

Hombre, claro...: A Reflection on Narcissism in Spanish Culture

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Abstract

Cultural Narcissism is a phenomenon that has been prevalent in Spain for centuries, and it has been reflected in the country's literature and film. This narcissism is often characterized by an excessive focus on one's culture, traditions, and a way of life based on elevating the motherland above all. As it would for an individual, this cultural psychological condition leads to a lack of clarity, a tendency to lie and exaggerate in social communication, a sense of superiority in the value system, and the idealization of certain cultural figures. One of these most prominent figures in Spain is the “sacrificial mother” largely inspired by the Holy Virgin, who is often idolized and placed on a pedestal in literature and film. In the works of famous Spanish authors such as Miguel de Cervantes and Federico García Lorca, the mother figure is often portrayed as a symbol of life, safety, and comfort, but also the very source of all narcissistic behaviors. They are the embodiment of Spanish culture, and their roles as mothers are celebrated and revered. Spanish film has also reflected this idealization of the mother figure often assimilated with the motherland. In films such as *All About My Mother* by Pedro Almodóvar, the mother is the central figure, and her role as the nurturer and protector is highlighted.

Keywords

cultural psychology, Spanish cultural studies, narcissism, Spain, mother figure

Initial Considerations

One of the most notable examples of cultural narcissism in Spain is the country's controversial attitude toward its history: internal wars, religious tortures, massive colonization and genocide, ethnic and religious cleansings, fascist dictatorships, intellectual persecutions and diasporas, perverse political strategies between its different regions, inbreeding in its dynasties, and a

strong tendency for covering up its deeds with secrets and lies, have all ostracized the Spanish culture from developing alongside neighboring mindsets. The country's self-glorification of its historical past has resulted in a narrow perspective of Spanish culture that dismisses the experiences and perspectives of other cultures and peoples. Often ashamed of its cultural gaps in science and philosophy with the rest of the continent, the uniformity of its universities and the impotence of its institutions, the culture in-the-making has continued to exhibit in the last half century a Baroque taste for continuous festivities, carnivalesque popular confusions and fireworks of false hopes. In modernity, it also claimed it was *different* to attract visitors, but never cared to precise from where the difference came from... It constructed an identity that projected joy, diversity, freedom, inviting open minds, sensuality and sexual inspirations, competitiveness and innovative industries. It became grandiose again through secrets and lies, transfers of responsibility unto its neighbors, and would rather compromise its existence than its reputation.

The culture kept on repeating the same pathological cycles of a condition that has been more contagious than any other diseases in the past fifty years: Narcissist Personality Disorder. The only difference is that it affected the culture at large and not only individuals. Cultural narcissism refers to the excessive admiration and love for one's own culture and traditions. It can lead to a lack of interest or appreciation for other cultures, as well as a tendency to view one's own culture as superior (Cichocka & Cislak, 2020; see also Bertin et al., 2022). In Spain, cultural narcissism has been observed in various aspects of society, including politics and the arts. Narcissism became slowly but surely part of the Spanish cultural make-up. This essay will seek to offer a reflection on cultural narcissism in Spain and its effects on society.

One question remains before we can proceed, however: can cultures be suffering from the same pathologies than the ones Western Psychology has identified and defined for the individual? Also, if we do accept to look at cultural pathologies the same way we look at them for individuals, what should be our research methodology around the identification of patterns in a culture?

Methodology

The research on Spanish cultural narcissism and its correlation with territorial identity and irrational reverence to the mother figure employs a mixed-methods approach informed by Heine's Cultural Psychology principles (Heine, 2019). The methodology is designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data in contemporary cultural products (novels and films) in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between cultural beliefs, identity, and psychological attitudes.

The research will employ qualitative methods to gather rich, contextual data on the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding Spanish identity, the mother figure, and narcissistic attitudes. These methods are grounded in the principles of cultural psychology, which emphasize the importance of understanding behavior within its cultural and historical context. They measure and analyze the prevalence and intensity of narcissistic attitudes, territorial identity, and reverence to the mother figure within the Spanish population. These methods will provide evidence of the relationships between these variables, allowing for the identification of patterns and trends within the data.

Furthermore, the research will incorporate cross-cultural comparisons to provide additional insight into the unique aspects of Spanish cultural narcissism and its relationship with territorial identity and reverence to the mother figure.

Overall, the methodology employed in this research is designed to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between cultural beliefs, identity, and

psychological attitudes within the Spanish context. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methods informed by cultural psychology principles, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Spanish cultural narcissism and its underlying psychological and cultural dynamics.

