# Rainbow's End: Since the 1998 introduction of civil unions in Spain, has its Queer audiovisual culture become more homonormative?

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Department of Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies

University of Leeds

In Fulfilment of the Requirements

For MA by Research

02/10/2023

I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Duncan Wheeler and Stuart Green for their continued support of me throughout this year and their belief in my academic potential. Your mentorship has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank the department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American studies at the University of Leeds for their backing of my thesis and for bestowing me the Cowdray Scholarship. The generous award of this studentship has given me such financial stability throughout my studies and has enabled me to completely focus on my research.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends and family for their emotional and moral support and for the copious amounts of tea made for me during the final month before my deadline.

# Abstract

In the research concerning fictional audiovisual depiction of Queerness in Spain, there have, broadly speaking, been two recent eras defined as culturally and historically prominent. The first is aptly described by Santiago Fouz-Hernández who writes that for mainstream Queer visibility, 'the modest momentum achieved during the second half of the 1990s was considerably amplified throughout the 2000s' (2010: 81). Furthermore, in Chris Perriam's monograph *Spanish Queer Cinema*, he specifically marks the introduction of civil unions in Catalonia as the start of a 'substantial increase in the intensity and visibility of discourses – verbal and visual or performed – around LGBTQ identities' (2013: 1). The second era starts with the arrival of Netflix, the world's most popular streaming service, to Spain in 2015. The rise of Subscriptions Video on Demand services (SVoDs) is notable to this study for two reasons. On the one hand, these platforms allow for the inclusion of a greater number and variety of LGBTIQ + characters (Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay, 2021: 595) as a result of the commercial viability of producing programming for niche demographics. Conversely, Netflix in particular has sought to utilise Spain's established televisual infrastructure to exploit the country's decisive position as a programming pipeline to other Spanish-speaking nations and regions around the world' (Edgerton, 2023: 129).

This thesis aims to chronicle the changes, consistencies, and regressions of Queer representation in Spanish culture by comparing these two periods of time. While much of the criticism on LGBTQ+ narratives is founded on visibility politics and the evaluation of positive/negative representation, I argue that this is insufficient for a rigorous analysis. As Queer film theorist Richard Dyer contends, one must discern how the principles of a text 'in however ambiguous a way, [are] also principles of heterosexual hegemony' (1977: 1) by linking aesthetics with sociopolitical analysis. Therefore, I will assess the degree of said

‘heterosexual hegemony’ in my chosen texts by equating it to and referencing what Lisa Duggan terms ‘the new homonormativity’. She defines this concept as ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’ (2003: 50). By adopting this framework, I intend to avoid the futility of a quantitative or simplistically positive/negative analysis of representation.

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# Introduction

In the research concerning fictional audiovisual depiction of Queerness in Spain, there have, broadly speaking, been two recent eras defined as culturally and historically prominent. The first is aptly described by Santiago Fouz-Hernández who writes that for mainstream Queer visibility, 'the modest momentum achieved during the second half of the 1990s was considerably amplified throughout the 2000s' (2010: 81). Furthermore, in Chris Perriam's monograph *Spanish Queer Cinema*, he specifically marks the introduction of civil unions in Catalonia[1] as the start of a 'substantial increase in the intensity and visibility of discourses – verbal and visual or performed – around LGBTQ identities' (2013: 1). The second era starts with the arrival of Netflix, the world's most popular streaming service, to Spain in 2015. The rise of Subscriptions Video on Demand services (SVoDs) is notable to this study for two reasons. On the one hand, these platforms allow for the inclusion of a greater number and variety of LGBTQ + characters (Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay, 2021: 595) as a result of the commercial viability of producing programming for niche demographics. Conversely, Netflix in particular has sought to utilise Spain's established televisual infrastructure to 'exploit the country's decisive position as a programming pipeline to other Spanish-speaking nations and regions around the world' (Edgerton, 2023: 129).

[1] The change of law was however foregrounded by fierce debate within Spain's queer liberation movement between COGAM and smaller radical liberationist groups who criticised this assimilationist approach as betraying the original aims of the movement. For further reading on the civil partnership debate in Spain, see Kerman Calvo and Gracia Trujillo's (2011) article *Fighting for love rights: Claims and strategies of the LGBT movement in Spain.*

This thesis aims to chronicle the changes, consistencies, and regressions of Queer representation in Spanish culture by comparing these two periods of time[2]. While much of the criticism on LGBTQ+ narratives is founded on visibility politics and the evaluation of positive/negative representation, I argue that this is insufficient for a rigorous analysis. As Queer film theorist Richard Dyer contends, one must discern how the principles of a text 'in however ambiguous a way, [are] also principles of heterosexual hegemony' (1977: 1) by linking aesthetics with sociopolitical analysis. Therefore, I will assess the degree of said 'heterosexual hegemony' in my chosen texts by equating it to and referencing what Lisa Duggan terms 'the new homonormativity'. She defines this concept as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2003: 50). By adopting this framework, I intend to avoid the futility of a quantitative or simplistically positive/negative analysis of representation.

**Queer cinema and the Spanish context**

To define queer cinema is no easy feat. In Schoonover and Galt's influential monograph Queer Cinema in the World, the authors suggest that to understand cinematic queerness, one must 'think not just about the representations on-screen but about the cinematic apparatus itself, its mechanisms of articulation, and its modes of transnational circulation' (2016: 4).

[2]Although, it must be stated that these respective eras are not completely clear-cut. There are examples of subversive cinema from era 1 such as the gay comedy-drama *Cachorro* (2005, d. Miguel Albaladejo) transgender comedy musical *20 centimetros* (2005, d. Ramon Salazar). Similarly, it would be wrong to suggest that Netflix has always strived for a liberal image throughout era 2, the most notable example being the commissioning of Dave Chappelle comedy special 'The Dreamer' after his previous Netflix special sparked controversy for transphobic humour (NBC, 2023).

They continue to list a number of elements that have the potential to define the genre: queer directors, the positive reception from queer audiences; the re-coding of 'straight' films as queer; the diegetic depiction of queer characters; scenes nonheteronormative sex. However, the existence of neither one nor all of the elements in a text is sufficient to irrefutably place a film in the queer canon.

Instead, I choose to adopt the approach favoured by Teresa de Lauretis in her work *Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issues of the Future* when it comes to defining queer textuality in this study. She maintains that 'a queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex.' (2011: 22), that is the dissident potential of queerness centres on its ability to dismantle dominant ideologies. In conjunction with Dyer's aforementioned assertion on the 'principles of heterosexual hegemony' (1977: 1), de Lauretis' assertion is the other side of the same coin and enables me to keep a consistent methos when analysing a text of queer audiovisual culture.

I also strongly believe that this framework is wholly applicable to the Spanish cinematic context. I disagree with Eduardo Nabal's decree that 'queer cinema', especially that of Spain, does not exist as a movement (2005: 229) and instead align with Chris Perriam's view that there are films currently and recently being produced and consumed in Spain that can be classed as queer (2013:1-8). Although the films I will discuss vary widely on their degrees of political queerness, as Perriam asserts, they are 'Spanish forms of queer on film' (2013: 11) and 'make a difference and they form a distinctive cultural space – an imaginary – of inclusion' (2013: 5). As such, they should not be read with a solely anglophone lens, hence my inclusion of Spanish theory throughout this study.

**Notes on Terminology**

In order to progress with this thesis, it is crucial to define the terminology used throughout. The most pertinent word to unpack is the term 'queer', once a pejorative that has since been reappropriated by LBGTQ+ activists. This reclamation follows a definition of the word described by Alexander Doty as 'any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight' (1993: xv). However, I also employ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (1993: 8). The term at once builds community yet rejects identity, and, as María Yazmina Moreno-Florido asserts, its power lies in its 'elasticidad y en su resistencia a la definición' (2009: 28).

With this in mind, my definition of post-queer is already contained in my definition of queer. Post-queerness favours identity construction away from clearly delineated sexualities but goes a step further by encouraging acculturation. This definition is in parallel to Angela McRobbie's concept of postfeminism. She states that postfeminism 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force' (2004: 255). By applying this to a queer context, I argue that post-queer modality looks favourably upon the successes of the gay liberation movement while simultaneously characterising it as a thing of the past.

Though I follow the notion that queerness inherently rejects the concept of identity formation, I do reference the idea of gender and sexual identity. My discussion of said identities is constructed in view of Aliaga and Cortés' seminal text *Identidad y Diferencia: Sobre la Cultura Gay en España*. In it, they propose that identity is not 'una sustancia inquebrantable y fijada de antemano' but 'fluir de elementos de distinta significación, a un proceso a través

del cual los individuos van moldeando su personalidad, sus afinidades, sus preferencias, su concepción de la existencia en oposición a determinados principios y en relación a cierta idea de pertenencia a unos valores comunitarios' (Aliaga and Cortés, 2000: 11).

Of course, given the topic of this study, there are a range of terms that crop frequently that may seem synonymous but should not be read as interchangeable. For example, I use the initialism LGBTQ+ as shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others who identify as other sexual and gender minorities. Although some, like radical feminist Julie Bindel question whether the range of identities 'bracketed together[,] ... share the same issues, values and goals?' (BBC, 2014), this study does not seek to answer that question. Therefore, I use the initialism as an umbrella term to refer to the community at large.

The distinction between 'gay' and 'homosexual' is also often a bone of contention in queer studies. As Mark Simpson explains: 'once upon a time there were no gays only dreary *homosexuals*' (1996: 2, Simpson's emphasis); demarcating the former as linked to identity definition, and the latter as a medical term. Although it is important to recognise the negative implications of the term 'homosexual' historically, unlike David Lugowsky (2009: 99) or Juan González (2005: 30), I will not omit its usage in this study with the view that it is overly medical. I follow the assertion of Kerman Calvo that the word now consists of a neutrality which it was short of in the past (2006: 23).

Finally, is it crucial to acknowledge the debates that run through the history of queer theory which highlight the pitfalls of using language founded in binary oppositions. Terms such as homo-, hetero-, and bisexuality as well as queer, transgender, and cisgender all threaten to uphold the paradigms the discipline seeks to destabilise. For example, Eve Kosofky Sedgwick notably argues in her influential article *The Beast in the Closet* that the sexual binary at times, be considered simplistic (2008: 182-212). Butler too grants that resistances

can strengthen hegemonic power dynamics by affirming what queerness attempts to resist (Butler in Browne, 2004: 334). Therefore, it could be argued that the very notion of identifying queerness within Spanish audiovisual culture means that this study inherently performs homonormativity. However, I follow the view of Butler's successive argument which states that identity categories tend to be 'instruments of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory connotation of that very oppression' (1991: 13-14); that is, the dismantling of binary identities starts from operating within these categories.

**Era 1 (1998-2005): Millennial cinema and same-sex 'love rights'**

There are several reasons that I delineate Era 1 of my study by the years 1998 and 2005. Firstly, these years represent two political milestones for the LGBTQ+ community in Spain. The regional government of Catalonia passing the first ever regional partnership law (Calvo, 2005: 5) in 1998. Likewise, in 2005 Spain became the first Catholic country to not only legalise same-sex marriage, but also guarantee homosexual and heterosexual marriages on complete legal parity by removing all references to gender its civil code on matrimony (Encarnación, 2021: 69). Secondly, these two legal changes are absolutely symbolic of Duggan's homonormativity. These types of legal entitlements are defined by legal scholars as 'love rights', advancements in areas such as marriage, adoption, and inheritance (Wintemute, 2005: 126). According to Calvo and Trujillo in their analysis of several countries' queer liberation movements, 'on most occasions, LGBT rights recognition follows a linear process that begins with basic rights and ends up with love rights' (2011: 571). Thus, these laws represent an advanced stage of LGBTQ+ assimilation to the heterosexual norm.

In Spain, discourses of homonormativity were essential in achieving these aims. For example, the so-called 'pink vote' campaign, a survey of LGBTQ+ groups that led to official political

endorsements, was an early advocate of same-sex marriage. An analysis of contemporary gay publications shows that same-sex marriage became a primary issue for the 'pink vote' in 1999 (see: *Shangay Express*, 1999). The campaign itself reached its peak in 2000 when the leaders of both the PSOE and *Izquierda Unida* (IU) held meeting with delegates from LGBTQ+ political groups to discuss electoral pledges and future policy commitments (Monferrer, 2010: 300).

