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REPRESENTATION OF MATERNITY AND LESBIANISM IN SPANISH CINEMA

Irene Pelayo

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the recent search for and cataloguing of films with lesbian themes in Spanish cinema, I have observed, through the lesbian characters in the sample films, the establishment of curious reiterations with regards to the depiction of the relationship between maternity and lesbianism and how Spanish cinema reflects this relationship.

The depiction of lesbianism in our cinematography is a relatively new phenomenon when compared to other Western film-making, namely in France, the UK and especially Germany, a fact which should not be surprising given the legal context of a society in which a homosexual act could be considered a crime.

This fact coupled with the traditional invisibility in which female homosexuality in particular has found itself throughout its history serve to make Spanish cinema a reflection of this invisibility, hence the absence of themes and the association of lesbianism to certain places inhabited exclusively by women and characterised by their invisibility such as convents, prisons or boarding schools. It has, however, rarely referred to maternity or to the mother figure as such.

2. MATERNITY AND LESBIANISM IN SPANISH CINEMA

In this study framework, we will include three types of situations that combine maternity and lesbianism and that have so far been shown in Spanish cinema:

- Lesbian daughter who reveals her sexual condition to her mother/ parents.
- A couple made up of lesbian women who raise a child together.
- Mother of children born of a heterosexual relationship who at a certain point of maturity defines herself as a lesbian.

2.1 LESBIAN DAUGHTER WHO REVEALS HER SEXUAL CONDITION TO HER MOTHER/PARENTS

The fact that a girl, usually in adolescence, would talk about her sexual condition with her mother/ parents is still a theme that is seldom brought up in Spanish lesbian cinema.

Silvia ama a Raquel (Diego Santillán, 1979) is a harsh critique of lesbianism from a societal and family perspective. Set in a small town in northern Spain in the 1950s, the film shows the beautiful love story between two adolescent cousins. Their happiness becomes an inferno when a farmer finds them together and spreads the

news of the girls' lesbianism to the town inhabitants in a matter of hours, which leads the whole town and even the girls' families to reject and insult them, to the point of getting one of them murdered. Here, lesbianism is an unthinkable act to one of the girls' mothers, who far from saving her daughter and niece from the social rejection and insults, participates in them. One possible interpretation of this is that the murder of the cousin is the well-deserved ending imposed by life as punishment for having been a lesbian and corrupting her cousin.

This theme is treated more extensively in the 1999 French-Spanish production *¿Entiendes? (Porquoi pas moi?)*, Stéphane Giusti, 1999) that centers its plot on the night when a group of youths, mostly girls, gather their parents together in a house on the outskirts of Barcelona in order to reveal their lesbianism/homosexuality as a group. The film shows a wide spectrum of opinions regarding lesbianism/ homosexuality through which there is an attempt to reflect the ignorance, homophobia and stereotypes that the citizens continue to hold on to on the threshold of the 21st century when dealing with this subject.

2.2. LESBIAN COUPLE RAISING A CHILD TOGETHER

Being in a social environment in which, according to data from the "Spanish Society of Fertility", an estimated 500 single women receive fertility treatments on an annual basis in Spain, it is noted that there is no wholly Spanish film that addresses (this issue) the issue of lesbian couples raising a child together, a fact which suggests a notable lack when depicting maternity and lesbianism in cinema. This absence is even more evident when comparing Spanish cinema to other Western cinema, especially that of the United States, where the theme of assisted reproduction associated with lesbianism is one of the most common themes of lesbian cinema in recent years. One possible reason for this absence may be the fact that the law on assisted reproduction in Spain is not specific regarding the sexual orientation of the mother, which entails that the conflict, both real and cinematic, disappears.

This great thematic lack when dealing with the process of pregnancy and the birth of a baby whose parents are a lesbian couple is made up for in some way in the Spanish-American film *Tardes de Gaudí* (Susan Seidman, 2001), which shows the difficulties encountered by a lesbian couple trying to raise the biological daughter of one of the women and her previous partner, an American transsexual woman who does everything possible to regain custody of the daughter. The traditional concept of family is completely dismantled in the film only to give way to a happy ending in which all the family members seem to forget the problems experienced previously during the legal custody battle and look to the future with much more hope.

2.3. MOTHERS OF CHILDREN BORN OF A HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIP WHO DEFINE THEMSELVES AS LESBIANS AT AN OLDER AGE

Compared to the other themes discussed above, this case is the most dealt with in Spanish cinema. Thus, our attention is on married or divorced women with children from an existing or previous heterosexual relationship, who are between the ages of 35 and 55 and who have successful careers, and whose stability is shattered as a result of starting a relationship with another woman. This relationship, which, on one hand, ruptures the life that they led up until this point, on the other, rescues these women from the monotony that they were submitted to previously and introduces a new relationship in which the difficulties tend to be a result of the large inequalities between the partners, whether due to social class, race, nationality or simply age.

Films such as *El pájaro de la felicidad* (Pilar Miró, 1993); *Calé* (Carlos Serrano, 1996) or the more recent *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* (Daniela Fejerman and Inés París, 2001); *En la ciudad* (Cesc Gay, 2003) or *Sévigé* (Júlia Berkowitz) (Marta Balletbò-Coll, 2004) are a clear demonstration of the various forms of accepting and living lesbianism when there is (or has previously been) a heterosexual partner as well as children in the midst. The common ground between the protagonists of these films are sometimes obvious and often fall on topics normally associated with lesbian culture, although Cesc Gay, in his film *En la ciudad* (2003) breaks with the past and shows a relationship of equals between two women who, in this case, are not only younger than the other characters analysed but also do not have a relationship of inequality.

Spanish cinema depicts this lesbianism either through concealed visibility or through total visibility, but never at the middle point of restricted visibility.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Although the number of representations of the lesbian-maternal relationship in cinema has increased in the past 15 years, there are still many representative absences regarding this issue. The invisibility that for years has marked the lesbian condition in this country has been the cause of the great lack of role models to follow. Although this country has produced over a hundred films that address the lesbian theme, only ten or so address the issue of motherhood in relation to lesbianism and many of the others are intended to satisfy a masculine heterosexual audience, thus not offering a point of reference for lesbian viewers.

The intention of this paper is to show how Spanish cinema is beginning to portray (portrays) new family models in which one or more of the members are lesbians, as well as the tendencies and stereotypes that form the basis of our cinematography with regards to the representation of these materno-filial relationships. Finally, I would like to analyse the great thematic and filmic lack in our cinematography concerning this highly contemporary issue in Spanish life.

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Image 1: *Calé* (Carlos Serrano, 1996). Cristina, right, is one of the first representations in Spanish cinema of a mother with children from a heterosexual relationship who at an older age comes out as a lesbian.



Image 2: *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* (Daniela Fejerman e Inés París, 2001). In the picture, Eliska and Sofia are being observed by the latter's three daughters who are stunned after receiving the news that their mother is a lesbian.



Image 3: *En la ciudad* (Cesc Gay, 2003). Irene, left, is a married woman with a daughter who jeopardizes the stability of her marriage when reunited with her old friend Silvia, whom she is kissing in the picture.



Image 4: *Sévigné* (Júlia Berkowitz) (Marta Balletbò-Coll, 2004). Júlia, left, and Marina, right, kiss for the first time in this scene after months of falling in love and getting to know each other during which Júlia has overcome, with Marina's help, the platonic love she felt for her daughter.