"MADRID ME MATA": KILLING THE HUSBAND IN ALEX DE LA IGLESIA’S 
LA COMUNIDAD (2000) AND PEDRO 
ALMODOVÁR’S ¿QUÉ HE HECHO YO PARA MERECER ESTO!! (1984)

Shot some sixteen years apart, Pedro Almodóvar’s ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!! (1984) and Alex de la Iglesia’s La comunidad (2000) share a number of features. Besides the idiosyncrasies inherent in having the charismatic actor Carmen Maura playing the main role, both films offer a commentary on Madrid and the sexism of late-twentieth-century Spanish society. This was the time that Madrid witnessed the socio-cultural movement called la movida. The movida started among Madrid’s marginal groups in the late 70s and was a new pop culture, largely based on 60s New York underground and 70s punk cultures. During the late 70s and early 80s in Madrid, many young people started to explore alternative sexualities, and all-night clubs with all sorts of music, including punk, flamenco, rock or pop, proliferated. The visible expressions of this movement were music, art, fashion, design, photography and film, with Almodóvar becoming the movida’s most important exponent.

Although neither de la Iglesia’s nor Almodóvar’s films could be treated as simple allegories for one idea or notion, both invite some interesting associations, especially concerning women and the urban environment. In spite of their differences, this study will show how the films’ protagonists, Gloria and Julia, embody and, at the same time, fight against Madrid. This city, however, presented as a hostile masculine domain that these women need to recreate in order to inhabit it. The process of recreating the city is for Gloria and Julia one of identification, self-definition and self-creation.

As well as outlining the important role that women played in the transformation of Spanish society, ¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!! and La comunidad suggest that social and individual change are only possible when some aspects of the past are symbolically “killed”. In each, the central character faces up to the inadequacies of a husband who needs to be eliminated. Different in style and approach, these films present the husband’s “murder” as the only possible alternative to bring about a future that is, nonetheless, still uncertain, especially in the case of Almodóvar’s Gloria. These films propose that, for renewal to occur, women, and by implication their society, need to obliterate the shackles of their past. This is especially the case for women who, like Gloria and Julia, belong to and represent a particular urban and social environment: that of the lower-middle and working classes of Madrid.

Almodóvar and de la Iglesia use social caricature to suggest a reality that pervades Madrid and, by extension, much of Spanish society, with the
emphasis on the anachronism of traditions that coexist with a more rabid contemporaneousness. In his fourth feature film, ¿Qué he hecho yo…!!?, Almodóvar singles out the frustrations of Gloria, a working-class wife and mother of two who lives in an undesirable, claustrophobic flat in La Concepción, a working-class district of Madrid bordering the (in)famous circular highway built in the 1970s, the M-30. Gloria is an illiterate, glue-sniffing and amphetamine-addicted housewife married to an abusive husband, Antonio (Ángel de Andrés). They have two sons: one, Toni (Juan Martínez), is a drug dealer; the other, Miguel (Miguel Ángel Herránz), is a homosexual, who becomes a male prostitute and leaves home to live with a pederast. The tiny flat is also the abode of Antonio’s mother, the abuela (Chus Lampreave), who hoards sparkling mineral water and madeleines (magdalenas), and complains constantly about Madrid, wishing to return to her village.

Caged in her urban apartment and alienated by a life of work, drug addiction and loneliness, Gloria is, nevertheless, a character whom we fully understand and with whom we can identify. From the opening sequence, in which she is summoned under the shower by an impotent policeman, Polo (Luis Hostalot), for a frustrated attempt at sex, to the final sequence where she contemplates suicide, Gloria embodies the difficulties of being an uneducated woman in 1980s Madrid. As she cleans in different places for many hours a day and submits to the sexual advances of her unfeeling husband, Antonio, Gloria’s life is doomed and hopeless. Her existential frustration allows us to appreciate the lack of options for women, especially for poor women, in a social context in which machismo reigns.