Of course, with profound social and political shifts come changes in cultural production. It is no coincidence this time period overlaps with what Fouz-Hernández and Perriam describe 'modest explosion' (2000: 96) of relatively successful LGBTQ-related feature films in the second half of the 1990s. Clearly, the discourses surrounding the changing position of the LGBTQ+ community in Spanish societies influenced not only what gay audiences wanted to see on-screen but also what the mainstream film industry was willing to produce.

That is not to say that my analysis will completely refrain from references to earlier Spanish history. As Samuel Amago notes, a study on contemporary Spanish culture would be incomplete 'without referring to the country's authoritarian history and its 'miraculous' transition to democracy' (2011: 100). However, I believe my research will redress the balance between the plethora of studies of cinematic homosexuality in Spain before 1998 (see Melero Salvador 2004; Smith, 1992, 1994 and 1998; Arroyo, 1992; Mira, 2000 and 2004; Silverthorne, 2005; Triana Toribio, 2000; Trybus, 2008; Berzosa Camacho, 2012) and those on audiovisual representations post-1998 (Fouz-Hernández, 2008, 2010, and 2011; Fouz-Hernández and Perriam, 2000; Gras-Velázquez, 2013; Pelayo, 2009; Perriam, 2004 and 2013; Richmond Ellis, 2010; Smith, 2007).

**Era 2 (2015-2022):**

The second era of my study begins with the arrival of Netflix to Spain in 2016 and covers an equal timespan to Era 1, thus ending in 2022. The change of focus from cinematic to televisual texts in each respective era is a deliberate choice. Firstly, as Fernández Meneses writes, 'there seems to be a consensus among Spanish and Anglo-American scholars that the 1990s saw the renewal of Spanish cinema' (2019: 87-8). The popular appeal of the genre formulas that characterised cinema of this period also retained momentum for the first half of the 2000s. Secondly, the nation's mainstream cinema fell into a state of crisis after the neoliberal Eurozone crisis of 2008. This has been attributed to several factors such as the 'sector's over dependence on subsidies lavished by the first democratic government, the proliferation of non-viable production companies and the shrinking of television investment into film production' (Kourelou, Liz, & Vidal, 2014: 144). I would argue that to this day the Spanish film industry has never fully recovered.

However, the saving grace for the country's cultural production came in the form of the age of streaming. As Paul Julian Smith rightly asserts, thanks to the growth of SVODs, Spanish television has become 'a remarkably influential and vibrant cultural industry' (2017: 1) as its products are now consumed internationally. The biggest driver for this revitalisation is the most-subscribed streaming service in the world and the case study of Era 2: Netflix[3]. When the platform was launched in Spain in 2016, the company was in the process of rebranding

[3] Netflix has been chosen as the only SVOD platform for this thesis due to its sheer international impact and the constraints of this project's word limit. However, the streaming service A3Player, established by Spanish media company Atresmedia, also plays a significant in producing LGBTQ+ television in Era 2. It has seen successes with shows such as *Drag Race España, Veneno*, *Vestida de azul*, and *Lumelia*. Furthermore, the platform also sells content internationally, including *La casa de papel* or *Toyboy* which will be discussed in this thesis. By selling these shows to Netflix, the shows obtained extended runs and were able to expand their audience across multiple markets and languages.

from ‘from a centrally-managed multinational corporation based mainly in Silicon Valley to a more decentralised transnational operation with multiple interconnected headquarters worldwide’ (Edgerton, 2023: 128). The first stage of this plan was to find capable local productions company with which to co-produce content. The step was executed with the help of Madrid-based Bambú Productions when in March 2016 Netflix announced its first original Spanish television series *Las chicas de cable*. The show was a resounding success an remains the service’s longest-running non-English programme. As Edgerton writes in his research on Netflix and the Spanish television landscape, the company realised that ‘that their global ambitions could best be served by embracing the many advantages provided by Spain’s local production conditions and infrastructure’ (2023: 133) such as climate, location settings and experienced industry professionals. As such, in July 2018 Netflix opened its first European production hub in Tres Cantors, just north of Madrid (Roxborough & Ritman, 2019). With the Spanish language being the fourth most spoken in the world, the new Madrid hub gave the platform a strategic advantage in dominating the market of Latin America and other Spanish-speaking regions.

Furthermore, the rising popularity of SVODs has also led to the production of content targeted at more specific demographics of society. As Oliveira Silva and Lima Satler have argued in their study on Netflix’s *Sex Education*, a teen comedy whose characters represent the breadth of the gender and sexuality spectrum, the platform has found commercial value in diversity (2019: 1). Additionally, the company is clearly keen to promote its image of social progressiveness and inclusion to further bolster this profitability. For example, when the service’s official Instagram account posted a photo of two gay characters from *Élite*, one of the texts analysed in this study, it received a number of homophobic comments. In reaction to this, the official account responded to several of these comments with rainbow emojis (Garner, 2018). Although, Netflix has received criticism for its liberal political ideology with

tech billionaire Elon Musk even accusing the platform of being infected with 'woke mind virus' (Chisholm, 2022).

In this research I aim to evaluate to what extent Netflix's reputational strategy informs its depictions of Queerness in its most popular original Spanish-language content. Has its progressive agenda allowed LGBTQ+ characters to retain a sense of radicalism? Or has it sanitised queerness in a simulation of the community's broader assimilation into society?

**Methodology**

As my thesis is concerned with the sociocultural analysis of Queerness in Spanish audiovisual production, I have decided to focus on texts that have a broad reach of audience. The reason for this is because I wish to determine how media representations of the LGBTQ+ community are influenced by and also reflect broader sociological, legal and political contexts in modern-day Spain. I believe that this will better demonstrate by mainstream productions as opposed to independent films, short films or texts that are predominantly available on the film festival circuit. Furthermore, I want to chronicle this political change in the context of a wider cultural development: the gradual decline of the Spanish film industry and the international rise of not only over-the-top media services but also Spanish productions of original streaming content.

I have defined a set of parameters to determine what can be classed as 'mainstream' and therefore be assumed to have a wide audience. For Era 1, I have compiled data from the *Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte* to gather a list of Spanish films from 1998-2005 with queer themes that grossed more than *€500.000* in their most successful year. To ascertain which films have Queer themes without watching every single domestic production in the timespan, I consulted the filmographies of the aforesaid previous research and used the key terms such

as ‘Queer’ ‘Spain’ and ‘LGBT’ to find relevant titles with the IMDb search engine. The 12 films that meet the criteria are as follows:

| **Name** | **Director(s)** | **Year** | **Box Office Gross in Euros (adjusted for inflation)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Todo sobre mi madre* | *Pedro Almodóvar* | *1999* | *13,011,912.06* |
| *La mala educación* | *Pedro Almodóvar* | *2004* | *8,931,912.54* |
| *Segunda piel* | *Gerardo Vera* | *1999* | *7,236,185.74* |
| *Sobreviviré* | *Alfonso Albacete, David Menkes* | *1999* | *4,597,742.60* |
| *Reinas* | *Manuel Gómez Pereira* | *2005* | *3,098,425.87* |
| *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* | *Inés Paris, Daniela Fejerman* | *2002* | *3,089,207.68* |
| *Atómica* | *Alfonso Albacete, David Menkes* | *1998* | *2,235,765.03* |
| *Almejas y mejillones* | *Marcos Carnevale* | *2000* | *2,106,547.43* |
| *Krampack* | *Cesc Gay* | *2000* | *1,262,125. 42* |
| *El calentito* | *Chus Gutiérrez* | *2005* | *1,175,299.87* |
| *En la ciudad sin limites* | *Antonio Hernández* | *2002* | *1,246,467.64* |
| *Plata quemada* | *Marcelo Piñeyro* | *2000* | *657,807.75* |

Although not all of these films are referenced in this thesis, I watched each title to ensure a strong bank of primary research for my ensuing analysis.

However, it is much harder to determine the audience reach of my texts from Era 2, as Netflix is notoriously secretive about its viewing figures. The service has in fact received substantial criticism for selectively releasing ratings of its original programming (Alexander, 2019). The only data Netflix releases on the viewership of its programming is in the form of its weekly 'Top 10' lists where films and TV series are separately ranked (without specific numerical values) on streaming figures based on proprietary engagement metrics. However, as Netflix only started releasing its 'Top 10' lists on July 12th 2021, using these rankings as a basis for my research would be insufficient. Consequently, I have chosen to only include Spanish Netflix series that have official Instagram accounts as this not only demonstrates that a show has a solid fanbase but it is also representative of the specific shows that the service wants to promote as a representation of its brand. The LGBTQ+ Spanish TV shows that have official Instagram account (with the number of followers at the time of writing) are as follows:

| **Name** | **Creator(s)** | **Year(s)** | **Instagram followers** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Élite* | *Carlos Montero, Darío Madrona* | *2018 – present* | *6.4m* |
| *La casa de papel* | *Álex Pina* | *2017 - 2021* | *11m* |
| *Las chicas del cable* | *Ramón Campos, Gema R. Neira, Teresa Fernández* | *2017 - 2020* | *386k* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Sky rojo* | *Álex Pina, Esther Martínez Lobato* | *2021 - 2023* | *210k* |
| *Toy boy* | *César Benítez, Juan Carlos Cueto, Rocío Martínez* | *2019 - present* | *332k* |

In a similar vein to my text from Era 1, I used the same search terms on Netflix's search engine as well as its premade programme collections such as 'LGBTQ+ Spanish Series'.

This thesis' theoretical context is also firmly grounded in queer theory. For example, my conceptualisation of homonormativity is enmeshed with Gayle S. Rubin's 'Charmed Circle Theory' which states that "some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability" (Rubin, 1984: 153) especially those that are coupled and monogamous. This research's approach to gender is also rooted in Judith Butler's seminal work 'Gender Trouble' which posits that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative characters and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination" (1990: 192-3).

## Outline of Chapters

The chapters in this thesis are titled as follows: lesbian narratives; sexual fluidity; transgender narratives. As the research concerning Queer cultural production in Spain is overwhelmingly focused on homosexual men, I have decided to focus my study on the underrepresented

portion of the community, namely the LBT and not the G[4]. Furthermore, I have titled my second chapter 'Sexual Fluidity' rather than 'Bisexual Narratives' in order to acknowledge new conceptions of liminal sexuality and represent the plethora of identities that come under this umbrella i.e. pansexual, demisexual etc.

In chapter one, I use *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* as a case study to embody the state of transition for both lesbianism in the period within the nuclear family structure and queer representation in Spanish audiovisual culture more broadly[5]. I then endeavour to demonstrate that the modality of lesbian representation in Era 2 is outlined by a greater focus and development of homosexual narratives and a rejection of tropes that appear in similar generic texts of the 1990s and 2000s. However, I also argue the proliferation of the Queer streaming content has also brought with it an emergence of 'queerbaiting' and cynical grabs for LGBTQ+ viewership.

In my second chapter, I begin by exploring the formulation of sexuality in *Segunda Piel* (1999, d. Gerardo Vera) and *Sobreviviré (*1999, d. Alfonso Albacete and David Meknes*)* to demonstrate how, in these narratives, attraction outside the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality is problematised and how the latter is positioned as diametrically opposed to heteronormative respectability. I will directly compare mutual masturbation scenes in *Krámpack (*2003, d. Cesc Gay*)* and Netflix's Élite to illustrate the cultural shift from sexuality operating in a binary framework to adopting a changeability that reinforces

[4] Although this thesis largely avoids detailed discussions of gay male-focused narratives, texts such as *Chuecatown, Reinas, Fuera de carta* and *Historias del Kronen* will be mentioned as they have a significant impact on several of the films analysed.

[5] Although the film was released outside the parameters of this thesis, Robert Richmond Ellis' 2010 study on *Fuera de carta* (2007, d. Nacho García Velilla) provides an illuminating analysis of paternity and homonormative family dynamics in Spanish cinema.

heterosexist gender dynamics. Finally, I will look at *La casa de papel*, another text from Netflix, to evaluate how sexual fluidity queers the fictional trope of unrequited love while refraining from destabilising masculine power in a similar manner to *Élite*.

Finally, I analyse cultural representation of transgenderism in Spain to show how Era 1 is characterised by its focus on transfemininity, the social rejection of gender non-conformity and the destabilisation of the heteronormative gender binary. Moreover, I argue that the modal shift in Era 2 affords an exploration of transmasculinity with a degree of social integration. Yet, there is also a tendency of homonormative gender classifications alongside cultural cliches of transness such as the notion of bodily entrapment, the 'mirror scene' and a hyperfixation on genitalia.

