* shows a wariness about Spain's new libertarian identity, implying it might someday prove to be the oppressive double of the fascist regime it had replaced, a wariness that was partially justified by the series of moral scandals (including a secret campaign to eradicate Basque terrorists) that led to the 1996 defeat of the Socialist government after thirteen years of uninterrupted left-wing rule. Thus, more than these other films from the 1970s, *Cambio* anticipated later works produced in the early Socialist era, such as Antonio Giménez Rico's documentary *Vestida de azul* (1983), Imanol Uribe's *La muerte de Mikel* (1983), and Almodóvar's *La ley del deseo* (1986), which all show how the legacy of Francoist repression is still internalized within a supposedly hyperliberated Spain.

Cambio de sexo as Subversive Melodrama

From a 1990s perspective, *Cambio* seems firmly positioned within the genre of melodrama, which highlights sexual and generational conflicts within the family and features stylistic excess and lurching ruptures of tone. This form was used subversively by Fassbinder and Bertolucci (whose work is invoked within *Cambio*) as well as by other well-known European auteurs such as Visconti, Pasolini, Bardem, and Buñuel. Yet in November 1994 at a panel at New York University on 'Spanish Cinema in the 1990s: Sexuality, Melodrama, and Global Desire', Aranda denied that any of his work was melodrama, for he claimed the term was pejorative and that this genre was incompatible with the kind of realism he cultivates in his films.

Cambio can be read as a realistic 'clinical history' of a transsexual, particularly since the story was based on a real-life event discovered by documentary film-maker Carlos Durán (who is credited with the story idea and after whom one of the main characters is named). From this perspective, the film documents the case of a female subject trapped in a male body who must undergo a long process of transformation that culminates in a surgical procedure,

which is described in graphic detail. Yet since her driving ambition is to become a 'real woman' who can find love and happiness in a heterosexual marriage, her saga could also be read as a transsexual woman's film, a subgenre to which both *Cambio* and *Mi querida señorita* belong. While the realism of the 'case study' helped disavow the political implications of the subtext (particularly for the censors), Armiñán and Borau deliberately positioned that subtext within the familiar genre of domestic melodrama—a practice, as I have argued elsewhere, that was common in Spanish cinema during the Francoist era and that also seems operative within *Cambio* (Kinder 1993: esp. ch. 2).

Nevertheless, at the NYU conference, Aranda identified the term 'melodrama' with theatre and seemed unaware that this genre had been redefined as a subversive rather than a regressive form, particularly in Peter Brooks's seminal book *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), which was published the same year that Aranda's film was made. Defining the melodramatic imagination as 'an abiding mode in the modern imagination' that is characterized by excess and that cuts across many periods, cultures, and art forms, Brooks claims the extravagant representations and moral intensity of melodrama simultaneously place it in opposition to the realistic mode and yet require a realistic context to rupture: 'Within an apparent context of "realism" and the ordinary, they seemed in fact to be staging a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation' (1976: p. ix).

This is precisely how melodrama functions in *Cambio*, where an elaborately structured series of extravagant theatrical performances rupture the ordinary realism of the case study, which leads not to polar concepts of morality and class (as in *Mi querida señorita*) but more specifically to conflicts between male and female sexuality, patriarchal law and transgressive desire, mainstream norms and subversive marginality, romance and travesty, loss and recuperation. Unlike other recent popular drag movies from other nations like *To Wong Foo*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*, and *Paris is Burning*, none of *Cambio*'s performances is played for laughs; instead, they raise a complex set of subversive ironies. This particular form of melodrama enables the film to be read productively across different cultures and periods and in relationship to recent queer theory. For it invites an alternative reading that problematizes not only the optimism over

Spain's political changes but also the essentialism of the unified gender identification achieved by José María through surgery and the heterosexual dream that drives it. It is this kind of reading that distinguishes *Cambio* from its predecessor, *Mi querida señorita*.

In this alternative reading the iterative nature of *Cambio*'s theatrical performances is crucial because it implies that gender and sexuality are not freely chosen by an individual through any singular act but are materialized through a series of repeated actions that are regulated by social and historical forces—a process that has been theorized most powerfully by Judith Butler.

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (1993: 95).