Results and Discussion

Let me open this discussion about contemporary Spanish culture with a disclaimer, before we get any further in this proposed discussion about a cultural pathological pattern I have been seeking to identify. Narcissism lays at the base of dozens of other cultures and what can be identified in Spanish culture is a much bigger monster elsewhere (Li & Benson, 2022; see also Fatfouta et al., 2021; Jauk et al., 2021). The pathology is global and can be observed in most cultures that have accumulated and suffered traumatic episodes in their history. Defense mechanisms to trauma include the narcissistic machine in their different responses. This chain of reactions connected to the pathology can be as cultural as individual, and the two realms can feed on one another. One place to take the temperature and look for symptoms of narcissism in a culture beyond its representation of its history is in its arts and letters. Spanish art, music, and literature are often seen as some of the most prominent and influential in the world, with large international followings. While there is no denying the contributions of Spanish cultural heritage to the world, such as the paintings of Goya or the works of Miguel de Cervantes, there is a clear tendency in Spain to prioritize these contributions over the creative work of other cultures. This cultural narcissism has led to a lack of diversity and representation in Spanish art. For instance, in Spanish literature, there is often a lack of representation of authors from diverse backgrounds. In film, Spanish-language movies tend to be overly melodramatic, with a heavy focus on love triangles, family dramas, and other clichés, giving little attention to stories of underrepresented cultures or marginalized identities.

Simultaneously, today's Spanish culture has enough historical distance to contemplate the shallowness of its own past superlatives, such as the world's greatest empire it once was under Charles V and his son Philip II. Rather than Grandiose, the narcissism Spain's culture might shelter in the present day is more of a covert nature. Covert Narcissism is very hard to detect at first in the individuals who are affected by this pathology, as they expose a rather open-minded, liberal, educated and charming personality to seduce the empathic victims they will end up using as narcissistic supply. It is also typical of individuals who have experience a downgrading of status, generally through traumatic transitions in their history. It might be the cluster in which we find Spain and the particularities of its cultural pathologies. It is noteworthy that a broad range of research is dedicated to the topic of narcissism (Bocian et al., 2021; Choi & Kweon, 2023; MacDonald & Schermer, 2023; Rogoza et al., 2023; Sedikides & Hart, 2022; Šram & Dulić, 2015; Zeigler-Hill & Dehaghi, 2023).

Talking about cultural narcissism — and displacing a psychological condition unto a group of people, anywhere from a family to a nation — is not an endeavor to be taken lightly. What psychology has identified as *conditions*, since its confirmation as a discipline by Freud in the early twentieth century, have been strictly restricted to the realm of the individual. Cultural psychology is yet to affirm itself as a recognized and respected field of study. As Steven J. Heine (2019) sums up:

[c]ultural psychology, as a field, is still a relatively new discipline, and it continues to produce striking evidence that challenges psychologists' understanding of human nature. In contrast to much conventional wisdom, this field has been revealing that culture shapes

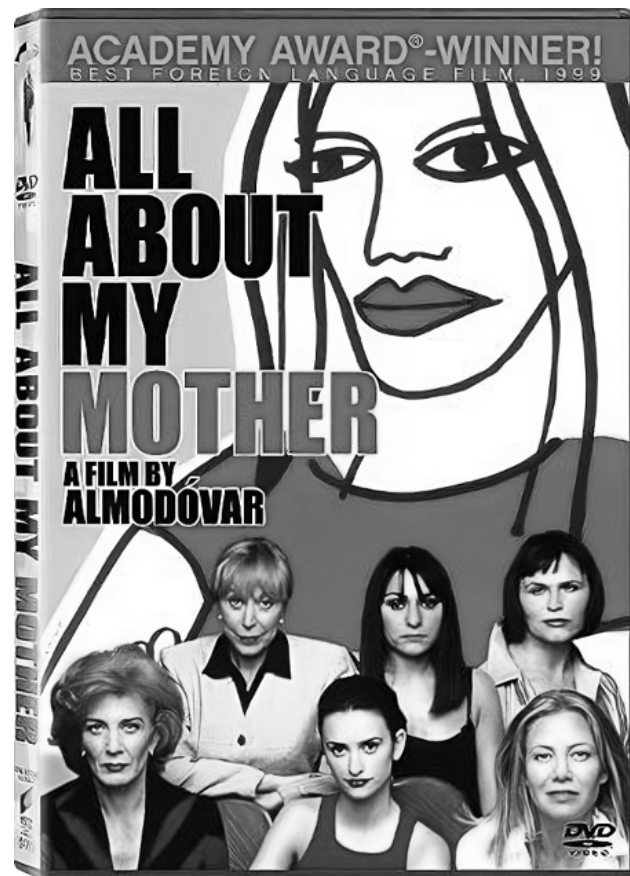


Figure 1. Movie poster for *All About my Mother* by Pedro Almodóvar

how people's minds operate — sometimes in profound ways. The past couple of decades have been an exciting time, as an abundance of research continues to demonstrate that culture is not just a thin veneer covering the universal human mind. Rather, this research has shown just how deeply cultural influences penetrate our psychology and shape the ways we think. The research underscores how human thoughts occur within cultural contexts, and shows that different cultural contexts can lead to fundamentally different ways of thinking. (p. XX).