# Chapter 1: Lesbian Narratives

Far from being exempt from the patriarchy of wider academic scholarship, research on Queer audio-visual culture in Spain has been overwhelmingly focused on gay men. This reality is inextricably linked to the dearth of lesbian narratives seen on Spanish screens until very recently. As Mónica Calvo and Maite Escudero discuss in their study on lesbian representation in the 2000s telenovela *Hospital Central*: 'whereas in Anglophone countries some TV sitcoms and dramas vindicated a lesbian presence and existence in the 1990s, Spain was still suffering a political and cultural paralyzing lethargy in terms of lesbian visibility' (2009: 35). Up until the turn of the 21st century, small-screen portrayals of lesbians – mostly in telenovelas like *Al salir de clase*, *Siete Vidas* and *Aquí no hay quien viva* – were typically pathologized or hypersexualised. Additionally, the very few lesbian characters found in Spanish cinema maintained the historical trend of being 'perverts and monsters who must be punished and destroyed' (Kabir, 1998: 3).

To understand the reasons behind this minimal yet unfavourable cultural representation, one may look to the impact of a lack of historiography on the formation of Spanish lesbian identity. For example, although records show that over 5,000 males were ´arrested, humiliated, and jailed for being homosexuals (Arnalte, 2003: 4) under the *Ley de peligrosidad y rehabilitación social*, there is no data regarding similar repression against lesbians. In the words of Beatriz Gimeno, one of the few Spanish feminists whose work attempts to write the history of queer women in Spain, this lack of narrativization means that 'the past historical memories of lesbians have been lost forever' (Gimeno, 2005: 192).

As such, it is imperative to analyse the narrativization of lesbian in contemporary Spanish culture. In this chapter, I argue that films from Era 1, as outlined in my introduction, mark a state of transition for both lesbianism within the nuclear family structure and queer representation in Spanish audiovisual culture more broadly. These narratives do occasionally subvert homonormative respectability, but they also purport stereotypes regarding homosexual characterisation. I use the film *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* (2002, d. Inés Paris and Daniela Fejerman) as a case study to exemplify these trends. Then in the second part of this chapter, I endeavour to demonstrate that the modality of lesbian representation in Era 2 is outlined by a greater focus and development of homosexual narratives and a rejection of tropes that appear in similar generic texts of the 1990s and 2000s. However, I also argue the proliferation of the Queer streaming content has also brought with it an emergence of 'queerbaiting' and cynical grabs for LGBTQ+ viewership.

## Cultural Transitions in *A mi madre les gustan las mujeres*

Despite suffering from an aforementioned degree of cultural erasure, lesbianism nevertheless inhabits a unique position within the gender dynamics of Spain. In a nation with such a long-standing Catholic tradition where the church defines 'la familia' as 'monógama, patriarcal, indisoluble, sexualmente exclusiva, procreativa y con una marcada segregación de roles sociales y de género en su interior' (Grau Rebollo, 2002: 97), Queer women disrupt the bond between maternity and womanhood. As Tamsin Wilton indicates, '[f]or women the ultimate duty lies in motherhood, in reproducing the state [. . .]. It is as mothers within a heterosexual family unit that women are allowed [. . .] a recognised, albeit limited citizenship' (1995: 181–182). Therefore, in and of itself, lesbian identity problematises traditional family structures and the notion of Spanish citizenship.

However, the onset of the new millennium marked a turning point for relationship between Queer women and the nuclear family. In 1997, just before the start of the period on which this research is focused, sociologists Lisa A. Mulholland and Kate Griffin published *Lesbian Motherhood in Europe*. The text concluded that despite fluctuating social, political and religious frontiers in Europe granting a newfound visibility and approval for lesbian mothers, the family sphere has persisted as the exclusive provenience of heterosexuals (1997: 150). Yet, in the two decades that followed this research, Spain saw an acceleration of civic rights granted to lesbians as a result of their tireless campaigning. This includes Spain becoming one of the first countries in the world to legalise same-sex marriage and adoption in 2005, the state passing a bill in 2015 to allow married lesbian couples to register both their names on their child's birth certificate, and, as recently as 2023, the government enshrining in law the right of women in same-sex relationships to access IVF. In fact, a paper by Sophie A. M. Hennekan and Jamie J. Ladge, published twenty years after the aforementioned research, details the experiences of lesbian couples through pregnancy, early motherhood and their return to work after maternity leave. It demonstrates that queer women are not only exhibiting homonormative family structures but are also assimilated to the point of adopting the role of the Western neoliberal working mother (2017: 1). Clearly, though lesbians were once branded as incompatible with motherhood and the family unit, they have now been granted social legitimacy to live homonormative familial lifestyles through legal advancements. This is especially prominent in Spain where the 2019 Eurobarometer found that Spain was the most accepting of LGBTQ+ people (91%) of any Catholic majority country in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2019). It would seem that with the emergence of 'the postmodern family with its connotation of diversity, choice, flux and content' (Stacey and Davenport 2002: 356) has come a new lesbian identity that has turned toward, rather, than away from, the valorised concept of 'la familia'.

Films from Era 1(1998-2005), as outlined in my introduction, often mark a state of transition of Queer representation in Spanish audiovisual culture. Some elements of these cinematic narratives are subversive, offering a form of Queerness is doesn't necessarily align with homonormative respectability. Yet, remnants of sensationalism or mockery within homosexual characterisation still prevail. One film that aptly exemplifies this transitionary period is the comedy film *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* (2002, d. Inés Paris and Daniela Fejerman). The film follows three sisters – Sol (Silvia Abascal), Elvira (Leonor Watling) and Jimena (María Pujalte) – and their reactions to their aging mother Sofia's (Rosa Maria Sardá) announcement that she is dating a much younger woman. Alongside this revelation, the sisters also try to navigate the issues in their own lives with Jimena on the brink of leaving her husband, Elvira facing a quarter-life crisis, and Sol channelling her mother's newfound lesbianism into her work as a musician. Although the sisters initially try to adopt a progressive view of this new relationship, their prejudice eventually comes to the surface as they plot to split up the new couple when they realise that their mother has funded an expensive scholarship for her Czech lover Eliska (Eliška Sirová) to remain in the country. Sol and Elvira each attempt to seduce Eliska to initiate with the break-up with latter having some success in the form of a drunken kiss. Eliska then ends the relationship and returns to her home country out of guilt, prompting Sofia to fall into a state of depression. Realising the emotional damage their meddling has inflicted on their mother, the sisters journey to Prague and convince Eliska to return and reconcile with Sofia. Back in Spain, before the couple can continue living happily, Eliska receives a letter alerting her that she has lost her right to remain as her scholarship was cancelled after her initial breakup. To ensure Eliska is allowed to stay in Spain, Elvira's lover Miguel (Chisco Amado) weds her in a marriage of convenience and the film ends with both of the couple's families celebrating together at a wedding reception.

The film is the feature length debut from directing duo Inés Paris and Daniela Fejerman. At the time of the film's release, the pair were positioned as outliers, alongside the notable filmmaker Marta Balletbo-Coll, in the realm of the overwhelmingly male-directed lesbian film canon of Spain. Paris and Fejerman patently utilise tropes from the traditional Hollywood romantic comedy as Bécquer Medak-Seguín describes in his study of the film: 'family chaos erupts… a poor decision opens the floodgates for moral dilemmas, a redressing of the decision, and a happily-ever-after, allegory-saturated ending' (2010). However, considering the established popularity of comedy films in Spain (Lázaro Reboll and Willis 2004: 13), the film's chosen genre not only creates safe parameters from which to examine a 'parodistic postmodern critique of the Spanish society' (Medak-Seguín, 2010), but also ensures a degree of mainstream palatability and commercial success. This is reflective of María Camí-Vela's interview with the directors in her book *Mujeres detrás de la cámara* where the women emphasise the plot's focus on 'new families' and the transformation of traditional social and sexual modes (2005: 374), suggesting a reluctance to class *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* as a 'lesbian film'. This therefore furthers an understanding of the film's treatment of postmodern lesbian identity through the lens of homonormativity and the reproduction of heterosexist family structures.

Firstly, to understand why the film exemplifies the transitionary period of cinematic Queer representation in Spain, it is imperative to contextualise the society in which the film was released. By the time the country entered 2002, its gay rights movement had hit a roadblock: despite the 'pink vote' campaigns of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and *Izquierda Unida* (IU) which consulted many LGBTQ+ groups on issues like gay marriage and adoption reform, legal advancements were to remain painfully slow while the *Partido Popular* (PP) continued in power. It took until the previous year, five years into Jose Maria Aznar's tenure and twenty-two years after homosexuality has been legalised, for the *Cortes*

*Generales* to decree the erasure of records of crimes committed under Franco's *Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social* (Medak-Seguín, 2010). Before same-sex marriage was legalised in 2005 under Zapatero and the PSOE, the enactment of the bill was blocked several times by Aznar's government with the rate of political legitimization prompting fierce backlash from Catholic authorities who, once the new law was eventually passed, submitted an appeal against it on the ground of being anti-constitutional. (Calvo and Escudero, 2009). Although public attitudes towards homosexuality had generally softened by in the early 2000s - the Spanish public were one of the most accepting of same-sex marriage (68 per cent) in comparison to other European countries (EOS Gallup Europe, 2003) - hostility from both church and state still proved challenging for activists[6].

Yet, even with this shift in popular support for queer issues, Fejerman and París' film is resolute in its critique that Spanish society's acceleration towards civil advancements like same sex marriage somewhat masks the nation's deep-rooted homophobia with superficial acceptance. This view is primarily reflected in the film's main narrative drive: the reaction of Sofia's family to her newfound lesbianism. One character with a perceptibly negative response to her mother's sexuality is Jimena, Sofia's oldest daughter and a strait-laced working mother. In the scene following her mother's coming out, the sisters debrief, and she states: 'Yo no tengo nada en contra de los gays y lesbianas de verdad. Pero a su edad, ya podía sentir un poco la cabeza, coño. Que es nuestra madre'. This implicitly homophobic reaction is packaged within pragmatism in that Jimena claims her primary worry is the emotional turmoil such a sudden lifestyle change will have on someone of an advanced age

[6] Page 22 – It is worthy to note that this idea was also explored at the end of Era 1 from a gay male perspective in the 2005 film *Reinas* (2005, d. Manuel Gómez Pereira), the release of which preceded the legalisation of gay marriage by three months. For further reading, see: Robert Richmond Ellis (2010) or Paul Julian Smith (2006).

and the toll that is in turn placed on the family. This echoes the findings of Julie Thompson in her study, published in the same year as the film, on hostility towards lesbian mothers in the US which claims 'lesbian mother households thus represent abnormal family arrangements, subject to judicial and psychological scrutiny' (2002: 113–114). Furthermore, Jimena's sentiments towards her mother's new relationship worsens when she learns that Sofia has spent her savings funding a piano scholarship that will extend Eliska's stay in Spain. Not only does she plot with her sisters to break up the couple, but later on in the film, during an intervention with her mother, she asserts that 'las diferencias entre vosotras no solo la edad' and that 'no es una relación entre iguales'. Here, the age gap between Sofia and Eliska is problematised but so are their differing economic statuses which speaks to the perceived financial vulnerability of lesbians in comparison to gay men (Gimeno, 2005: 3). Additionally, Jimena is representative of the neoliberal subject whose politics may be more socially progressive than women of the previous generation, but will ultimately maintain an economically conservative position. By invoking class discrepancy as a reason for Eliska not being worthy for a relationship with her mother, Jimena positions herself as a privileged subject of social change for capitalising on women's access to the labour market in post-Franco Spain while individualising and blaming others for structural inequality, two traits commonly studied in much of the scholarship on gender and neoliberalism (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Scharff, 2016). As Jimena is able to conceal her homophobia under the guise of protecting her mother's finances – she says of her and her sisters' scheming: 'estamos pensando en el bien de mama' - Fejerman and París' are able to critique the way in which 21st century Spain projects a false image of being free from a conservative anxiety about lesbianism.