In *Cambio*, José María's decision to 'become a real woman' is not only repeatedly prohibited by his father and commanded by his heterosexual lover Durán but also repeatedly urged by his sympathetic female mentors (his sister Lolita, his landlady Doña Pilar, and his transsexual friend Bibi) who have absorbed the culture's gender norms through education, mass media, and the family.

The first pair of transformative performances is witnessed by José María in the company and at the command of his censorious father, whose own sexual stability is compromised by his presence in this drag club and by his exaggerated womanizing machismo, which is presented as a form of drag. Like the potential male lovers whom José María will later encounter in Barcelona, the father displaces any sign of his own sexual instability onto his son by harshly condemning and threatening to physically punish the boy's so-called 'abnormality'. Yet these repeated prohibitions help shape and eroticize the boy's transgressive fantasies—a dynamic that is mirrored in the first rupturing performance.

Unfolding like a surrealistic dream, the first performance begins with a man in white walking onto the stage and being attacked by four topless female dancers, who appear to be raping him, which suggests the sexual instability of the heterosexual male. This sexual

transgression is interrupted by a prim lady who is discreetly dressed in a long, high-necked red dress from a past era and whose spectacles emphasize her role as voyeur. As the lady picks up a dead chicken (a Buñuelian icon), the four topless women assemble a mirror before her, as if to reveal what lies beyond (or behind) her dignified persona. Her mirror image (who is played by a different woman) begins to strip. As if to prevent this female split subject from exposing herself and her erotic desires or perhaps to express his own aggressive sexuality, another man in white enters the scene and shoots the naked imaginary signifier, splattering her body with blood. This performance evokes Butler's retheorization of Lacan's mirror phase.

The body in the mirror does not represent a body that is, as it were, before the mirror: the mirror, even as it is instigated by that unrepresentable body 'before' the mirror, produces that body as its delirious effect—a delirium, by the way, which we are compelled to live. (Butler 1993: 91)

This description aptly applies to the performers on stage—not only to the 'split' female who, like José María, experiences a gap between the inner and outer self but also to the killer with his phallic weapon, who mirrors the hypermasculinity of José María's father with his phallic cigar. It applies equally well to father and son who are watching this spectacle that mirrors their own relationship. The mirror scene has a delirious effect on the boy which compels him to adopt this performance as a prophetic scenario that he will re-enact in a series of castrating performances—on stage, in bedrooms and bathrooms, and ultimately in the surgical theatre of the hospital. This process is facilitated by the fact that two of the performers will figure prominently in his sex life: the mirror image is played by Fanny, his father's whore who is hired to initiate him sexually and who later will humiliate him as he performs on stage; and the first man in white turns out to be María José's love interest Durán, whom her love will save from his demeaning life with strippers. The second, murderous man in the white coat prefigures the doctor who will perform the surgery that eliminates the gap between the female subject and her imaginary. Not yet understanding such symbolic meanings, José María, when asked whether he likes this number, responds, 'Yes, it's fun.'

This act is immediately followed by the stunning transvestite headliner, Bibi Andersen, who is introduced as 'a mystery of

nature' and 'the biological enigma of the century'. As if offering an alternative condensed version of the previous act, she performs a provocative striptease, which ends with the display of her penis. As she says in a later scene, the penis is crucial to the act, for it proves the double nature of her performance (both as a dancer and as a woman) which must be read against two different sets of norms; without it, she has to rely merely on *her* own talent without the uncanny spectacle of the freaky hybridization of the sexes. Not surprisingly, the reactions of the spectators-in-the-text to this performance are more personally engaged. Obviously threatened by the display of the penis on a performer who has aroused his desire, the father asks Fanny, 'Is it stuck on?' Revealing the jealousy she feels toward this rival performer, Fanny responds: 'The tits are stuck on, the rest is his own.' Disavowing his earlier experience of pleasure, the father assures her: 'I like the old dancers better.' Meanwhile, José María remains silent, absorbed in his own delirium over this new set of thrilling possibilities.