My personal interest for digging deeper in the psychological condition of a particular culture of which I am not officially a member comes from my experience in attempting to become one and the challenges I was not able to overcome as product of other cultural psychological parameters and conditions. Trans-culturalism is not always a successful process. But it is still a realization of one's capacities and will to engage with another culture's psychology without it being familiar at first. And as in any individual or culture, psychology teaches us there is a surface and then a larger part of the floating iceberg underneath that line which separates the visible from the invisible.

Yet, over the years, a series of questions has arisen through the works of a variety of scholars and my own around the possibility of a deeply enrooted covert narcissism at the core of Spain's supposedly transformed and modernized culture in the 21st century. Any foreigner who has a sufficient exposure to the unifying culture of the Kingdom, although it constantly stresses its regional cultural differences to cover it, has come to be aware of many points of double morality and contradictory behaviors that make the old Francoist touristic propaganda of "Spain is different" or the holy trinity of *siesta*, *fiesta*, *paella* be questioned very seriously. What often lays below this image of overly enthusiastic land of leisure, recreation and delightful sensorial and

culinary experiences can turn out to be an extremely disenchanting realization that it covers up depressive tendencies, physical exhaustion from unregulated work conditions, and very unhealthy and/or risky practices ranging from drug consumption to sex addiction. Indeed, deceitful and disenchanting is the moment of realization once the iceberg becomes total.

Since the Baroque period, Spanish culture has reflected on the art of *engaño* (deceit) and its hardly translatable counterpart, el *desengaño* (disenchantment). In the present, the same reference to the art of blurring any situation of clarity exists in a culture that often perceives its social interactions of all kinds, from the professional to the sentimental, in terms of mirrors, optical illusions, reflections, projections and distortions. With centuries of Catholic heritage in its history, as well as internal cultural differences and competitive complexes drawn from the still-recent traumatic experience of four decades of dictatorship, Spanish culture might be showing signs of a ‘narcissistic culture disorder,’ which affects its media, its politics and its determination to project a modern identity. To connect the cultural narcissism that often characterizes the Spaniards from the perspective of stereotypes to the present-day systems of make-believes, this essay seeks to understand how and in which parameters Spanish culture permits or enables its nationals to blur clarities of education, status, ethnicity and sexuality in order to project them in a narcissistic contemplation. Clarity is the worst enemy of the subject in diagnosed narcissistic personality disorder. A culture that has been supportive and has relied on the relativity of clarity through optical plays and illusions can also be a culture that envisions his narcissistic attitudes to be mastered as an art. This article seeks to question whether this is the case of modern-day Spanish culture.

Obviously, Spain cannot be blamed for being the only country whose culture practices deceptive narcissism, among many other forms of *engaños* that can be indexed. Friedrich Nietzsche (1873/2010) wrote in his essay “On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense” in 1873 that:

[the] art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man: here deception, flattery, lying and cheating, talking behind the back of others, keeping up appearances, living in borrowed splendor, donning masks, the shroud of convention, playacting before others and before oneself — in short, the continual fluttering around the flame of vanity is so much the rule and the law that virtually nothing is as incomprehensible as how an honest and pure drive to truth could have arisen among men. (p.254)

As we shall see, what is identified as universal here by the German philosopher has developments in the psychology of a geographically isolated nation with a Roman Catholic heritage and a history of terminated colonization. Fallen empires must cope in different ways, and the heavy narcissism of the Generation of 1898 is an initial sign that Spain overcomes this episode of ego reduction by a narcissistic compensation in its artistic productions as well. In the 20th century, from Salvador Dalí to Pedro Almodóvar, the country sees a series of initially creative figures turning into trademarks, brands, a phenomenon that finds its roots in historical traumatic moments when individuals belonging to a society agree implicitly that some of them will receive these marks of distinction and branding for the greater good of the entire culture.

I would like to isolate three particular episodes in Spanish History that are responsible, in my opinion, for the narcissistic attitudes noticeable in the cultural behaviors: 1) the ethnic, cultural and religious cleansing in the 15th and 16th centuries and the promoted idea of a *pureza de sangre* (purity of blood); 2) the conquest, the rise of the Empire and its fall and agony in the 19th century; and 3) the experience of the longest Fascist dictatorship to ever last in Western Europe during the 20th century. Of course, these three significant time periods do not constitute an exhaustive list, but they certainly highlight turning points in the developmental process of the culture we are proposing to study through the lens of psychoanalytical claims usually applied instead to the narcissistic individuals who might derive from it. However, a methodology has

been applied to other Western cultures, and once again to the United States in particular, that isolate strategies of narcissistic survivals in the aftermath of traumatic historical events and/or time periods.