Another character that allows the film to challenge Spain's skin-deep integration of homosexuality is Jimena's husband Raúl (Gabriel Garbisu) who arguably has the most hostile

reaction to Sofia's sexuality out of any character in the film. He and Jimena eventually divorce over the issue with Elvira telling her sister that she doesn't understand how she could stay together with 'un facha' for so long; Jimena replies 'por él votaba socialista'. This comedic piece of dialogue is revelatory of a key factor in Spain's historical relationship with homosexuality: social action is secondary to political complacency. As Medak-Seguín explains: 'that homosexuality was decriminalized in 1979, when the last prisoners guilty of homosexuality were freed, was more akin to what Paulo Freire would call "false generosity" than to a liberation of the homosexual oppressed' (2010: 135). Although this legalization of same-sex sexual activity answered leftist calls for a modern and liberalized society while also alleviating wider guilt over the oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, it took almost two decades to see any further legislative change when in 1998 the first civil unions were granted in Catalonia. However, it must be noted that, excluding the countries of Scandinavia, Spain was among the first nations in Europe to implement legislation like this. Nevertheless, although the film ends happily and Raúl is positioned as an antagonist because of his views, his faux socialist principles reveal a side of Spain that bolsters itself on its supposed progressive morals without challenging its longstanding prejudice.

Despite the negativity towards homosexuality that permeate the fictional world of the film, there are glimpses of hope for a more liberal Spanish future. These primarily manifest in the characterisation of Sol, Sofia's youngest daughter. As the lead singer of a rock band, she is the filmic representative of contemporary Spanish youth and has by far the most relaxed view of her sisters on her mother's sexual revelation. Although the ages of Sol and Jimena, the oldest and youngest sisters, are never explicitly stated in the film, the actresses playing them (Silvia Abascal b.1979 and María Pujalte b.1966, respectively) are around thirteen years apart. Thus, having characters from opposite ends of the same social generation with wildly different reactions to queerness becomes indicative of the accelerated rate of socio-political

change for the LGBTQ+ community in Spanish society in comparison to other western European counterparts. Moreover, with Abascal being born during Spain's transition to democracy, the character of Sol becomes linked to the nation's desire to construct for itself a liberal post-Franco identity. In the scene following Sofia's coming-out, Sol asks Jimena why their mother's lesbianism bothers her so much, to which she replies: 'no paso de todo como tú'. The portrayal of Sol as unperturbed towards queerness is reflective of the nation's aforementioned growing acceptance towards homosexuality (EOS Gallup Europe, 2003) and the wider assimilation of the LGBTQ+ community into Spanish society. Likewise, as she justifies her position with the assertion that 'todo el mundo es bisexual', Sol also symbolises Spanish youth's easy-going attitude to fluid sexuality which foreshadows the erotic liminality by which public narratives define queer youth in the 21st century (Bennett, 2010: 5).

Nevertheless, Fejerman and París may offer astute observations about the changing status of the LGBTQ+ community in a rapidly liberalising Spain, but their film still remains a product of its box office aspirations and the era of integrating homosexuality. Firstly, the title chosen by the directors is clearly a tactic to grab attention by undermining the audience expectation of the sentence: 'a mi **padre** le gustan las mujeres'. The use of titillating film titles is also a device for Spanish sex comedies that can be traced back through the decades with works such as *Desde que amanece, apatece* (2005), *Sexo, Sua Única arma* (1981), and even some of the genre's earliest examples from the Franco era like *No desearás el vecino del quinto* (1970). However, just as the previously stated films supplant a considerate exploration of sexual and gender dynamics in Spain in favour of bawdy humour that often mocks its subjects, *A mi madre…* often uses the shock value of an aging mother being sexually attracted to a younger woman as the butt of the joke.

Furthermore, if one takes the title as an utterance from one of Sofia's daughters, it becomes apparent that the audience are expected to identify with the sisters - probably Elvira as she

has the most screen time of any character – and sympathise with the absurdity of their mother coming out at such an advanced age. In fact, not only does the development of Sofia and Eliska's relationship play second fiddle in the narrative to Elvira's quarter-life crisis, the couple's sexual connection is played down in favour of a commercially safer maternal characterisation. Whereas the directors allow Eliska to nurture Elvira with Czech food and Sofia to serve copious amounts of tea to her daughters throughout the film, moments of intimacy between the pair are repeatedly interrupted by the three sisters. In one scene where Sofia begins to open up to Elvira about the origins of her relationship, she says 'se fue dando de una forma natural. Ya estaba sola aquí, nos hicimos amigas, se quedó a dormir varias veces…' at which point Elvira suddenly interrupts and reminds her Mother that she doesn't have to tell her the details.

As well as delivering humour from subjecting a highly-strung daughter to the awkwardness of the primal scene (Freud, 2010: 29), the film takes the joke a step further by inversing the theory with the use of a homosexual maternal subject. Consequently, this exchange expresses Elvira's discomfort over the relationship as she also becomes a spokesperson for the film's heterosexual audience who may be averse to the explicit erotic potential of a lesbian couple, not least one with such an age gap. This trend of curtailing queer intimacy continues when later on the couple are stood in the kitchen, amorously embracing one another with their foreheads touching. The doorbell then rings and Sofia rolls her eyes and returns to slicing bread while Eliska answers the door; the three sisters are on the other side. The sharp tonal change in this scene exemplifies the constraint of queer expression in the private sphere as above all the home remains a fundamentally heteronormative space. Sofia's home is ultimately the central space for her to interact with her family therefore, as Lynne Walker writes in her essay on the relationship between architecture and social dynamics, her private space will always be embedded with heteronormativity (2002: 824-827). Moreover, by

returning to the task of slicing bread, Sofia supplants her sexuality for the maternal role of homemaker and appeases the hegemonic notion described by Pat Romans in their study on lesbianism and motherhood as 'the perceived incompatibility between [lesbians'] desire to relate sexually to other women, and their ability to rear children successfully' (1992: 98–99). Instead of exploring the complexities of how Queerness fits in with the traditional modes of familial configurations, *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* glosses over these issues in favour of light entertainment typical of commercial comedy films. Despite being marketed as an LGBTQ+ themed film – i.e. the lesbian wedding cake topper on the film's poster, the focus of Sofia's relationship and her daughters' reactions being more prominent than in the actual narrative of the film - the physical contact between Sofia and Eliska is kept to a minimum to offer a sanitised and censored version of homosexuality palatable for a mainstream audience.

In fact, the only frank depiction of lesbian eroticism in the narrative is dealt with in a sensationalised manner. In a scene where the sisters attempt to find a woman to lure Eliska away from Sofia, they enter a lesbian bar. The locale is introduced and mediated through their heterosexual gaze as the camera slowly pans across the room focusing on pairs of women kissing passionately and intimately touching one another. Not only does this sexually charged space exaggerate the promiscuity of lesbian culture but, with one female clubgoer lustily staring at the camera, the audience is directly affronted by the stereotypical masculine and predatory nature of queer women (Thompson, 2002: 149). What's more, when the sisters eventually enter the frame, one patron touches Elvira's breast non-consensually, much to her shock. The archetypal hypersexual lesbian is played for laughs as the scene infers that this type of queerness is a threat to heterosexuality, with further comedy arising at the audience conjecture that Sofia, a maternal figure, could identify with such a culture now she has 'come out'. Rather than use their film to examine the social dynamics of the lesbian bar as an increasingly rare and disappearing space (Clements, 2014; Morris, 2016; Rosenthal, 2016),

Fejerman and París aim for humour at the expense of lesbian identity to broaden the appeal of the film to a wider heterosexual viewership.

In addition, this ambition of general palatability is further evidenced by the film's concluding scenes. After Sofia and Eliska reconcile, she receives a letter of notice ordering her to leave Spain as she no longer has a visa, a job, or a grant to justify her right to remain. To prevent Eliska from being deported, Miguel, Elvira's love interest, agrees to marry her. The ensuing scene sees the pair dressed like a typical bride and groom, with the camera cutting to a priest who declares that 'para mí, esto es un momento privilegiado, la oportunidad de unir con el profundo vinculo de matrimonio a personas de distintas nacionalidades'. This declaration reflects the expansion of the European Union – negotiations for the Czech Republic's accession began in 1998 and were finalised in 2004 – but also the way in which the Spanish queer imaginary perceives itself as more transgressive than perhaps is reality. As Gema Pérez-Sánchez notes in her study on immigrants in contemporary queer Spanish cinema, films like *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* focus on forms of diversity more easily-digestible by the state, like the social and legal inclusion of white foreign nationals, to avoid 'challenging the patriarchal, normative complacency within which it must accommodate itself' (2008). Ultimately, the sole queer relationship in the film can only prevail through heterosexual matrimony. The priest pronounces Eliska and Miguel as officially married and symbolically drops his Bible in shock when the newlyweds turn away from one another to kiss their real partners, Sofia and Elvira. Despite differing mediums, Jane Robbins' analysis of Lucía Extebarria's bestselling novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* can be applied, in which she says that this type of work 'creates the illusion of transgressing societal norms without questioning their epistemological bases, thus appealing to Spanish readers [or viewers] who want to appear postmodern, but are not ready to forfeit the values of their own upbringing'

(2003). Evidently, the normativization and domestication of lesbianism on-screen suppresses the subversive potential of queerness.

Yet, as a film from an era of Spanish queer cinema characterised by a state of transition of queer representation, its narrative is expectedly contradictory in nature. The inclusion of the wedding scene is at once both homonormative and radical. By applying literary critic Linda Hutcheon's theory on postmodern cinema's 'subversion from within' (1989), the romantic comedy's generic convention of a happy-ending is only achieved by undermining the heterosexual institution of marriage; the nuptials are not taken for love but for convenience as Eliska wants to legally remain in Spain. Therefore, the version of marriage presented by Fejerman and París is strategic, a result of the capitalist modes of production of which the film is implicated, whereby marriage becomes a product for unrestricted consumption, or where, as Medak-Seguín suggests, 'the product serves whatever function its consumer desires rather than the intended function of its producer' (2010). Yet, the images of both couples leaving the church arm-in-arm, holding bouquets and having rice thrown at them foreshadows Spain's legalisation of same-sex marriage, in which homosexual and heterosexual couple were on the same legal footing for the first time. This ultimately reinforces the increase in contemporaneous patterns of homonormativity.

This domiciliary form of lesbianism is maintained throughout the film's very last moments as during the final scene Sofía and Eliska's family coalesce during the couple's post-nuptial celebrations. The party is performing a circle dance, a traditional part of Slavic wedding receptions with Eliska and her brother initially partnered in the middle. Eliska then swaps her brother out for Sofia who then swaps her partner out to dance with her daughters as the credits begin to roll and the screen fades to black. Reading the closing shot of the film as a visual manifestation of Gayle S. Rubin's charmed circle theory which states that heteronormative society places sexuality that is heterosexual, marital, monogamous,

reproductive within the circle of 'acceptability' and excludes anything else (1984), the image is almost a recap of the film's changing familial dynamics throughout its narrative. Sibling bonds are destabilised by a queerness that still attempts operate within the realm of respectability without explicit eroticism. Despite this sanitised form of homosexuality surviving for most of the film, it is ultimately side-lined in favour of heterosexist family structures. Sofia's identity as a mother is prioritised over her identity as a lesbian and the female subject is returned to her allocated role within the established order. In Jill Robbins' essay on lesbian eroticism in contemporary Spanish culture, she argues that queer women remain in a state of semi-invisibility, present but not explored, as 'the general public, gay or straight, prefers those texts that do not really question or problematize the structure of society or interpersonal relationships' (2003). She adds that this attitude could be a hangover from Spain's transition to democracy where 'the ideal of the liberal public sphere could not be tainted by imperfect realities in those circumstances, and those who suffered acutely fighting for the imagined rights and freedoms of liberalism under the authoritarian Franco regime were understandably reluctant to criticize its failings' (Robbins, 2003). So, in their attempt to broaden their appeal to the average Spanish cinemagoer, Fejerman and París sustain and celebrate the monogamic family unit while pandering to an undeniably revealing predilection of the nation's psyche.