By way of contrast, Julia, the main character of La comunidad, is a figure who mirrors and offers a commentary on Gloria by highlighting some of the changes that took place in Madrid society between 1984 and 1999. Like Gloria, Julia lives in a precarious economic situation that she shares with her husband, Ricardo (Jesús Bonilla), who has been made redundant following the downsizing and restructuring of the company in which he had worked for many years. Julia is, however, much more energetic and enterprising than Gloria, as seen in her outgoing personality and her attitude as a temporary estate agent who, from the beginning of the film, is out and about displaying a good level of mental and physical stamina.

Unlike Gloria, who is dressed in slippers and drab clothes throughout the film, Julia, bordering on middle age, appears modern and sexy. This is indeed emphasised by the opening sequence, when she speaks on her mobile while holding an umbrella and a briefcase. As the camera approaches her, we see her in the middle of a Madrid street wearing a raincoat over the tight pink suit that she will wear for most of the film. From her way of walking, we also notice the thin, high heels that she will take off only occasionally, when relaxing in “her” home, or when she climbs to the top of the building in the final chase. Altogether, Julia appears to be a resourceful and energetic character, and this is conveyed in the contrast between her and her husband, Ricardo.
Even though Gloria does not share Julia’s energy, she is the character we endorse in ¿Qué he hecho yo...!!. This is clearly Almodóvar’s intention, and it is achieved from the pre-credit sequence by the use of a crane shot which approaches her slowly until it reaches ground level and shows the world from her own viewpoint. Literally as well as symbolically, we “descend” to meet Gloria as we hear a voice giving instructions and the crane shot changes to a low-angle shot, which reveals a second camera filming. The camera’s high angle is maintained in this scene to show Gloria at eye-level. However, she is seen from above in the next segment, in order to stress her lowly position while she scrubs the floor. At the same time, we see some men in the adjacent room practising Kendo. We sense her anxiety when we see her on the right-hand side of the screen, in an adjacent room, holding her mop with both hands and imitating the men with their Kendo sticks. The tension and movements in this scene suggest that her liberation can only come from fighting back, as will most certainly be the case when she uses the very same Kendo move to hit her husband with a ham bone.

Throughout ¿Qué he hecho yo...!!, Maura, who looks completely different in La comunidad, successfully represents Gloria as a ruined woman. Unlike other directors and scriptwriters who were rewriting Spanish history from the point of view of the victims of the Franco regime, Almodóvar focuses on the contemporary culture of lower-class urban housewives. It is worth remembering that being a housewife was the most frequent occupation of Spanish women at this time, when Spain had the highest proportion in the European Union of women who did not work outside their home.

In order to highlight Gloria’s alienation and loneliness, Almodóvar films her through a frame of household objects, such as the oven and the washing machine. These appliances watch her, as it were, and control her life within the scenario of her flat, which is presented as even more claustrophobic by the juxtaposition of different gaudy wallpaper patterns over which are hung a number of cheap framed prints, including a rural scene with horses. The inclusion of these pastoral scenes, which were commonplace in lower-class houses at the time, as Gwynne Edwards remarks, “suggests the open spaces and the freedom that Gloria and her family lack.” This kitsch setting is described in the script as suffocating and “cutre”, which Paul Julian Smith translates as “squalid and vulgar”.

Almodóvar’s and de la Iglesia’s films are both set in Madrid. But, unlike the working-class environment of ¿Qué he hecho yo...!!, the Madrid shown at the beginning and end of La comunidad is the centre of the city, with monumental buildings and old, though seigniorial, houses. This, however, is only a façade because, once the building in which most of the film takes place is present, the scene seems to move back in time to a lower social scale. Even though the film is set in today’s Madrid, when Julia opens the door of the comunidad we seem to go through a time warp, moving into the past, as made manifest in the décor of the entrance of the building as well as the residents’ clothes. This reinforces
the sense of anachronism and the contrast between modernity and tradition that de la Iglesia, like Almodóvar, foregrounds in his films. This conflict is instrumental in conveying both directors’ message regarding the uses of tradition and its subversion.