Discussing cultural narcissism began with Christopher Lasch (1979) in his well-known *Culture of Narcissism* first published in 1979, and now a national best-seller in the US in 2022 for the vision of the Trump years it had predicted 41 years ago. Although we cannot find a Spanish equivalent of such a questioning of one's own culture in Spain, we can very well find inspiration in the establishment of parallels between the US and Spain, as Lasch offers proposals in his book that are universal, even if essentially focused on the American narcissistic attitudes. Even though his work is focused on the future of the United States from the perspective that the 1970s might have had of a beginning of a 21st century and the rise of narcissism in the culture, Lasch points to some key ideas that could very well be applied to Spain from a different angle. Particularly in his identification of what he defines as "the new narcissist" and how this prototype for our century in the Western world is "superficially relaxed and tolerant," which once again makes us wonder what this *hombre claro* attitude might contain of traditional rigidity disguised in a somewhat modern and progressive overall message.

Spaniards have an overall tendency, also, as Lasch points out about Americans, to have lived as if they are living their ancestors' lives and their offspring's lives, which is shown in the same transmission as a narcissistic practice in these two cultures; something other cultures precisely try to avoid, but often cannot. Yet, too many parallels between the United States and Spain would result void of sense given that Spaniards are nowhere close to the socio-geographical mobility observed in North America, as they often choose to cultivate a close connection with their land of origin and will only migrate for work but very rarely to embrace another region's culture as their own. Systematic self-association with a territory reinforced by linguistic and culinary differences (among others) is also very typical in Spanish culture. The territory as a guarantee of an imagined 'authenticity,' a concept altogether linked to the mentality once attached to the *pureza de sangre*, is simultaneously what makes the subject envision his/her existence as a link between the previous generation and the following. Charged with an inherited essence to pass along to validating children, Spaniards are in majority strong defenders of their traditions, the religion from which most of them derived, and the holy circle of the family whose core principles are often unquestionable. And this attachment comes with a great deal of self-criticism in the many humoristic expressions of this culture. Canonical literature and contemporary films have always reserved a special space for this mirroring of cultural evidence.

Amongst other targets of humoristic self-evaluation, the repetitive nature of the professional, the religious and the sexual appears to be heavily represented. There is a certain trust and certainty in the repetition, as pointed out in Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze & Patton, 1968/2021) when the French philosopher was aiming at De Gaulle's conservation of cultural practices to the detriment of new possibilities for the younger generation. Spain never had an identified political revolution in this respect or any other; it has often emulated neighboring tendencies and navigated to maintain its deeply rooted European identity while exporting projections of innovation and modernity it wasn't always able to fully develop and express at home. The Spanish mechanisms of repetition in cultural practices has often meant internal conflicts and contradictions, which has ironically benefited its artistic productions and facilitated their international reputations. Self-derision is nowhere to be found as exotic and persuasive as it can be in Spain. Its repetitive cultural contradictions and voluntary omissions have seduced a world of tourists seeking a land where they could '*soltarse la melena*' (let their hair loose), as Spaniards would say, and embrace the lust for transgression found from the professional spheres to the sleep deprivation of the *fiestas*, cultural manifestations that also end up being a repeat of the previous edition. Outsiders find in Spain a temporary relief from their more rigid cultural

practices; but those who end up staying longer and possibly decide to be part of and/or affected by the cultural psychology must face several moments of realization that might estrange them from the land that first provided some much relief. Eventually, repetition can be extremely exhausting for them. Yet, for most Spaniards, repetition is at the core of culture, without question.

The rebellion against this enduring aspect of the Spanish culture from within has moved generations of Spanish intellectuals toward new worlds of creativity, remaining spaces of undiscovered thoughts and territories to be conquered through the very suffering from one's cultural obligations and practices. Places where the assumed clarity of the *Hombre, claro!* expression was never fully assumed. And the purpose of this essay is also to contemplate a reasonable myriad of works of art as reaction against the opacity and narcissism that can be a cancer at the core of all cultures. Literature and film, but not exclusively, are these non-systematical spaces we shall convene in our discussion. However, these works also contain inevitably the very contradictions to which they are pointing and cannot commit to a full rupture with the traditions. As Giles Tremlett points out in *Ghost of Spain* (2006),

Tradition and modernity somehow manage to fit snugly together in Spain. It is a wonder to those of us from countries, or cultures, where the latter has wiped out much of the former. This strange conjunction of old and new produces some of the most endearing pictures — literally so, in the photographic sense — of modern Spain: the conical-hatted *nazareno* astride a motorbike; the turbaned *moro* from a Moors and Christians festival in Alicante, chatting on his mobile phone; or the woman bullfighter from one of Pedro Almodóvar's films, dressed in a glittering *traje luces*, a suit of lights. (p. 15)