*A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* is emblematic of a transition for representation of lesbians in Spanish cinema in a society where queer demands were generally making their way onto the political agenda, especially for liberal parties like *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and *Izquierda Unida* (IU), but were yet to be fully realised. Although the film contains some elements of subversion and forward-thinking in its treatment of its titular character's sexuality, it still carries remnants of sensationalism or mockery characteristic of homosexual representation in 20th century Spanish cinema. Furthermore, this

contemporaneously prominent form of Queer visibility is seemingly only offered with the caveat of assimilating into the heterosexual family blueprint. However, the mainstream appeal of a familial comedy film like this with a widespread release enables Fejerman and París to interrogate audiences with potentially deep-rooted homophobia and ask them to critique the society in which they live. Viewers may consider that homophobia does not always manifest in the form of explicit degradation and hatred but in aversion to visibility or display of sexuality outside the realm of respectability, or that one cannot lay claim to ideal progressivism without examining their own longstanding prejudice. Furthermore, with the open-mindedness of Spain's youth, as represented by Sol, the directors deliver an optimistic outlook for the future of the country's LGBTQ+ community which, with the legalisation of same-sex marriage just on the horizon, seems to be well placed.

Nevertheless, it is important to view *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* within the context of its commercial success: domestically the seventh highest grossing (€ 429.098) Spanish film in the year of its release. Undoubtedly, the film's box office aspirations influence the extent to which the directors can explore an unabashed, or even well-rounded, depiction of lesbian identity. The audience gaze repeatedly confines Sofia solely to the role of the mother as queer intimacy is consistently curtailed throughout the narrative. Even the lesbian bar, the only queer space presented in the film, is hypersexualised and exaggerated to the point of appearing like a caricature of a gay venue. In the end, Sofia and Eliska must operate within the framework of heterosexist structures and use matrimony to achieve their generic happy-ending. Though this is not before the lesbian relationship is used to secure Elvira's heterosexuality and to depict her and her sisters as the agents of their mother's happiness and family harmony. This allows heterosexual audiences to identify with the siblings and to maintain content with their modern and liberal tolerance of queerness.

Referring back to Robbins' analysis of the complex relation between the visibility and invisibility of the lesbian in Spanish culture (2003), the way in which lesbians are permitted exposure under terms defined by heteronormativity, the film lays bare how the concurrent existence and suppression of lesbianism ultimately reinscribe essentialist gender and sexuality regimes[7]. With a desire to catch-up with Western Europe, a remnant from the years of its transition to democracy, the Spanish queer imaginary lingers in stasis, feigning socio-political transgression without actually confronting the heteronormative complacency within which it is required to operate. Although *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* may not be the most radical in its aims, its cultural impact permits it to remain an artefact of a transitory era for the relationship between queerness and Spanish national identity.

## Wendy, Menci, Rebe y otras chicas del monitor

From its early days as a developer of original programming, Netflix has strived to make a name for itself as a platform of LGBTQ+ voices both on-screen and behind the scenes. From the many lesbian romances in its prison comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black* to the Wachowski-created *Sense8*, the service has a history of taking opportunities where traditional terrestrial channels would perhaps see too much risk. The service's desire to consolidate its reputation as a leading producer of queer content is similarly reflected in its Spanish-language output.

Both the wider assimilation of the LGBTQ+ community to Spanish society and the potential for SVODs to target niche audiences are influential in characterising modes of lesbian

[7] The issue of curtailed sexual intimacy in lesbian narratives also applies to male narratives. For further reading, see the chapter 'Boys Interrupted' in Fouz-Hernández's in *Spanish Erotic Cinema* (2018).

representation in Era 2. On the one hand, lesbian characters occupy a more prominent positions in ensemble casts and their narratives reject some of the more disappointing tropes of their Era 1 counterparts. However, the reconceptualization of an LGBTQ+ audience as a valuable target demographic sometimes elicits cynical ploys for their viewership. Below, I seek to argue that *Sky Rojo* is presented as LGBTQ+ series through social media marketing and algorithmic recommendation despite the negligible lesbian content of its narrative. This method of 'queerbaiting' allows the show to appeal to lesbian audiences without alienating a heterosexual viewership. Therefore, the LGBTQ+ community becomes just another demographic for Netflix to capitalise upon as neoliberal homonormativity depoliticises and commercialises queerness. Then, I argue that the treatment of the principle lesbian couple in *Élite* avoids many of the cliches found in teen dramas from the 1990s and 2000s[8]. Its depiction of the 'gay kiss', the decentralisation of the 'coming out' story arc, and the rejection of narrative redundancy for its lesbian characters all contribute to its exemplification of Era 2 modality.

Despite Netflix's insistence that it does not use demographic data as part of its algorithm for recommendations, it has certainly worked on a conceptualisation of an LGBTQ+ audience. According to Sundeep Das, a former researcher for Netflix, a 'team of in-house experts meticulously tag each title with a rich taxonomy of 200 different story data points that form the basis of thematic containers' (2019). At the time of writing, suggested searches consist of general terms like 'LGBTQ TV programmes' and 'LGBTQ dramas', but also include more specific categories like 'LGBTQ films about friendship' and 'Irreverent LGBTQ TV comedies'. Furthermore, it has been identified by many researchers that the platform's

[8] For further analysis of the depiction of teenagers in audiovisual culture see the work of Timothy Shary i.e. '*Teen Movies*: A century of American youth' (2023).

recommendation algorithm has seen a notable amount of publicity and plaudits (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; MacDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016) which has solidified a reputation for the service's ability for personalisation. However, this perception also enables Netflix to exploit its queer users' desire to access narratives with which they can identify. This is best described by Elizabeth Bridges in her article on 'queerbaiting' as a method of marketing that infers a Queer element to narrative that either barely or completely refrains from appearing in the text. (2018: 116).

I propose that the biggest culprit for 'queerbaiting' from Netflix Spain is the pulp comedy-drama *Sky Rojo*. The series follows Coral (Verónica Sánchez), Wendy (Lali Espósito) and Gina (Yany Prado), three woman who are trafficked into sex work and are trapped and forced to work in a club/brothel in Tenerife. They all end up on the run from their violent pimp after attempting to murder him and the ensuing plot follows their attempts to evade capture and escape the island for a new life. The show was co-created by Álex Pina and produced by his company Vancouver Media after the roaring success of his show *Money Heist* (which will be discussed in the following chapter). It is clear from several factors that with *Sky Rojo* Netflix was banking on making a hit similar to Pina's previous title. There looks to have been no expensed spared with the show's high production values and all-star cast with names such as Asier Etxeandia and Miguel Ángel Silvestre. The series' extensive social media campaign also saw the creation of official pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Plus, Pina claims that the casting of Spanish, Argentine and Cuban actors in the roles of the three leads was to reflect the 'gran mosaico de nacionalidades' (*Caccio*, 2021) among sex workers in Spain. If this is true, then it's a lucky coincidence that this 'mosaico' also helps to draw in the extensive Latin American fandom of *Money Heist.* Evidently, these investments paid off. *Sky Rojo* was a critical success at home and abroad (Jones, 2021; Sanguno, 2021) and globally it was the fourth most watched show on Netflix and its most watched non-English language

show in the during its premiere weekend (FlixPatrol, 2021). Perhaps to attain this level of achievement Netflix needed to make a play for as many demographics as possible, including its LGBTQ+ audience.

The character Wendy, who is one of the three principal leads and is played by Argentine pop star Lali Espósito, is revealed to be a lesbian in episode four of the first season. Exposition of her background is given through a series of flashbacks when it is shown that she agreed to take up prostitution as a way of earning money for her girlfriend in Argentina. Their plan was to save enough to leave the poverty of Villa 31, the infamous Buenos Aires shanty town. However, Wendy's girlfriend eventually breaks up with her over the phone, leaving her trapped, alone and penniless in Tenerife. This flashback is the only time the viewer sees any sort of lesbian intimacy for the entire first series of *Sky Rojo*. This may be justified as an example of 'la modalidad integrada', as theorised by Irene Pelayo (2011) in her doctoral thesis on Spanish lesbian narratives, where a character's sexuality is incidental to the plot (Wendy's girlfriend could easily be switched out for a boyfriend) and does not define their characterisation. However, given the focus that the show's marketing put on a relationship with a mere few minutes of screentime, it's hard not to see this brief inclusion of lesbianism as a tokenistic grab for lesbian viewership.

For example, it would be fair to assume that as a result of watching hours and hours of its Spanish-language LGBTQ+ content for this thesis, Netflix's algorithm has learned to suggest these types of programs to my account. Furthermore, among the many paratexts that Netflix customises for each user are the thumbnails that appear for each text on the homepage and among search results. As Eklund describes in his work on Netflix's personalisation strategies, 'thumbnails are excellent sites for research as they are a tangible embodiment of these algorithmic processes in action, providing a face to something that is often lost in the world of big data' (2022: 737). At the start of my research the thumbnail for *Sky Rojo* showed an

image of Wendy and her girlfriend moments before kissing one another. Currently, the thumbnail consists of an intimate shot Wendy and Greta, her love interest in the show's third season (released in 2023 and therefore out of the timeframe of this research). Depending on when she started watching the show, a hypothetical lesbian viewer could be drawn in by two methods. The former image would entice her with a deceptively brief same-sex relationship or the current image would keep them clinging onto to the promise of a developed lesbian romance that would appear in three seasons' time. Although, the Netflix Technology Blog may have its own way of explanation away an accusation of this algorithmic presentation constituting 'queerbaiting'. It asserts that 'if the artwork representing a title captures something compelling to you, then it acts as a gateway into that title and gives you some visual 'evidence' for why the title might be good for you' (Chandrashekar et al., 2017). These images are not doctored, they do in fact appear in *Sky Rojo,* and they may appeal via modes of identification to lesbian viewers. Therefore, the validity of this 'visual evidence' is hard to contest. However, it is legitimate to question whether or not a program with one (incidentally) lesbian character with a fraction of screentime depicting her sexuality justifies a place in the category of 'Spanish-language LGBTQ+ series'.


*Figure 1: Current thumbnail image for Sky Rojo on my Netflix account*

Moreover, the program's social media content also provides examples of what could be labelled as 'queerbaiting'. An Instagram post on the show's official account, posted just 6 days after the release of the first series, features an edit (pictured below) of two photos of Wendy and Gina, another of the program's female leads. Both images are very similar and show the pair embracing one another, with one shot seemingly depicting the moment just before they kiss. The caption reads 'Siempre la una para la otra. ❤️'. With both its visual physical intimacy and amorous accompanying text, there is an undeniable inference in this post that Wendy and Gina will be romantic interests for one another in the series. In his essay on 'queerbaiting, Brennan argues that the concept relies 'on the question of actuality, or whether the homoerotic is 'really' present' (2018: 189) and continues to argue that the terms should not prevent queer subtexts being read from a work. When one recontextualises the shots from the post, this type of subtext begins to emerge. The top image is taken from a scene where, to keep Gina optimistic about her future, Wendy promises they will both live in

a lavish house ‘con una cama enorme donde vamos a dormir despatarradas’. Additionally, the bottom image pertains to a scene embodying the lesbian feminist revenge fantasy in which Gina assures Wendy that they will punish the man who raped her in a previous episode. Yet despite this, a homoerotic reading of this image becomes a homosexual one when compounded by a second Instagram post three days later. The post (also pictured) consists of a short clip of Wendy saying ‘A mí, no me gustan los hombres. A mí me gusta el chocolate’. Here, she is promoted as an explicitly lesbian character despite her sexuality being minimally mentioned in the show’s overall narrative. This satisfies one of the motives of ‘queerbaiting’ described by Woods and Hardman in their article on the concept: ‘to lure queer audiences whilst ensuring that heterosexist audiences are not alienated by queer content’ (2021: 585). Although Netflix is no stranger to targeting specific audiences with its marketing, to ensure the success of its high-cost productions it aims to appeal to as many niches as possible. By overpromising on a lesbian narrative that it does not deliver, *Sky Rojo* broadens its attraction to LGBTQ+ audiences without having to drastically alter the storyline of the show itself.