The next pair of performances concern María José's first 'date' in Barcelona. The first is private: José María is home alone on a Sunday, luxuriating in a female masquerade for his own pleasure and a queer reception of popular culture. While listening to a women's programme on the radio (the kind that is central in *Al servicio de la mujer española*) and while watching a soap opera on television, he first dons a virginal white communion gown and vogues dramatically on the bed, then puts on a sexy red dress, as he freely adapts the dialogue and gestures transmitted over the airwaves. He wears this red dress to the public space of the night club where he meets a handsome, moustached Burt Reynolds lookalike who is wearing a white jacket (like the two men in the first prophetic performance).

The second performance occurs the next day when María José, dressed to look like a young innocent schoolgirl, waits for her date, who rides up on a motorcycle wearing a helmet and a racing driver's uniform. Since both are deceptively costumed, there is misrecognition on both sides: she mistakes him for a cop until he takes off his helmet, and he thinks that when she said, 'I'm not exactly a woman!' she meant that she was a virgin, not a transvestite. Yet, as in the injustice at school with which the film opened, the only consideration is the discomfort of the empowered heterosexual male (a category fetishized in the huge poster of Mark Spitz

that dominates the room in which her deflowering was to be performed). When the Reynolds impersonator discovers María José's penis, he hits her; in response, José María tries to cut off his own balls, drawing blood as in the first prophetic performance.

The next pairings of performances are more complex, leading us to compare what happens at home with his father and in Barcelona with Durán. To help his son return to 'a decent life', the father assigns him an arduous regimen of work, which may allude to the re-education programme mandated for suspected homosexuals by the Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law. The performance of these repetitive tasks is presented in a montage sequence accompanied by classical melancholy music. When the father discovers women's lingerie in his son's bedroom, he forces him to dress as a woman. Intuitively realizing that this command is designed to test the sexual stability of the father more than that of the son, José María meets his challenge. Discreetly drawing the curtains behind rather than in front of him, as if to shield his naked body from the gaze of us spectators in the movie theatre, he boldly confronts his father with frontal nudity and then with his convincing drag in a red dress. As if that were not sufficient provocation, he then vogues with a sexy come-on gesture, which elicits a slap from his father. In demonstrating that his own sexual mobility is as threatening to his father as it was to the Reynolds simulacrum, José María is liberated from his patriarchal dominance and is free to return to Barcelona.

In Barcelona, the sequential order of the contrasting double performances is reversed. First, there is another dress-up sequence where he is directed not by his censorious father but by a sympathetic surrogate mother, his landlady Doña Pilar. Not only does she advise José María about make-up and wigs, but she loans him a wonderful outfit from 1944, which he wears when he goes to the club and first meets Durán. Evoking the vintage costume of the dignified lady in the first prophetic performance (as well as the gowns worn by Sanda and Sandrelli in *Il conformista*), this dress is worn by María José in the transgressive tango with Bibi (who replaces Fanny as mirror reflection), which brings the two sides of the divided woman (lady and stripper) closer together in a collaborative number now performed in synch. Telling María José that she 'could become a spectacular woman . . . even better than Bibi' (a promise motivated by Bibi's altered status as a transsexual) and assigning her a new theatrical name alliterative with his own

(Diana Darcy), Durán becomes a Pygmalion who commands her to undergo rigorous training that is designed 'to wipe out all masculine mentality'. In case one misses the analogy between these labours and those assigned by José María's father to make him a 'man', this sequence is also presented as a montage accompanied by melancholy classical music, but this time the imagery consists of huge stylized facial close-ups (evocative of Bergman's *Persona* and of similar transformative sequences in Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammel's *Performance*) rather than realistic medium and long shots as in the earlier work montage. Bibi helps supervise the training, which couples her with Durán as surrogate parents and Oedipalizes the rivalry between the two female impersonators. Although María José performs both sets of labour, she continues to offer resistance—both to Durán's domination and to the repetitive tasks of steaming, plucking, creaming, piercing, and exercising that are required of any *body* that wants to be made over into a so-called 'desirable woman'. Insisting she is a 'natural' woman who had no masculine mentality to begin with, she tries to fetishize the breast and womb in place of the phallus. For her, it is a matter of body parts—of getting rid of the penis, which she fears Durán wants her to expose on stage (the way Bibi did in the original pair of performances), which will evoke the same castrating behaviour from him that it did from the Reynolds lookalike and her father. As María José puts it, 'I don't want to show it . . . I want to forget it . . . I don't want to be an enigma like Bibi, just a real woman.'