Somehow, the rebellion continues to operate within the same system without fully questioning its foundations, to which it still seeks to honor and abide. At first, it can appear as a complex cultural particularity when it might be the consequences of a culturally sustained narcissism that strives on maintaining this confusion for the external eye. A culture where cognitive dissonances become the norm and even justify the need for the repetitive cultural practices. The art of confusing with established and prefabricated discourses from both the political and the religious realms is omnipresent in a culture that has often self-represented by the stereotypical macho-man image of the *torero*, an epitome of narcissism, cocky and tricky, and whose special dance will confuse one of the strongest animals and kill him progressively in a spectacle of *engaño* admired by a whole crowd of *olé* whisperers. This very same principle of culturally accepted cognitive dissonance performed on a sacrificed animal is therefore widely accepted and admired by most of the culture. The ritualistic nature of most cultural behaviors in Spain can be, in this sense, a challenging pressure on the foreigner who has come to contact with the culture for an extended period. For many, what was originally a country of positive energies, enthusiasm and social connections, initially and from the outside, can quickly turn into a nightmarish situation of total suffocation by the cognitive dissonances once inside the culture. Clarity becomes relative.

Hearing the patronizing and self-assured tone of the expression *Hombre, claro...*, used to title this article, is always an experience for the outsider. This culturally reproduced statement of the obvious often turns out to open the door for a lot of questions. Yet it functions as a shield against potential interrogations. A form of cultural narcissism that allows opting out of providing any kind of formulated answer. A common knowledge that never was for the majority, but generally limited to a group that is trying to reaffirm its identity, in fear of being absorbed by a larger political face to the world. And finally, an imposed closure on any topic that might be linked to the speaker's insecurities. The iron curtain that protects the many shops of Spain suddenly falls sharp on you, so you may not have the space to contemplate a reply. One can be left with a certain sense of sideration. Even when it is placed with humor, it serves that one

and only purpose. Settle the deal, close the conversation and invite to move on to the next item without leaving a chance for further discussion.

One student once asked me why in every Spanish film we watched and discussed for class, there were always one character that would end up being psychologically and/or physically abducted by another, and particularly by their mother. I was rather puzzled and, at the same time, started having quite a revelation. Why was Spanish culture so tuned on to taking control? A very sudden relief from decades of dictatorship unleashed decades of accumulated demons, both individual and collective. But the collective has a way to always reclaim the individual in a culture whose history is composed of dark episodes of odd solidarities. And solidarity always bumps against the wall of leadership and dominion when narcissism continues to feed the very roots of the cultural tree. It follows the pattern of a natural cycle. As it does for many other cultures around the world. Control has been a dire necessity for every member of the Spanish culture at some point of their existence in its history, in an episode that has caused a traumatic response of which the culture offered a pre-made discourse. Whether justified or emulated by cultural dictates, this response belongs to the reservoir of phrases that emerge regularly in Spanish conversation. And conversations are the very space of dominion and power exchange. Phrases that are palimpsests of historical moments and mundane occasions to utter them, that have acquired authority over time. *Hombre, claro...*

Far from adopting an empiricist attitude in the face of the traumatic experiences in History, the ideologically fabricated phrases that populates social conversations within this culture of Western Europe seek to reaffirm a mathematically impossible unanimous consensus. Clarity, of all things, is being invoked as the reason when clearly it is not. The extensive use of *claro* in phrases placed in conversations has eroded the word to a point of divergence from its original meaning that is unconceivable. Hence the more prudent Latin-American version of *cierto*, closer to the Italian *certo*, that prefers to not involve visual capacities, but rather a reasoning. But no consensus stands strong in the backstage, only an illusion of it. Miguel de Cervantes (2005) denounced this aspect of his culture at the turn of the seventeenth century in several occasions, but never so explicitly as he did in his *Retablo de las Maravillas*. In this short play called *entremes*, a play in between the acts of a larger performance, the author of the monumental *Don Quixote* shows how quickly a lie that serves the individual can become a norm for the entire group once it sparks on a stage of Spanish society.

Narcissism as a cultural phenomenon is observable through the usage of lies in small talks, a place where there should not be any reason to use them. If the reality around them is unpleasing to them, many Spaniards will not hesitate in altering it with all the necessary untruths. Rapidly a lie can be flipped in the new truth for the group who has started it. Anything is forgiven if the Honor — a remain from the centuries of feudal mentality this culture is based on — is preserved. The delusion of Don Quixote himself and his capacity to adapt reality to his imagination, as grandiose and caricatural narcissist, end up becoming the normative perception for anyone surrounding him after a certain time. The opaque is somehow made clear through the proclamation of untruths, and everyone agrees to see through it as if it were transparent. This amazing solidarity in the lies, the very cement of Spanish culture, is not observable so easily in other cultures. What makes this gregarious miracle possible is the omnipresence of Catholicism in the culture. But as Spaniards themselves like to point out, it is important to claim the religion as *Spanish Catholicism*, as it has a different flavor in the Peninsula as it does in the rest of Europe and the world.