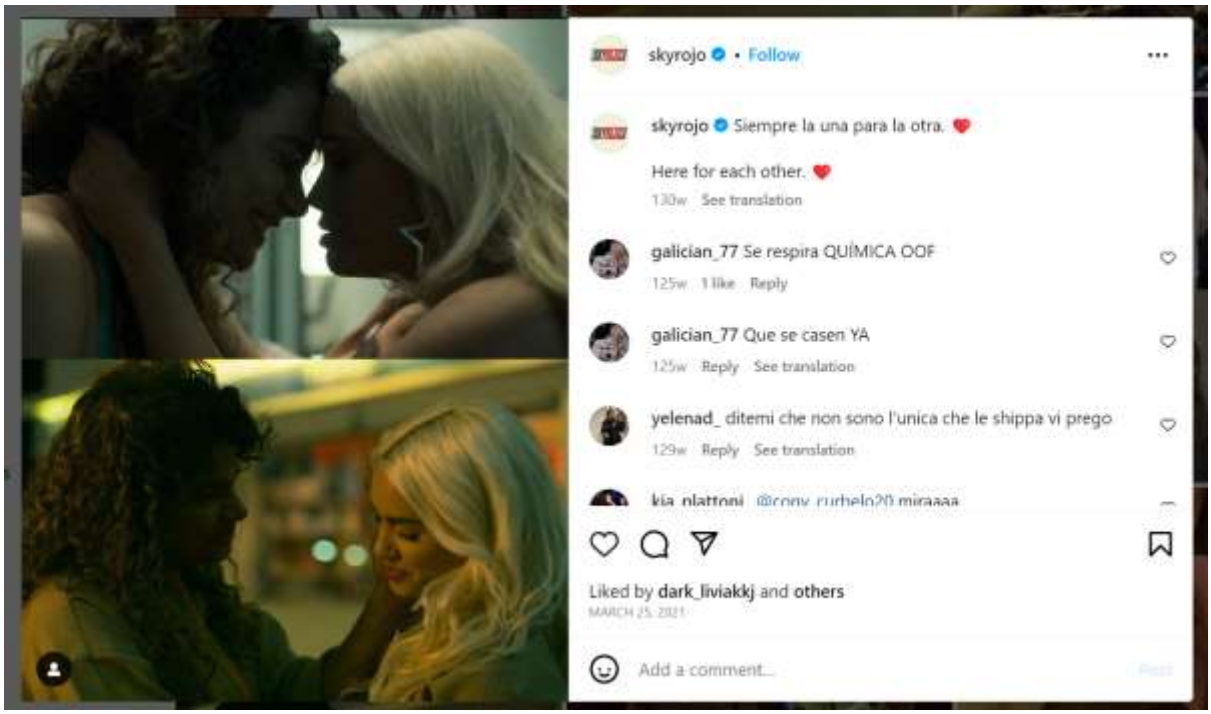


*Figure 2: Instagram post from @skyrojo on 25/03/2021*

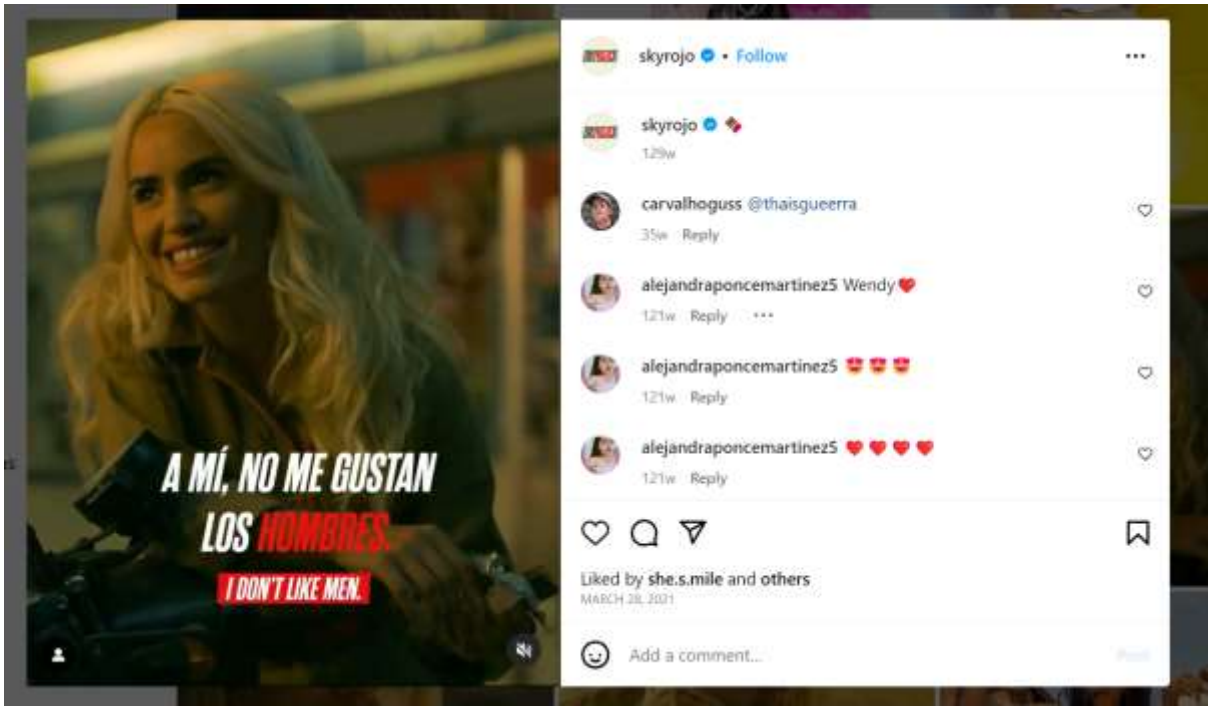


*Figure 3: Instagram post from @skyrojo on 28/03/2021*

It must also be noted that the casting choice of Lali Espósito is significant to this discussion. At the time of the show's premiere, Espósito had built a solid reputation with an extensive entertainment career of almost 20 years. She began as a child actress in several Argentine telenovelas before rising to fame across Latin America as part of pop group Teen Angels. After the group disbanded, she released her debut album *A Bailar* in 2014 and has gradually built a music career that has brought commercial success across the Spanish-speaking world and beyond. As previously stated, Espósito's star status is clearly a huge draw for an international market. However, her selection as the character Wendy arguably contributes to Netflix's approach to 'queerbaiting'. In a Tweet sent by her account @laliоficial on 22/05/2020, during the show's filming which was broken up by the COVID-19 pandemic, she responds to a fan who asks her '[¿]te consideras bi?'. She writes:

Espósito, Lali. @lalioficial. ‘Para mi todos somos bi. Hetero para mi es que te enamoras de alguien del otro sexo o naturalmente te gusta más uno de los dos sexos. Pero yo creo que todos somos@Bi. 🤷‍♀️ Así lo siento yo.’ [12:35AM]

The tweet was Espósito’s first statement of any kind to reference the possibility of her not being heterosexual and was reported on by several media outlets (Exitoína, 2020; Canal Net, 2020; Rinaldi, 2020). I would not be so cynical as to contend that Espósito would announce this as a marketing ploy for *Sky Rojo*. However, it is conceivable that Netflix would utilise the sexual ambiguity of one of its show’s most notable cast members to capitalise on a LGBTQ+ audience base. This would explain its desire to plainly depict Wendy’s lesbianism in its promotional material and misleadingly play to the homoerotic gaze on the show’s official social media. Interestingly, Espósito first incorporates her bisexuality in her music, ergo ‘coming out’ more explicitly, via the lyrics of her 2022 song ‘N5’. When the third season of *Sky Rojo* was released the following year, Wendy is granted a developed lesbian romance in the form of secondary character Greta.

Though the narrative of *Sky Rojo* itself may not provide us with much material for a primary narrative analysis, its marketing and display within the Netflix interface reveals much about the conceptualisation of queerness in the age of streaming. The show falls foul of ‘queerbaiting’ in its social media promotion by overstating the relevance of Wendy’s sexuality to its overall storyline and for hinting at a same-sex romance that simply fails to materialise. Furthermore, it is clear that the platform’s algorithmic personalisation is designed to overplay the show’s Queer themes in order to entice a LGBTQ+ audience. By reducing lesbian audiences to simply another commercial demographic, queerness becomes depoliticised in a step towards neoliberal homonormativity.

However, it would be unfair not to mention the developed lesbian narratives that Netflix does have to offer. Examples that fall out of the remit of this research include *Valeria,* billed unofficially as Spain's answer to *Sex and the City,* and its coprotagonist Nerea (Teresa Riott). As one of the titular character's close friends, she explores the difficulties of being the only queer person is an otherwise heterosexual social group while consolidating her identity as part of a lesbian activist organisation. There is also the Catalan-Castilian romantic comedy *Smiley,* which gives ample time to its side-plot concerning Parti (Giannina Fruttero) and Vero (Meritxell Calvo) as they navigate open relationships, the idea of lesbian motherhood, and the anxieties of 'coming out'. Yet, it is with the teen drama *Élite* that I will continue my analysis for several reasons. Firstly, it is one of Netflix's most successful productions and its extensive advertising campaigns signifies its prominence in the promotion of the platform's aims and global reputation. Secondly, it provides a solid case for how lesbian narratives have changed from Era 1 to Era 2.

First released in October 2018, the show follows the lives of a number of high-school students who all attend one of the most expensive and exclusive institutions in the country. The initial series revolves primarily around the class conflict provoked by the admission of three scholarship students as well as the embroilment of the principal cast in the murder of one of their classmates. However, like many other teen dramas, the cast rotates as certain characters age out of the school setting and different melodramas come and go. *Élite* has undoubtedly been a huge domestic and international success with the show's third and fourth seasons ranking at 9$^{th}$ and 10$^{th}$ respectively on the list of most streamed non-English language series (Moore, 2023). Critically, there are those who have found fault with the hypersexuality of the show's teenage characters (Haaniyah, 2020) but overall the programme has largely been applauded for its progressive plotlines and a cast that reflects the makeup of modern Spain (Linares-Rivas 2018; Martínez-Jiménez 2020). With a target audience of teenagers

(aged 12-18) and a strong focus on the formation of queerness, *Élite* is a crucial text in this study. Indeed, teen dramas are pivotal in the adolescent exploration of gender and sexuality and have been recognised as such in previous media scholarship (Pullen 2014; Vázquez-Rodríguez, García-Ramos & Zurian, 2021).

The first representations of lesbianism occur during the show's fourth series when the characters Rebe (Claudia Salas) and Mencia (Martina Cariddi) develop a relationship. Although, *Élite* is by no means the first teen drama in Spain to include female-female romances on-screen as part of its established plot. In 2009, the third season of *Física o química* saw the introduction of bisexual character Alma (Sandra Blázquez) while that same year Dani (Paula Cancio) and Sofía (Ana Fernández) explored their attraction for one another on *Cuestión de sexo*. However, when applying the tropes of lesbianism in 1990s and 2000s teen drama that have been defined by media scholarship to *Élite*, it is clear that the show embodies a shift in representation. I argue that the show's treatment of the 'gay kiss', the decentralisation of the 'coming out' story arc, and the rejection of narrative redundancy for its lesbian characters all contribute to its exemplification of Era 2 modality.

Menci and Rebe first meet in the opening episode of season 4 as the former is introduced as a new student at the school. Immediate, albeit ambivalent, sexual chemistry is established as Menci tells Rebe 'me encanta tu rollo'. When Rebe echoes this sentiment later in the episode the two decide to go for a drink together. It is at the rooftop bar in which they meet that two share their first kiss. Already identified by Tropiano in *The Primetime Closet* as a key component in televisual narratives of homosexuality (2002: 162), the depiction of the 'gay kiss' has often retained a conservative approach to same-sex intimacy to appease heterosexual audiences. Alfred L. Martin Jr.'s article on the plot device in the US network television of the 2000s names three ways in which this is achieved: the use of an over-the-shoulder shot; the adherence to the social codes of the public/private dichotomy; and spatial

distance between the characters (2014: 1). The scene of Rebe and Mencia's first kiss has none of these features. Firstly, the over-the-shoulder shot, often used to sanitise the interaction by obscuring the characters' mouths, is replaced by an eye-level medium shot of the pair that slowly pans to a bird's eye view. Their physical contact is given a full view as the audience is allowed to linger in this moment of affection. Secondly, the kiss takes place in public on the balcony of a rooftop bar, not only in full view of fellow patrons but arguably the rest of Madrid. As queer theorist Michael Warner states, 'being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private' (2002: 23), which in this case would be same-sex intimacy. To transgress the public/private binary in the way Rebe and Mencia do is, in Warner's words, a 'violation of deep instincts about sex and gender' (ibid.). Lastly, although the pair do not exhibit body-to-body contact, Mencia does wrap her arm around Rebe. This degree of tactility is enough to negate the typical bodily distance shown in these scenes which often 'work to remove heterosexist anxiety from the act of homosexual kisses' (Martin Jr., 2014: 157). Furthermore, considering the steamy sex scenes that occur between the couple later in the season, it would be unreasonable to argue that *Élite* is in any way pandering to this 'heterosexist anxiety'. In fact, it is clear from the offset that the show is keen to develop a lesbian romance with the same visibility of any of its heterosexual counterparts.