The same contrast between interior and exterior that we perceive as we enter the building in La comunidad will be further emphasised when we gain access to the apartment where most of the film takes place. Julia goes to the building to sell this apartment, but she finds it so luxurious and comfortable that she decides to enjoy it by spending the night there. Julia soon discovers, in the flat above the one that she is trying to sell, a hidden treasure in the form of bank notes. This money belongs to one of the residents who had won the football pools but has not left his flat since then for fear of the remaining neighbours, la comunidad, who have agreed to share the money when he dies. This was, according to de la Iglesia, his original idea: a dead old man sitting in front of the television. De la Iglesia affirms that he was inspired by the cruel everyday reality of life in cities that, like Madrid, are often nothing but impersonal and inhospitable:

Si, pero las cosas que les pasan a estos vecinos las puedes leer todos los días en los periódicos. Lo que les ocurre es una broma comparado con lo que ocurre en la realidad. O sea, abuelos que aparecen muertos porque la familia los ha abandonado. Eso ocurre de verdad en muchas casas, y la gente no se da cuenta de lo que pasa hasta que el inquilino muere y empieza a oler. 12

Throughout much of the film, Julia attempts to take “her” fortune out of the building, and she is constantly prevented from doing so by the eccentric and gruesome neighbours who appear capable of murdering her in order to get their hands on the money.

La comunidad shows selfishness and greed in an urban setting where interiors and exteriors clash, presenting a challenge to the Manichean view that things are what they seem. The title, La comunidad, refers to the proprietors’ association, as well as to the autonomous region of Madrid, which is known simply as “La Comunidad”, and is the location where de la Iglesia lives and works. 13

The word “community” also suggests the idea of a close-knit association of people, perhaps bound by a common goal. However, this community offers an example of the worst aspects of humanity, especially greed and envy. According to de la Iglesia, although this may seem a negative portrayal of society, it is nonetheless as present in our lives as the do-gooders he sets out to criticise. These are exemplified by the social idealisation of the then-famous television series, Médico de familia. 14

In de la Iglesia’s words:

La hipocresía que define a los vecinos es, al mismo tiempo, el motor de sus acciones [. . .]. Los vecinos son el horror, son los otros, son el infierno porque en ellos nos vemos reflejados, porque en ellos vemos grotescamente distorsionados nuestros propios defectos. Yo soy los vecinos, yo soy la envidia, los celos, yo soy la paciencia enfermiza, la rutina interminable, el pacto de silencio, yo callo, yo miento. 15
La comunidad is a satirical as well as a humorous reflection on envy and uncharitable behaviour which could easily be compared with some older Spanish films of this type, such as Luis García Berlanga’s Bienvenido Mr Marshall (1952), Plácido (1961) and El verdugo (1964), or Marco Ferreri’s El cochecito (1960) and El pisito (1958). La comunidad presents a view of humanity constantly at war, as de la Iglesia clearly indicates:

Creo que la guerra es el principio de todas las cosas. Si echas una ojeada a la Historia de una manera objetiva, descubres que lo único que hemos estado haciendo durante miles de años es odiarnos [. . .]. La película trata de un grupo de gente que vive así y que no lo reconoce. Que vive en su comunidad de vecinos y que está deseando que todo sea maravilloso y perfecto. Y que todo el mundo se lleve bien y que todo sea fabuloso y encantador. Todos esconden un contrato que han firmado entre ellos mismos para engañar y acabar con uno de los miembros de la comunidad que acertó una quiniela de 14. La moraleja de la historia y es triste que la tenga porque no me gustan las historias con moraleja dice: “Asumamos este elemento, no lo neguemos.” Todos queremos la pasta. Vamos a asumirlo e intentemos hacer algo con ello.16

Like de la Iglesia’s film, Almodóvar’s is set in an urban environment that plays an important role in the development of the plot. ¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!! is filmed in an inhospitable setting, with most scenes taking place indoors and the few shots taken outside being in winter and under a grey sky. To outline the alienation of these surroundings, Almodóvar uses perpendicular views of high-rise buildings, thereby stressing their angular shape and the absence of space between them, and adding to the claustrophobic feeling the city shares with Gloria’s apartment. For example, when Madrid is shown from Gloria’s balcony we see nothing but high-rise buildings. Likewise, when her son, Toni, and her mother-in-law find the lizard Dinero outside, they are silhouetted against a dark sky in a sort of desolate park-cum-building site. To emphasise further the squalor of the natural environment, they are located next to a tree with no leaves. As they talk, the camera shifts 180 degrees and we see that behind them there is only a dilapidated building that takes up the whole frame, with no sky to be seen. The dialogue furthers the solitude of the urban environment, as the grandmother reminisces about her village. This neo-realism is, however, mixed with comedy and melodrama when the grandmother adopts the lizard, which follows them as her pet, and names it Dinero because he is green, the colour of money, something which is certainly not very abundant in the environment in which they live.

¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!! is partly neo-realist in its depiction of a Madrid that is far removed from the bright lights and colours associated with its director’s remaining film production, for instance Carne trémula (1997), where Almodóvar presents a tour of the city’s monuments at the start of the film. In fact, in ¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!! the only public work we see is the dreary M-30, a motorway surrounding the city which opened in 1974. The supposed grandeur of this type of work, which would have been endlessly portrayed in newscasts such as the NO-DO during the Franco regime, is certainly ridiculed by Almodóvar.
Nobody familiar with Madrid would miss the obvious joke when Antonio, expecting to impress his German friend, Ingrid, says he will take her “for a spin” round the motorway and its surroundings.

Nevertheless, in spite of the squalor of the apartment and its surroundings, in ¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!!, as in many of his films, Almodóvar makes of some locations cinematic spaces that have meta-narrative value, even if they are unfashionable, and certainly distasteful. In ¿Qué he hecho yo . . .!! the setting rightly portrays the doom and gloom of Gloria’s life, creating in the viewer a feeling of being enclosed. This is also conveyed by the fact that Almodóvar uses mostly medium shots in the film. Indeed, there are few close-ups and the camera often remains static, with people crossing in and out of the frame, as though on a theatre stage, which contributes to the claustrophobia. 17

The differences between the two protagonists of these films, Gloria and Julia, are most clearly presented by their attitude towards sex, which is symbolic of their own outlook on life. After the initial scene of frustrated sex in the Kendo school shower, we see Gloria coerced by her husband into having sex. A close-up of her face, with Antonio on top, shows her to be obviously unsatisfied. Interestingly, the scene cuts to a surreal and colourful scenario in which Almodóvar plays a cameo role and lip-synchs the famous song “La bien pagá”. The association of Gloria with the “well-paid” woman of Miguel de Molina’s copla clearly marks the marriage bed as the scene of prostitution and dissatisfaction. 18 Ironically, however, Gloria is not even paid for her “job”, as she has to work hard to make sure the family can survive and only returns home to continue working in her flat. The sexism that pervades her society is stressed later on by the fact that, when Gloria says she is illiterate, we see Antonio teaching his son to copy his signature, which, he says, has his family name; that is to say, the name of the father that will perpetuate his patriarchal dominance.

Unlike Gloria in her sexual apathy, Julia has a more active libido, and she tries repeatedly to get her husband to have sex with her in “their” new, luxurious flat. In all these scenes, she is emphatically shown to take the leading role, and she is equally active when trying to seduce an attractive young Cuban neighbour. Her sexual desire is thus given prominence, and Julia is certainly “on top” of her men in every sense. Contrasting with her liveliness and energy, her husband, Ricardo, is dwarfed as an unlikely nobody who disappears from the scene after Julia symbolically “kills” him. In fact, Julia “murders” Ricardo gradually, as she first says that he has been beaten up (which is true), then that he is in hospital, and finally she affirms that he is actually dead. At this stage of the film we realise that the assertion is obviously false but symbolically true for Julia’s life.

As with Gloria, however, steps are taken by de la Iglesia to ensure that viewers follow Julia’s ordeals with a good degree of empathy. This is clearly achieved, first of all, by the obvious choice of Maura, an actor who commands
the viewers’ attention and sympathy. As de la Iglesia affirms, Maura is a star who invites identification:

[...]