El Retablo De Las Mentiras

In Spain, as in other parts of the world, the cultural permissiveness for every day's art of lying in the social interactions is very connected to the religious heritage of the country. This cultural

narcissism is characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, preoccupation with the self and their immediate family, and lack of empathy for others. A portion of Spaniards often view themselves as unique, entitled, and deserving of admiration and special treatment. One reason why narcissists are also liars is because they often need to maintain their image of superiority and control. They may lie to exaggerate their achievements, status, or abilities, to cover up their mistakes or flaws, or to manipulate others for personal gain. In addition, narcissists may also lie to avoid accountability or responsibility for their actions, or to avoid negative consequences from others or society. They may also be prone to gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation where they deny or distort reality to make their victims doubt their own perceptions and memories. Overall, the tendency of narcissists to lie may stem from their underlying insecurity, need for validation and admiration, lack of empathy for others, and desire for control and power.

Paradoxically, Spaniards are simultaneously famous for their bluntness with a great variety of life opinions and orientations, the *hablar claro* which they like to remind one another oftentimes. Yet, this reputation is also true when it comes to the fabrication of alternative realities. The bright transparent face they often advertise about themselves comes with its dark side of untruth. The foreigner coming from a Northern or Anglo-Saxon cultures to the Iberian Peninsula will be shocked by the easiness Spaniards have in modifying the truth and adapting narratives to their own interests. Centuries of Spanish Catholicism, a monolithic religion built on the expulsion of and complete intolerance for other spiritual practices as well as the gregarious acceptance of alternative narratives, have blurred the boundaries between the *hablar claro* and the *mentir*, to the point that one can easily be confused with the other. Catholicism is one of the only Christian religion that allows the rite of confession as a lie-purifier for the believer. And within the wider spectrum of Roman Church, Spanish Catholicism takes pride in associating the religion with the cultural practices as much as possible. Other cultures have associated the national adjective to the religion they practice: Irish Catholics like to be distinguished from Polish Catholics and even worship in different churches in the United States, so they can also find in the house of God a place for linguistic segregation, cultural re-enacting, and social reassurance away from the homeland. How ironic it can be that *kathôlikos* means ‘universal’ in Greek, all these forms of Catholicism show a preference for a cultural closed circuit rather than an open mind embrace to diversity and difference. From the outside, Spanish Catholicism can appear quite intriguing at first. Nowhere in the Catholic world can one witness so many public acts and displays of religious fervor. If you walk around a town enough time, you will come across a *procesión* and find yourself quite uncomfortable with the *nazareno* figure, as it might remind you of the Ku Klux Klan activist about to burn one of his victims. The penitence-oriented nature of these cultural manifestations can make any outsider be fascinated and quite repelled at the same time. Although many Spaniards find the practice of the procession repulsive or depressing, a permitted invasion of the secular space by the religious monopoly, no one will ever stop to change the practice and has integrated this practice as normal without any further questioning. Usually, this portion of Spaniards is quite sensitive to those displays of hidden faces in the processions, and find them just as contradictory to the message of Christ as they find monarchy an obsolete and ridiculous entity in their culture. But very few dare to speak against tradition. Even in its recycled and parodied form of the *orgullo gay* with all its *carrozas* and its desire to replace religion with sexuality, the procession remains at the core of Spanish culture. Nowhere else in Europe is it so observable and so needed by the people as it is in Spain, from Andalucía to Galicia.

Spanish Catholicism cares and focuses more on the social practices and the public displays than on the individual’s spirituality or the interpretation of Scripture. Philip II of Spain can be thanked for keeping the Peninsula safe from religious diversity. He had taken his cue from his great grandparents, the Catholic Kings who reclaimed the entire territory in 1492 and enforced a cultural and religious cleansing. Muslims and Jews were forced to leave or convert, leaving

Catholicism as the only option after centuries of prosperous diversity. Even those who accepted to convert to Catholicism were never fully considered "Catholics of old blood." Consequently, the religion is so attached to social class division in Spain since this era. Nowhere on earth is Catholicism such a religion of appearances and social performance as it is in Spain. Nowhere can one contemplate the Baroque of the Roman and Apostolic religion as much as at a Spanish wedding. This insistence on performance is obviously linked to the cultural narcissism that we are seeking to identify here. We can blame the peninsular geography of Spain for cultural isolationism and inflexibilities, but nowhere in the Catholic world is the religion so omnipresent and rooted in the deepest terrain of a culture. Even France and Italy, other daughters of the Church, have opted for secularist republics and are no longer entertaining a Catholic-proclaimed royal family descending in a straight line from the Bourbon dynasty.