The next two pairs of performances are presented as an extension of this training and as the development of the problematic relationship between María José and Durán; like the original pair, they both have a prelude involving an angry encounter with another woman. The first pair is introduced by a rehearsal (with an older female coach and Durán looking on), which is followed by the actual debut performance of the same number. Preceded by a disturbing primal scene (like the one in the first prophetic performance) where Bibi arrives with champagne and finds María José kissing Durán, the next performance is similarly interrupted, this time by Fanny and a male customer who hits María José with a champagne cork while she is dancing on stage. When María José asks Durán to fire Fanny, he refuses. These performances reveal María José's growing sense of frustration with Durán, which erupts in the transgressive performance that follows.

Set within a flamenco bar where transvestites freely mingle with straight gypsies who are equally marginalized within Spanish culture, this public performance is the only one in the film where there is no barrier between performers and spectators. For the first time, we see María José dancing for her *own* pleasure. She performs with a wild, drunken abandon that is sexier than the carefully choreographed moves of her previous numbers. The dance becomes most transgressive when she clutches an empty wine bottle between her legs, mocking the phallus that has oppressed her because of its position not on her own body, from which it is easily detachable, but within the symbolic order. As if reversing the situation from the opening prophetic performance, this scene of transgressive pleasure is interrupted by Durán, who makes her retreat in fear and aggressively pursues her with a castrating verbal attack: 'You're nothing but a shitty transvestite . . . I'll never think of you as a woman!' Accusing her of travesty, he is actually threatened by her mocking of the phallus, on which his own powers as a heterosexual male are propped. In Butler's terms, she challenges its originary position by showing it is not a given and therefore can be replaced.

In expiation for this transgressive performance at the gypsy bar, María José performs the number that Durán wants her to sing, 'Mi cosita'. After coyly performing as an innocent Little Bo Peep who claims she will keep her 'pretty little thing' a secret, she lifts her skirt and reveals (in a flat cut to an inserted genital close-up) María José's (but not Abril's) tiny penis. Redirecting the mockery from the symbolic phallus to her own body part, she submits to Durán's castrating domination, which inserts rather than removes the penis. This time it *is* stuck on! She suffers a humiliation greater than Bibi's, for it is overdetermined by three subordinate identifications: as child, as female, and as physically inadequate male. It is this submissive performance that makes Durán ask for her forgiveness and declare his love: 'I wondered why I did it . . . I don't know.' To answer his question, we must recall the original prophetic performance where he is almost raped by four women. By castrating and infantilizing his boyfriend, Durán maintains the illusion of his own 'pure' masculinity and disavows his own homoerotic desire. From this perspective, the ending is as closeted as the opening.

This is where Aranda and his co-writer Jordá claim they wanted the film to end. Instead, they added an epilogue that provided a

'happy' ending that was more appealing to audiences and that humanized Durán, who, according to Aranda, could be seen as merely 'an exploiter of circus freaks' (Alvares and Frías 1991: 110). It also provided further ironies. From these declarations of love there is a flat cut to an aeroplane (an image parodied in the ending of Almodóvar's *Laberinto de pasiones* where the nymphomaniac heroine flies off with her bisexual Iranian royal), which shows them on their way to Morocco for the surgery (the same trajectory later pursued by the transsexual played by Carmen Maura in *La ley del deseo*, whose sex change is literally designed to please her incestuous father who rejects her). On the political register, Morocco is also the site from which Franco launched his coup that would convert Spain to fascism—an ironic connection that helps question whether the sex change really is so transformative.