Throughout the film, as de la Iglesia intends, audiences are led to identify with Julia, and understand her decisions, finding them believable. The choice of her dull husband, and the scenes where Ricardo appears, are designed to strengthen Julia’s presence, and allow the viewer to empathise with her. In fact, Ricardo offers a foil for Julia, as he shares her background and limitations, but he is certainly a passive and apathetic character: “Ricardo es desgraciado como Julia, pero es pasivo frente al sufrimiento, se diferencia absolutamente de ella en su capacidad de cambio.”20 Indeed, Bonilla fulfils this ungrateful role to perfection, as de la Iglesia has acknowledged.21

The audience certainly follows Julia up to the last scenes, when the claustrophobic feeling created throughout the movie is released with the sequence on the rooftops. As Julia goes out and the spectators run away with her, there is a sense of liberation which, de la Iglesia has affirmed, shows how Julia literally and symbolically throws away her luggage to come out into the open, clean and renewed. Thus, it is fitting that in this sequence Julia and her neighbour Ramona (Terele Pávez) meet beside the sculptures of large horses on top of the roof. These horses, as de la Iglesia comments, remind viewers of Mount Olympus:

En el climax hay una liberación, una resolución de los conflictos, y por tanto el protagonista, simbólicamente, se purifica. Se limpia, suelta lastre, por lo tanto “asciende” [...]. El personaje se purifica en la cima blanca de la montaña que es la película. Por eso los caballos, que reflejan el Olimpo mitico.22

When at the end of the sequence Ramona asks Julia to admit that she is also a member of “la comunidad”, driven, like the rest of them, by envy and ambition, Julia realises the price that she is about to pay for the material gain contained in the suitcase. As Ramona says “Tú eres como yo. Dilo,” we see a change in Julia’s expression and notice that she will not be a member of the comunidad. Julia has seen herself reflected in the neighbours, especially in Ramona, and decides that she does not want to be like them. By throwing the suitcase at Ramona, Julia casts away the shackles of greed. The weight of the suitcase catches Ramona off balance, and she falls into the courtyard, taking with her several clotheslines before she reaches the ground. This patio, as de la Iglesia says, stands for the heart of the community (“el corazón de la comunidad”),25 and it is, therefore, a suitable site for the end of Ramona and the remaining neighbours. Once she lands on the ground, the neighbours arrive and start to fight over her body for the contents of the suitcase. Spectators learn about
their end from the pages of a newspaper seen in the next scene, where it is reported
that the members of a "community" have killed each other for fake money,
since the suitcase contained Monopoly notes that Charlie (Eduardo Antuñá)
had put there. This money, at the end of the film, flies above the Madrid skyline
and over the horses of Mount Olympus. At the same time, a different, more joyful
"community" is dancing to a cheerful tune with Julia and Charlie. This group is
made up of people sharing their time and music and includes intellectually
disabled people. The fact that they meet in a typical Madrid tavern named
"El oso y el madróño" (The Bear and the Strawberry Bush), symbols of the capital
city, indicates that we are being offered an alternative, more festive microcosm of
Madrid.

In a similar way, Gloria also finds liberation at the end of the film and, as
with Julia, we also endorse her throughout the scenes leading to it. In spite of
her shortcomings, or perhaps because of them, our identification with Gloria
increases as the film progresses and culminates when she grabs a ham bone in
the kitchen, after Antonio has hit her, and unintentionally kills him, when he hits
his head as he falls. When the sole witness of her crime, the lizard Dinero, is
meaninglessly killed by one of the investigating policemen, Gloria realises that
she can start a new life free from Antonio’s abuse. However, the film suggests,
a new start cannot be easy for Gloria, as she is hindered by ignorance, poverty
and, perhaps more importantly, by the constraints of being a woman in a sexist
society. This is clearly understood by her homosexual son, Miguel, when, return-
ing to the flat, he tells Gloria that the house “needs a man” (“Esta casa necesita
un hombre”). Unusual though Miguel may be as a stereotypical “hombre”, his
return makes Gloria abandon thoughts of suicide and consider a new life
within the constraints of the surrounding beehive-like apartments with which
the film closes.

To conclude, in both films Carmen Maura represents Madrid and, at the
same time, fights against a city that embraces and repels her. Both characters,
Gloria and Julia, endure various ordeals and ultimately emerge into the
light of day to look out with a degree of hope. As the famous slogan of the
Madrid movida, Madrid me mata, indicates, Madrid both kills and gives life to
Gloria and Julia. The urban space where a greedy and sexist community
reigns has to be destroyed so that a new city can emerge. These women’s
abusive and useless husbands, I have suggested, personify the Madrid that has
to die for a new town to be reborn. For only beyond them is there a possible
urban space with light and space for women like Gloria or Julia to move and
breathe in.