The religion that confesses its believers for absolution of this sin is consequently very permissive of cognitive dissonance in the day-to-day discourse of members of its culture. As largely determined by the psychoanalytical community, cognitive dissonance is one of the most evident features of narcissism. It is often the result of the permissiveness around lies that the child experiences and chooses to whether adopt or reject. When truths are altered or transformed, the development into an adulthood of clarity is deeply challenged, especially when maternal figures are responsible for these alterations.

Optima Mater, The Irrational Reverence to Mother Culture

The mother figure in Spanish culture has been idealized for centuries, and this may be attributed to the Catholic Church's strong influence in the country. In Catholicism, the Virgin Mary is the ultimate mother figure, and this has translated into the Spanish culture, where mothers are often seen as selfless, nurturing, and sacrificial. They are regarded as the backbone of the family and are expected to provide emotional and physical support to their children. Cognitive capacities are first acquired through the mother, from gestation to birth to upbringing and education, if applicable. Mothers are an image that the individual generally lives with during the entire lifetime, a constant reference, whether it is a positive or a negative one. If clinical narcissism theory applied to the individual can also apply to a cultural phenomenon, then the figure of the Mother in Spain has an important role to play in understanding the overall outreach of the pathology unto the culture.

In an 1927 song by Conchita Piquer titled *En tierra extraña*, known of most Spaniards internationally, the Valencian singer cries her nostalgia of Spain from New York, as a daughter to a lost mother. The tone of the song evokes the depravation of maternal guidance and care in one's adult life. In comparison, one of today's popular TV shows in Spain, *Españoles por el mundo*, presents Spaniards with examples of countrywomen and countrymen who left the motherland, and constantly make clear from their interview from abroad to their remaining non-migrant brethren watching back in Spain, that the Peninsula, the Nation or the province of origin remains to a great majority of these Spaniards in exile the optimal maternal reference. They remind themselves, somewhat systematically so it seems in these shows, that the only reason that can make them leave the Spanish cultural way of life is economic. Even when emphasizing a difference, those who have chosen to live abroad acknowledge the superiority of the culture of origin, as one would never want to dishonor their mother. No other lifestyle in the world, with financial gain included, is to be compared to the one transmitted by the National breast of Spanish culture. There is no natural reason to grow away from the mother.

There are many places to be searched to understand the strength of the umbilical cord that unites most Spaniards to the Motherland, and one of the first to highlight is the cultural image created over the centuries around their own mothers. Many are the forms of *maternalization*



Figure 2. Julieta Serrano in *Matador*

of the land around the globe, but Spain remains a country where it is the most obvious, due to its history as a nation and the unity often enforced around a potentially explosive cohabitation of cultures. Literature and the arts, from the medieval *Cántigas de Santa Maria*, to the realist depictions of castrating mothers in Pérez Galdos or García Lorca, to the many mothers we see collected in films of Almodóvar (1990), are an everlasting proof that the foundations to this cultural devotion are proven their strength throughout the centuries. The mother has unified and she has also purified.

España, a country that uses the feminine form, is more of her mother than a wife or a sister to its citizens. Centuries of patriotic motifs have merged the devotion to the Holy Virgin Mary with the adoration of the Nation in the collective unconscious. It is not uncommon to see a flag next to a statue of the Mother of Christ in all the places where she has appeared around the ‘holy land’ of Spain: from Montserrat to Lourdes, from Fátima to el Rocío, Mother Mary has shown her preference and protection for the nation who has guarded Catholicism safe from Judaism, Islam and Protestantism. Her many apparitions circling the Peninsula, and particularly Spain as its major territory, seem to point for her preference for Spanish Catholicism, or rather, this expression of the Roman religion has a particular need for the omnipresence of the Virgin Mary in its public and private spheres. According to Linda B. Hall, “it is essential to understand the way in which her cult and image fit into the sacred landscape of Spain, metaphorically and literally” (Hall, 2004, p.17). Not only was this maternal image brought forward during times of Muslim invasion, it also became the cultural symbol of cultural unity and brotherhood. The *hermandades* (fraternities) established around the worship of a particular apparition of Mary in a certain town or village proves the need to gather as siblings under a same celestial mother. Once anchored in the cultural mind of a country, these images continue to impact each generation with a repeated assimilation of la *Virgen María* with each individual’s mother, *metaphorically and literally*. The vision of the *Optima Mater*, a mother figure, somewhat merging the universal divine motherhood with the temporal biological one, unites in the collective unconsciousness the feelings of territory with that of motherhood and childhood.