José María's surgery is also presented as a series of interlinked performances. First, she is subjected to a battery of tests administered by patriarchal authorities, which, like the two earlier work montages, are designed to regulate her true gender and which earn their stamp of approval, 'You are *not* a homosexual!' After being warned that there is 'no going back', the happy couple is shown a medical slide show, with graphic drawings that (like the reversal of José María's given names) demonstrate this sex change is basically a simple inversion: 'The skin of the penis, still with its tube-like shape, is turned inside out . . . and inserted into the new cavity . . . [which] is a functioning vagina.' The second performance, the actual operation, is performed in the hospital's surgical theatre. Only briefly suggested, it is quickly displaced by José María's dream, which hearkens back to the original prophetic performance. Costumed as bride and groom, María José and Durán dance in slow motion to melancholy music that evokes the transformative work regimes. As if repeating the moves of the transgressive tango earlier performed by Bibi and María José, they spin in circles and then he gently lays her down, in a deathlike posture. As he retreats, a bloody stain materializes on her white gown, suggesting the death of the phallus and its power. She awakens with him by her side, asking, 'Am I a woman now?' Though he tells her not to talk, she observes, 'I dreamed I died, now that I'm a woman.' Kissing her, he declares: 'You're alive and you're a woman . . . you've always been a woman.' She closes her eyes again, evoking the fate of the Belgian transsexual who died of a haemorrhage, the ending that Jordá actually

preferred (Alvares and Frías 1991: 109). The image dissolves to a large close up of María José staring directly into the camera as a male voice-over declares, 'Six months later, María José experienced her first feminine orgasm.' These declarations about her sexuality and pleasure are hardly reassuring for they are voiced by the patriarchy which still controls the enunciation of the body and the text, while she is left with dangling questions and with silence.

Ironically, the only thing gained through all this arduous labour and suffering is the restoration of the heterosexual norm and the replacement of one tyrannical patriarch by another—a replacement of her father by her husband and, one might add, by Abril's director, Vicente Aranda.

Victoria Abril's Star Discourse of Sexual Mobility

The misinterpretation of José María's line, 'I am not exactly a woman!' acquires new resonance when applied to the dynamics between Aranda and Abril, who was only 16 when *Cambio* was shot and only 15 when he first spotted her in a film on TV. As Alvares and Frías astutely observe, 'The adolescent image of Victoria Abril permitted her character to be situated on an ambiguous plane between the two sexes' (1991: 106)—an observation which is consistent with Butler's claim that there is no pre-existing material body onto which sex or gender are imposed but rather the body and its sex are materialized through regularizing, reiterated norms. In the case of Abril, these norms would be inflected by the roles she played in Aranda's movies.

Aranda originally signed Angela Molina for the part of María José and was planning to use one of her brothers for the earlier scenes as José María, but she withdrew. This choice would not have required the sexual transformation to be performed on screen, as it is with Abril. As in *Mi querida señorita*, where the sexual transformation moves in the opposite direction (from female to male instead of from male to female), the transsexual is played by an actor of the gender to which the character aspires. This choice enables spectators of both genders to identify with the process of sex change—seeing a man playing a woman who aspires to be a man, and a woman playing a man who desires to be a woman—for both films involve a sex change in both directions.

Not only did Aranda give Abril her first demanding role in *Cambio* that established her as a sexual shifter, but he also cast her as Juan Marsé's protagonist Mariana in his film adaptation of *La muchacha de las bragas de oro* (1980). At first he did not believe that Abril was capable of playing a role that demanded female sensuality: 'I was accustomed to seeing Victoria as a kind of cabin boy in *Cambio de sexo* and thus I could not bring myself to see her as the luscious Mariana' (quoted Alvares and Frías 1991: 117). But after a long search for the right actress, he finally decided to give her the role:

After much thought, one night we said, 'Why not Victoria?', and we called her . . . When we were looking for her, she was then on tour singing. She was being taken around by her husband, Gustavo Laube, who was also her 'manager' and who almost ruined her. We saved her from the songs. (Quoted Alvares and Frías 1991: 118)

It is ironic that Aranda should make this comment when he himself cast Abril as a musical performer in *Cambio* and (like Durán) required her to sing 'Mi cosita'. Like Laube and Durán, Aranda could be seen as another patriarchal Pygmalion who shaped her image and sexuality through a series of regulating performances. Although Abril may be identified more strongly with Almodóvar by American spectators, in Spain she is closely associated with Aranda,¹ for he first gave her the roles that proved no matter how extreme or explicit the sexuality with which she was identified, she still retained credibility, sympathy, and dignity with audiences worldwide, an achievement to which a hyperliberated Socialist Spain also aspired.