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NOTES


2 On *la movida*, see R. Cervera.

3 Almodóvar’s early films exemplify Madrid and, by extension, an ample spectrum of Spanish society of the 80s, where the traditional and archaic customs of old Spain coexisted with a sophisticated and urban postmodernity. This can be seen in, for example, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montό́n* (1980) and the present film, in which contemporary avant-garde worlds coexist with entrenched traditional values, such as the machismo of Gloria’s husband or the attitude of her mother-in-law.

4 Smith notes “the determining influence of environment on character” in this film, with special reference to the scene where Toni and the grandmother appear in the park (which I mention below), as well as the use of the camera to convey the smallness of the flat. See Smith, pp. 51–64 (p. 55). The film, Smith concludes, “[... problematises] urban space” (p. 62).

5 *La comunidad* was snubbed in the Goyas of 2001 in spite of having received 15 nominations for its hybrid, cartoon-like style. It uses a mixture of styles – black comedy, thriller and horror. Throughout his career, de la Iglesia has mixed fantasy films with Iberian tradition, cartoons and digital effects, and he is clearly influenced by classic film-makers such as Hitchcock. *La comunidad* was the most popular Spanish film of 2000.

6 This is a meta-cinematic device that offers a comment on filming and on the fact that a film is a representation or a performance.

7 The word used in the script is “ajada” (Smith, p. 52).

8 This is mentioned by Smith (p. 54), who cites Ian Gibson’s *Fire in the Blood* as the source for this information.

9 Vidal observes that it is as though these appliances were looking at her, thus intensifying her objectification (p. 121). This accentuates her isolation and powerlessness.

10 In *Almodό́var: Labyrinths of Passion*, Edwards concentrates on a study of the limitations faced by Gloria, seeing in her a type of “heroism which, in the course of the film and in the light of her experiences, will become ever clearer” (p. 45).

11 See Smith, p. 53.


13 De la Iglesia does not identify with other Basque filmmakers, refusing to be pigeonholed as such. Indeed, Triana Toribio believes Alex de la Iglesia to be the Spanish film-director *par excellence*. She writes that de la Iglesia “is, in many ways, the present and possibly the future of Spanish cinema [. . .] nothing is more castizo, more genuinely Spanish, than the films of Alex de la Iglesia, even if it is precisely the castizo that these films parody” (p. 1).

14 In de la Iglesia’s own words: “El planteamiento general de la pelίcula es que todos somos malas personas. Yo creo que es fundamental que el гєnero humano vaya asumiendo esto. Y ademίas, que el ejemplo de hombre que pontifica Emilio Aragό́n no existe” (quoted in B. Sartori).

15 De la Iglesia, pp. 52–3.
16 Quoted in B. Sartori.
17 This point is noted by Smith (p. 56), who comments on the use of the “fixed camera” and the scenes where Almodóvar shoots from inside the shops looking out into the street.
18 Smith also notes “the parallelism between prostitution and marriage” implied by the juxtaposition of the song with the previous scene (p. 54).
19 De la Iglesia, p. 54.
20 De la Iglesia, p. 51. Furthermore, de la Iglesia also notes that he wanted to make a film which would be comedy as well as horror, and that Maura was the only actor he could think of who could do both effectively. In fact, de la Iglesia says that he phoned her and told her that he would not write the script unless she acted in it. Maura agreed: “Vale. Escribidlo y luego hablamos” (p. 54).
21 According to de la Iglesia, Bonilla interprets the character of Ricardo “genialmente” (p. 51).
22 De la Iglesia, p. 55.
23 De la Iglesia, p. 58.
24 Smith also argues that Gloria “is clearly the identification figure throughout the film; and she is never blamed for the way her sons turn out” (p. 62). Smith mentions one of the final shots, where she returns from the bus after having said goodbye to Toni and her mother-in-law, and the camera tracks her in a long take that enables us to see and share in her sadness.

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