The relevance of 'coming out' to Rebe's characterisation also differentiates *Élite* from earlier teen dramas. As Whitney Monaghan describes in her monograph on lesbian plots in the genre in 1990s and 2000s, the 'coming out' story arc 'emphasises the climactic revelation of nonheterosexuality [and] has led some critics to question whether queerness can ever exist as anything else' (2016: 43). It is true that Rebe enters the fourth season of the show as heterosexual with her relationship with classmate Samu (Itzan Escamilla) ending sourly at the close of the previous series. Although she is initially reluctant to pursue things with Mencia,

it is revealed through a conversation with her ex that this is due to the emotional pain she is carrying from her last breakup. This narrative form of a bait-and-switch cleverly plays on established tropes of internalised homophobia in teen dramas while simultaneously deproblematising Rebe's sexuality. Once the couple begin to develop a relationship, there is minimal furore among their peers. In fact, the closest example of a 'coming out' for Rebe occurs during the second episode of the show's fifth season where the students go to a party where sexual experimentation is a requirement of attendance. She is passionately kissing fellow classmate Iván (André Lamoglia), who comes out as gay later in the series, when he lowers his hand to her crotch. She stops him and ends the kiss, telling him 'que ni borracha me puedo engañar, socio. Resulta que soy más bollo que los buñuelos de Cuaresma'. In this utterance, Rebe publicly and humorously affirms her queerness while also disavowing her heterosexual past. It is certainly a moment of self-realisation but not one that comes with the usual trappings of a fictional 'coming out'. When Glyn Davis talks of the self-enunciation of gay characters in millennial teen dramas, he describes a conflict that occupies a 'pivotal position in the […] narrativisation of queer adolescent subjectivity' (2004: 131). Yet, as Rebe's same-sex desire is already apparent to her friends and family, there is no conflict (or even any degree of surprise) from anyone but herself. When Monaghan discusses the 'coming out' narrative, she argues that 'key coming of age milestones […] are eschewed by the enunciation or public announcement' (2016: 53) of non-normative sexuality. Yet, Rebe's discovery pales as a coming-of-age milestone when compared to the explicit and sensual sex scenes she shares with Mencia in episodes 3 and 5 of the previous season. The fact that Rebe's characterisation moves away from essentialising the lesbian narrative as a 'coming out' arc differentiates *Élite* from being wrapped up in the cliches of many of the teen dramas before it.

What's more, Rebe's continued relevance to the narrative of *Élite* after her 'coming out' rejects the typicality of previous lesbian representation in the genre. As Monaghan writes, 'within many representations, particularly those of the early to mid-2000s, queer girls are transient figures, either reverting to an initial state of heterosexuality or disappearing completely once the storyline has concluded' (2016: 55). Neither of these fates befall Rebe. She remains a core cast member until the end of the series and is key in solving its central mystery: the murder of her ex-boyfriend Samu. Furthermore, her sexuality refrains from becoming redundant as she continues an on-off romance with Mencia until her departure from the show. In addition to this she explores a short-lived romance with a new friend called Jess (Isabel Garrido) who she meets at the aforementioned party. When Mencia asks her about her relationship with Jess, Rebe replies: 'es mi primera amiga bollo. Me ha invitado a mi primera fiesta bollo. Todo muy primera y muy bollo, la verdad'. Not only does Jess provide an alternative source of eroticism for Rebe, she is also the gateway for an early formation of a queer social group. Although it should be noted that this development does happen off-screen, Rebe's self-disclosure becomes a crucial step in her finding a like-minded community. Instead of lesbian characters having 'the queer aspects of their lives […] elided' (2009: 7) once their 'coming out' arc is complete, as David and Needham suggest, *Élite* uses Rebe's newfound identity to consolidate her sexual identity through queer homosociality.

With consideration of the fictional characteristic identified in scholarship on teen dramas in the 1990s and 2000s, it is clear that *Élite* signals a new kind of lesbian narrative. Its depiction of same-sex intimacy exhibits no need to sanitise itself for a heterosexual audience. Furthermore, the public disclosure of non-normative sexuality is an incidental plot point which means the show's lesbian characters are not cast aside once it occurs. As the rise of SVODs allows televisual producers to appeal to audience's once seen as to esoteric to court, the development of lesbian narratives has only become richer.

## Conclusion

The texts on which this chapter is focused clearly evidence a shift in the representation of lesbian in Spanish audiovisual culture. As an exemplification of Era 1 modality, *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* is emblematic of a Spain where queer demands were generally making their way onto the political agenda but were yet to be fully realised. The film's treatment of its titular character's sexuality may be radical in parts but it still carries remnants of sensationalism and stereotyping of homosexuality. Furthermore, the queer visibility found in the text comes with the caveat of assimilating into the heterosexual family blueprint. Robbins' analysis of the complex relation between the visibility and invisibility of the lesbian in Spanish culture (2003) exemplifies the way in which the film reinscribes essentialist gender and sexuality regimes. Although *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* may not be the subversive in its endeavour, it remains an artefact of a transitory era for the relationship between queerness and Spanish national identity.

Conversely, the modality adopted by Spanish lesbian narratives on Netflix signals a embodies the differences of Era 2. With its depiction of same-sex intimacy, its rejection on the narrative essentialisation of 'coming out', and its layered and continued development of its lesbian protagonists, *Élite* rejects tropes of 1990s and 2000s teen dramas. It refuses to sanitise or limit homosexuality for a heterosexual audience and therefore resists the tenants of homonormativity. However, the growing value of promoting a liberal brand and targeting LGBTQ+ audiences that has emerged in Era 2 has certainly influenced the conceptualisation of queerness in the age of streaming. The marketing strategies of *Sky Rojo* and the algorithms of the Netflix interface both fall foul of 'queerbaiting'. By reducing lesbian audiences to

simply another profitable demographic, neoliberal homonormativity manages to depoliticise and commercialise queerness.

# Chapter 2: Sexual Fluidity

Since the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s and throughout its development in the 21st century, there has been a move away from binary understandings of gender and sexuality (Mereish et al, 2017: 126). In fact, the word 'queer' itself has become shorthand for the many identities initialised in 'LGBTQ+', albeit without complete consensus from the communities described in the umbrella term (Barker et al, 2009: 368). As such, queer desire has been reconceived to arise regardless of a person's sex or gender identity and not because of it. This amorphous form of attraction is often termed 'sexual fluidity'. In their study on the concept, Bailey et al define it as a 'situation-dependent flexibility in a person's sexual responsiveness, which makes it possible for some individuals to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances regardless of their overall sexual orientation' (2016: 56).

This reconceptualization of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer can be seen in depictions of sexual fluidity in Spanish audiovisual culture in over the past several decades. Chris Perriam notes in his monograph *Spanish Queer Cinema* that in the 1990s and early 2000s 'the double excursions of some characters around the contours of homo- and heterosexuality are so labile and so imbricated in local socio-political implications that queer seems to be the best way of denoting them' (2013: 6). Yet, these 'excursions' undeniably problematise non-normative sexual identity as a plot motivator for these characters. Conversely, there are two modalities that have dominated scholarship on queer representation since the late 1990s. The first is 'la modalidad desfocalizada', as defined by Alfeo Álvarez (1997), and the second is 'la modalidad integrada' which Pelayo (2011) proposed as a continuation of the former's theory. The former is characterised by explicitly gay protagonists whose sexuality is not the central theme but an element of plot development. The latter, on the other hand, is distinguished by sexual identities that are incidental to the narrative with non-normative desire socially amalgamated without shame, conflict or stereotyping. However, I argue that both these

modalities foster a liminal sexuality which enables hegemonic articulations of gender and therefore uphold tenants of homonormativity.

It is with these reference to Chris Perriam as well as Álvarez and Pelayo that I respectively categorise depictions of fluid sexuality in the texts of Era 1 and Era 2. In this chapter, I will begin by exploring the formulation of sexuality in *Segunda Piel* (1999, d. Gerardo Vera) and *Sobreviviré (*1999, d. Alfonso Albacete and David Meknes*)* to demonstrate how, in these narratives, attraction outside the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality is problematised and how the latter is positioned as diametrically opposed to heteronormative respectability. Then, I will directly compare mutual masturbation scenes in *Krámpack (*2003, d. Cesc Gay*)* and Netflix's *Élite* to illustrate the cultural shift from sexuality operating in a binary framework to adopting a changeability that reinforces heterosexist gender dynamics. Finally, I will look at *La casa de papel*, another text from Netflix, to evaluate how sexual fluidity queers the fictional trope of unrequited love while refraining from destabilising masculine power in a similar manner to *Élite*.

## Good Straights and Naughty Gays: *Segunda piel* and *Sobreviviré*

Both *Segunda piel* and *Sobreviviré* were released in 1999, at the end of a decade that saw a 'modest explosion' (Fouz-Hernández & Perriam, 2000: 96) of relatively successful LGBTQ-related feature films. Many of these narratives also espoused elements of fluid sexuality. According to Alberto Mira, this primarily manifested in two ways: the blurred lines between friendship and homoeroticism and homosexual inclinations from a supposed heterosexual character as a way of introducing queerness to the story (2004: 594). Here, it is the second example that evokes the plot of *Segunda piel.* The film initially follows Elena (Ariadna Gil), a despondent wife who has suspicions that her emotionally distant husband Alberto (Jordi Mollà) is having an extra-marital affair. As the narrative progresses, her fears are not only confirmed but worsened as she discovers Alberto is cheating on her with another man, Diego (Javier Bardem). From here the focus of the plot shifts onto Alberto's emotional crisis and eventual nervous breakdown as a result of his conflicted sexuality. Ultimately, the

melodrama ends in tragedy as Alberto, unable to comes to terms with his same-sex desire, deliberately and fatally drives his motorbike into oncoming traffic. At the film's close, Elena and Diego bond over their grief.

The choice to cast Bardem and Mollà in the roles of doomed male lovers is noteworthy. Firstly, the actors were not only among the country's biggest stars of the era but had also appeared together previously in the romantic tragicomedy *Jamón, jamón* (1992, d. Bigas Luna). This gave the pair a chance, as noted by Perriam in his monograph on male Spanish stars, to recreate the 'homoerotic courtship' (2003: 114) marred by misfortune in a pathos that stirred Spanish audiences. Furthermore, both men maintained a close relationship throughout the 90s which was certainly played on for homoerotic potential during promotion for *Segunda piel*. As Mira writes: 'Bardem y Mollà jugaban a flirtear con lo gay y a lanzar mutuos piropos a los respectivos traseros cada vez que un micrófono o una Cámara se ponía a tiro' (2004: 596). Considering that the film was released somewhat with gay audiences in mind, that Vera himself was a renowned theatre director, and that the story was autobiographically inspired, the film has the promise of serving a first-class portrayal of the contemporary queer experience. Although in the end, its narrative does not deliver.

One glaring shortcoming to note is the film's failed attempt at deproblematising non-normative sexuality. It endeavours to do this firstly through its assimilationist queer leads. Although it makes sense in terms of plot for closeted Alberto to demonstrate no signifiers of gay identity, the same cannot be said for the comfortably 'out' Diego. He not shown with any gay friends, in any gay spaces, or with any connection to gay culture. Although heightened effeminacy in homosexual characters can be reductive – i.e. *Perdona bonita, pero Lucas me quería a mí* (1997, d. Dunia Ayaso and Félix Sabroso) – here, Diego's hollow gay identity speaks to something broader. Firstly, the character's manliness sates the audience's expectation of Bardem 'as epitomizing not only a general set of Spanish masculinities but a geographically non-defined machismo' (Perriam, 2003: 93). Secondly, the beginning of Spain's embrace of homonormativity started the year before the film's release with the passing of Catalonia's 1998 civil partnership law. As such, the narrative picks up on discourses from the LGBTQ+ community surrounding normalisation and appeals to those gay viewers who can

identify with Diego's subsidiary connection to queer culture. These subjects may rather see a gay protagonist embodying the assimilation, rather than the acculturation, of homosexuality at the expense of displaying any gay identity signifiers. Lastly, as Mira explains, the film is articulated for a heterosexual viewpoint as 'claramente una película enunciada desde un 'nosotros' gay no justifica un presupuesto y consiguientes ambiciones comerciales como los de *Segunda piel*' (2004: 598). Furthermore, the goal of deproblemitisation is also reflected in the narrative's unrealistic omission of any homophobic attitudes. One would imagine that Elena (or her mother who appears briefly) would be compelled to utter a slur or express a stereotype in reaction to Alberto's behaviour. Instead, the film presents a distorted version of late 90s Spain where not only is sexual discrimination absent but so are the words 'homosexual' and 'gay'. What is postulated is a version of Pelayo's 'integrated modality' that has tried to run before it can walk, so to speak.