For most Spaniards, nowhere else can the origin of all culture be found, as they often perceive their land as original, or in other words, a spring for other cultural modes, elevated enough to be protected from confluences, from a background where the concept of *pureza* remains attached to most cultural practices. In turn, the products of culture and cultures in Spain maintain a motherly familiarity in their senses. Maybe it is even more obvious in the migrants

who express their nostalgia and separation anxieties from the motherland at a higher pitch of pain. Mother is never wrong; you will often hear Spaniards chant the natural superiority of territorial products, the one who were usually cooked and served by their mother, or another mother figure in the house where they grew up. Mother generally knows best in many areas of life, ranging from the *recetas de la cocina* (recipes) to the *recetas de medicina* (prescription), and has opinions about their offspring's private life beyond their marriage. She has mastered both Nature and Culture in the vision of her children. Her assimilation to the Virgin Mary, often characterized by a name composed with María or another apparition of the Mother of God, makes her somewhat omniscient and revered in their eyes. Her methods are not to be questioned, and she grows older in full respect and sometimes submission to the solutions she has enforced for every problem. Even alternative mothers who desire to appear more liberal and escape the rules can find themselves trapped in these dynamics with their own mothers or reproduce them against their own conscious will. Culture, when adopted as a whole and assimilated with an omnipotent motherhood, can be stronger in determining an individual's social behavior than an education in critical thinking and the liberal arts.

We owe a lot to the *manchego* film director Pedro Almodóvar for breaking the taboos around the *Optima Mater* throughout his cinematography, as it now well-known and has been commented in cultural studies in the past three decades. In his works, we often meet mothers who present similar, yet evolving, psychological patterns and struggles. His choice of actresses to embody these mothers is in itself an over-arching narrative. There must be a reason why he has chosen to couple Julieta Serrano and Antonio Banderas three times during his career as mother and son in one of his films (in 1986 with *Matador*, in 1988 with *Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown*, and in 2019 with *Pain and Glory*). Perhaps the most obvious Narcissist Mother in all three is the one we observe in *Matador*. A caricature of a whole generation of mothers, Serrano offers in this film partially about narcissistic pathologies an incomparable representation of the repressive mother who feeds her son with guilt, invalidation and reproaches. More than a castrating mother, she stereotypes in a critical mode the temperament of the *Optima Mater*. In her, as in many other mothers, the maternal has absorbed the paternal, and she has assumed both responsibilities as a symbolically widowed mother.

Cultural psychologists such as Dr. Ramani Durvasula have worked on the impact of such caricatures of narcissist mothers that are to be encountered as such sometimes in real life. Narcissism in an individual is very linked to the relationship between the child and the mother when invalidation happens on a daily basis during the child's upbringing. In Almodóvar's films, the instances of such moments of invalidation by the mother are countless. The conservative figure of the mother constantly finds grounds to refrain her son from developing, therefore causing in him narcissistic behaviors to cope with the recurring downgrading. Whether Almodóvar suggests that this is a cultural phenomenon beyond the caricature is up to his public to accept or not. In a later film released in 1989, *Tie me up, tie me down (Átame)*, the reflection on Spanish narcissism will continue through the submissive relationship that the two sisters, Lola and Marina, have with their mother, interpreted by Almodóvar's own mother, a non-professional actress who did not like to watch her son's films. In all instances of dominating mothers we find in his cinematography, it is shocking to see how the depicted narcissistic adults expose childish attitudes and use lies when they are confronted to their mothers. Almodóvar's comedies and tragedies also emphasize immediate changes of behavior in many of the characters when the mother enters the scene. The *Optima Mater* imposes herself by imposing behaviors around her.

Cultural narcissism can have detrimental effects on a society. It hampers understanding and appreciation of other cultures, fosters mistrust and resentment among minority communities, and promotes a false sense of superiority that can lead to ignorance and intolerance. Recognizing and addressing cultural narcissism is crucial to promoting diversity and inclusivity in Spain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural narcissism in Spain is evident in various aspects of society, including politics, art, and language. While it is natural to celebrate and appreciate one's own culture and heritage, it is crucial to recognize the contributions of other cultures and perspectives and avoid a narrow and myopic view of the world. Spain has a rich and diverse cultural heritage that should be celebrated and shared with the world, rather than used to promote one's own cultural superiority. The idealization of the mother figure in Spanish culture reflects the country's cultural narcissism. The mother is seen as the embodiment of Spanish culture and ideals, and her role as the nurturer and protector is celebrated. However, this idealization has also created unrealistic expectations and pressure on mothers, and marginalized other cultural figures and traditions. Cultural narcissism has resulted in a lack of acknowledgment of Spain's colonial history, where the country's influence on other cultures has been romanticized and downplayed. This is reflected in literature and film, where non-Spanish cultures are often portrayed as inferior or exotic. For many scholars and students of Spanish culture, literature and film, the omnipresence of this narcissistic perception of one's culture can potentially become a demotivator. It is important, therefore, to address this issue and embrace a more inclusive and diverse cultural narrative in Spain's literature and film, within a broader and more inclusive European and global contexts, in order to continue to draw students to these fields of cultural studies.

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