According to Alvares and Frías, it was *La muchacha* rather than *Cambio* that consolidated the relationship between Aranda and Abril, whom, despite her petite stature and slender body, he would cast as a highly sensual figure in many films to come, including: *Asesinato en el comité central* (1982), *El crimen del Capitán Sánchez* (1985), *Tiempo de silencio* (1986), *El Lute, camina o revienta* (1987), *Se te dicen que caí* (1989), *Los jinetes del alba* (1990), *Amantes* (1991), and *Libertarias* (1996). Although she is not a great beauty, Abril's sexual intensity and the expressiveness of her body and face would lead other directors to cast her to play

¹ See Alvares and Frías 1991.

an impressive array of equally extreme sexualities, all of which she could make convincing regardless of how excessive the melodrama or how parodic the tone: whether it was the single mother who abandons her career as a scientist to enter the fantasy world of her autistic son in Salgot's *Mater amatisima* (1979); or the Mexican prostitute who murders the sadistic border guard and former client who has been terrorizing her in Borau's *Río abajo* (1984); or the incestuous daughter of a cardinal in Regueiro's *Padre Nuestro* (1985); or the porn queen who falls in love with her kidnapper in Almodóvar's *¡Atame!* (1989); or the parricidal daughter in Almodóvar's *Tacones lejanos* (1991) who is so obsessed with her famous mother that she first marries and then murders her mother's ex-lover and becomes impregnated by her mother's transvestite impersonator; or the monstrous 'video vamp' cyborg (to poach Paul Julian Smith's apt description) who 'takes pleasure in the confusion of boundaries' and who is 'masculinized as quest hero' in Almodóvar's *Kika* (1993);² or the victimized Spanish housewife in Josiane Balasko's *French Twist* (1994) who manipulates her adulterous French husband and lesbian lover into letting her move from one bed to the other; or the alcoholic prostitute who fights her way back to independence and self-respect in Llanes's *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto* (1995).³ Even when playing in a non-Spanish film such as *French Twist*, Abril's mobile sexuality evokes the radical cultural and political change that Spain has undergone.

When we see major stars such as Abril or Maura performing such complex sexualities, particularly alongside a real-life transsexual like Bibi Andersen,⁴ the iterative power of their sexual mobility is subversive, regardless of the specifics of the narrative. The frequent reiteration of such performances in Spanish films helped construct a new stereotype for a hyperliberated Spain—one that was popularized most successfully worldwide by Almodóvar

² Smith 1996: 47–50. An image of Victoria Abril as Andrea, the video vamp, enlivens the cover of this book.

³ For an extended reading of Abril's performance in *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto*, see Kinder 1997: 1–32. Kinder 1993 also contains detailed readings of her performances in *Río abajo*, *Amantes*, and *Tacones lejanos*.

⁴ This juxtaposition would be repeated by Gutiérrez Aragón in *La noche más hermosa* (1984) and in several films by Almodóvar, including *La ley del deseo*, in which Abril has a brief, uncredited appearance, *Tacones lejanos*, and *Kika*.

but that was also extended through the star discourses of Antonio Banderas and Abril, who both crossed lines of nationality and gender. As if to reaffirm the Spanishness of his own mobile sexuality, at the height of the media hype around Banderas's crossover to Hollywood and his scandalous affair with Melanie Griffith, when asked by an American journalist which of his leading ladies was the sexiest, Banderas replied, 'Victoria Abril is the best kisser.'⁵

Abril represents not merely the cliché of the whore with a heart (or panties) of gold, but a woman whose spirit is so intense that, no matter whether expressed through sexuality, madness, motherlove, or violence, the fire of her passion purifies her soul. It is this intensity that enables her to embody the proverbial two Spains with their opposing extremes of uncompromising orthodoxy and unrestrained anarchy. This is the quality that makes her such an effective icon for the dramatic and unpredictable cultural transformations that were taking place in Spain in the wake of Franco's death in the mid-1970s and what helps keep *Cambio* alive in the 1990s for an international gay audience that increasingly believes (along with Butler, Smith, Tropiano, and other theorists) in the performativity of both gender and sexuality.

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⁵ Rebello 1995: 37. For an extended discussion of the star discourse around Banderas, see Kinder 1997.

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