Yet, in the end this effort fails as Alberto's sexual fluidity is utilised for narrative disequilibrium in a manner which ultimately problematises same-sex desire. This initially occurs by the film's framing of homosexuality through the heterosexual gaze of Elena. For almost the entire first half of the running time, the plot is driven by Elena as piecing together the details of her husband's infidelity, with her eventually discovering his affair is a same-sex one after Diego leaves a voicemail on Alberto's mobile. Here, sexual fluidity becomes a malevolent force as it is constructed as a threat to a stable, respectable, heterosexual marriage. As the viewer is privy to Alberto's same-sex desire before Elena, the consequences of her husband's homosexuality are perceived primarily from the perspective of familial destabilisation and the emotional pain endured by the wife. Ignored is the dilemma outlined by Swan and Benack in their work on queer men in heterosexual marriages in which the closeted spouse 'must renegotiate identity in adulthood and come out in a heteronormative culture' (2012: 64) while also dealing with a sexual fluidity 'which is not recognized by our dominant cultural narratives' (ibid.). Moreover, this sexual fluidity is problematised to the same degree as infidelity as the film presents Alberto as a double adulterer, at once betraying both his wife and the heteropatriarchal order. When initially confronted by Elena over a suspicious hotel receipt, Alberto confesses to an affair but claims it was with a woman. He asserts that it meant nothing to him and thus she readily forgives him.

However, once Elena finds out about Diego, despite Alberto begging for forgiveness and promising to change, she tells him 'yo no puedo ser un hombre'. At once, Alberto's same-sex desire makes his disloyalty unpardonable and his marriage, regardless of any previous erotic pleasure, becomes nullified. Although there are later attempts to fix their relationship, at this point Elena disregards the idea that he was ever or could ever be genuinely attracted to her. His sexual fluidity also prevents Alberto from fulfilling his heterosexist role as head of the home. Later in the film, his visage of masculinity is shattered as breaks down in Elena's arms over his inner sexual turmoil and he neglects his fatherly duties by missing his son's birthday to spend time with Diego. Thus, Alberto's behaviour strikes a double blow for Elena; his infidelity is an emotional hit, but a queered infidelity renders the situation unsalvageable and ultimately breaks up the family. Until Alberto begins to exhibit signs of emotional collapse, the audience sympathies are very much placed with Elena. As such, by adopting a heterosexual gaze, Alberto's sexual fluidity is presented as the root of all narrative conflict.

How ironic then that despite being a key point of tension for each protagonist, none of them reference the concept of fluid sexuality even once. It is clear that Alberto harbours erotic desire for both Diego and Elena. His sex scenes with each of them are sensually charged to the same degree and visually mirrored, suggesting two halves of one complete sexual identity. It is also worthy to note that the explicit nature of the gay sex scenes had little to no precedent in Spanish cinema (Perriam, 2003: 114) which indicates a deliberate attempt for the film to present Alberto's homosexual and heterosexual desire as equally potent. Yet, notwithstanding this evident visual presentation, the concept of liminal sexuality is completely erased in the film's script. The narrative endeavours to make sense of Alberto's same-sex desire and offers two answers: he is either heterosexual, confused and unwell or he is homosexual and living a lie. The former is posed in his attempts to reconcile – he says of the affair 'fue un error… para mí está olvidado' – and in what Fouz-Hernández and Martín-Expósito describe as 'the more negative elements of early gay-themed narratives' (2007: 126): equating homosexuality with illness and the tragic death of the gay protagonist. In one scene, Elena and Alberto go out for dinner in an attempt to repair their marriage post-affair. She asks him with candour how long he has been sleeping with men. In response, he quickly runs out of the restaurant and throw

up on the street. Furthermore, the film ends with Alberto taking his own life due to the mental anguish of being caught between two binary sexual identities, purging the character for his transgression. There is a sense in both these examples that his same-sex desire is not an innate part of his identity but an affliction that has been acquired. Conversely, the reading of Alberto denying his natural homosexuality is offered in a vague and unsatisfying monologue towards the end of the film. In it he states 'llevo mintiéndome desde niño' and goes on to express regret at following his father's career choice adding that 'me he pasado la vida aprobando los exámenes de todo el mundo'. Here, some broader sociological points regarding queer existence are acknowledged. Patrilineal expectation as well as that of broader heterosexual society has forced Alberto to conform to a life that does not fit him. However, there seems to be a need to explain his homosexuality. As Mira notes, 'el momento en que nos revela su infancia esta ahí para ' dar sentido' a su comportamiento' (2004: 598). It is only the heterosexist model that requires such justification. Yet, characterising Alberto through these readings as a troubled heterosexual or a deceptive homosexual drives him to polar ends of the sexual binary. Therefore, by avoiding the exploration of the concept of fluidity in regard to Alberto's erotic desire, the narrative displays a binary, and therefore homonormative, approach to sexuality.

Conversely, although *Segunda Piel* stifles its modes of queerness, the narrative of *Sobreviviré*, another text from Era 1 with comparable commercial success, grants assured legitimacy to the notion of sexual fluidity. The romantic comedy comes from directing duo Alfonso Albacete and David Menkes, a pair who had already begun to carve out a post-Almodóvarian identity for Queer film in Spain with *Mas que amor frenesí* (1996) and *Atómica* (1998). In fact, Mira cites both filmmakers as part of the school of auteurs that, around the turn of the millennium, promoted narratives of 'desarmarización' which refrained from utilising a 'repertorio construido desde la perspectiva heterosexista' (2008: 548). This is certainly congruent with the main plot of *Sobreviviré* which concerns itself with the relationship between Marga (Emma Suárez) and Iñaki (Juan Diego Botto), a single mother and a gay man experiencing opposite-sex attraction for the first time. The directors also collaborated on the film's screenplay with high-profile novelist Lucía Extebarría, who herself interestingly had admitted to past same-sex relationships while rejecting the term 'lesbian' (El

Mundo, 2004) and at one time was in a heterosexual marriage. The film's story calls back to themes in the writer's early novels like *Amor, curiosidad, prozak y dudas* (1997) and *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (1998), according to Akiko Tsuchuya in her study on Extebarría. She posits that the writer manages to 'debunk the presupposition of a clear disjunction between hetero- and homosexuality (or between hetero- and homosexual desires)' (2002: 85) while also continuing to 'reinforce normative conceptualisations of gender and sexual identity' (2002: 84). It is with this dichotomy in mind that I argue that *Sobreviviré* reinforces, as described by Perriam, Albacete and Menkes' tendency for a 'problematically Queer aesthetic' (2004: 151) by using unrestrained sexual fluidity to position heterosexual and homosexual cultures as diametrically opposed.

Though to start it must be stated that *Sobreviviré* succeeds where *Segunda piel* fails by granting legitimacy to the concept of sexual fluidity in the first place. In truth, its narrative is deft in swiftly deproblematising liminal sexuality from the perspective of the co-protagonist, albeit in an over-earnest manner. In a scene just over the film's halfway mark, Iñaki visits Marga in her flat to confess his homosexual past. He nervously tells her 'yo acabo de salir una relación de seis meses con un hombre'. When she reacts nonchalantly, he repeats himself, to which she replies 'si, ya te oído, con un hombre'. Immediately, the narrative tension that has built up through the first part of the film is released in a single line. This representation of same-sex desire is crossing the boundary from the aforementioned 'modalidad desfocalizada', as defined by Alfeo Álvarez (1997), to Pelayo's 'modalidad integrada' (2011). In this scene, Inaki's concerns are denoted as belonging to a bygone era with Marga representing, and inviting him to recognise, the new era of modern-minded Spain. The audience at once are asked to sympathise with Inaki's anxieties but also analyse their own prejudice for expecting his sexual identity to cause a schism in the first place. Yet, Iñaki's queerness, although it may be integrated, isn't sanitised to the point of erasure like Diego. He is presented as a man with evident heterosexual desires but also with enough of a queer sensibility to linger in between the sexual binary. For example, in one scene the couple are outside the fitting room in a department and Iñaki is proactively giving Marga advice on her fashion choices, much unlike the typical apathy for shopping shown by male lovers in romantic comedies. The shot fades to a shop assistant knocking on the door

of the same fitting room. The door opens to show Iñaki and Marga kissing. Standard, though perhaps cliché, codes of gayness (i.e. refined taste; an interest in fashion) are juxtaposed with moments of heterosexual intimacy to give validity to Iñaki's homosexuality without jeopardising the credibility of his attraction to Marga. Thus, the film's central premise of exploring the bounds of sexual fluidity becomes a marker for identity in postmodern Spain.

Though, that isn't to say that *Sobreviviré* isn't without its more questionable treatment of sexuality. In fact, fluidity is used as a springboard to problematically contrast homosexual and heterosexual lifestyles. Through this dichotomy, Iñaki is presented with a choice: either continue seeking lewd homosexual practice or seize his chance of a loving, stable relationship. The idea that the latter option can be found by pursuing heterosexuality is reinforced through scenes of familial unity. After the couple have sex for the first time, by which Iñaki's heterosexual desire is consummated, so to speak, they are shown playing make-believe with Marga's son Tito. The scene is an endearing portrait of a seemingly nuclear family unit. As Tito acts as a positive force that strengthens the bond of the couple's romance, Iñaki's potential as partner is measured by his capability to adopt the role of patriarchal father figure. Yet, as Iñaki oscillates between hetero- and homosexual inclinations, so too does the 'respectability' of his behaviour. I use the term 'respectability' as it pertains to Gayle S. Rubin's 'Charmed Circle Theory' which states that 'some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability' (Rubin, 1984: 153) especially those that are coupled and monogamous. For example, at one point in the narrative Iñaki begins to have a sexual encounter with a male stranger in the changing room of a clothes shop but decides against it partway through. Here, there is an emphasis on the transgressive essence of gay sex practices which, as Grant Anderson writes in his work on cruising sites, 'entails an apparent misuse of public space, redefining it as a place of erotic pleasure and anonymous sexualisation' (2018: 1). However, it is clear that this transgression isn't celebrated as a destabilisation of prescriptive heteronormativity as it is instead presented as temptation to lure Iñaki back into a salacious homosexual lifestyle. This becomes more pertinent when contrasted with the more saccharine fitting room scene with Marga, as described earlier. In fact, even Marga herself displays a constant homophobic anxiety regarding the presumed seediness of Iñaki's past. After Iñaki

smiles at a flirtatious waiter, she imagines them hooking up in the restaurant's kitchen. As she dreams of their future wedding, a whole pew of Iñaki's male ex-lovers stand up to object. When Iñaki avows to not get back with his ex-boyfriend Óscar, she replies 'se llama a Óscar, Juan, o Ricardo, pero le echas de menos. Echas de menos la vida que llevabas antes'. This equation of homosexuality and promiscuity speaks to what Ricardo Llamas terms the 'hipercorporalización' of the male body. (1995: 153). He argues that the concept is 'una estrategia recurrente de control y dominación' (1995: 153) over queer people by solely defining them by their bodies through oversexualisation. Thus, no matter what extent Iñaki assimilates to heterosexual culture, his homosexuality still causes Marga to doubt his loyalty to 'straightness' and the security of their relationship. Unlike Alberto, each part of Iñaki's sexual identity is given validity but the choices the narrative presents him with are not valued as equally favourable. Therefore, sexual fluidity is used to construct modes of hetero- and homosexuality that are ultimately incongruous.

The modality of Era 1 offers a varied mix of cinematic representations of sexual fluidity. On the one hand, the attempts of *Segunda piel* to normalise homosexuality reflect the sociocultural shifts experienced by the LGBTQ+ community at the time of the film's release. However, this effort ultimately fails as same-sex desire becomes a problematising force in the narrative and signifiers of queerness become assimilated to the point of erasure. Moreover, although the narrative presents fitting conditions with which to delve into the concept of sexual fluidity, this endeavour is sidelined in favour problematic and binary notions of non-normative desire. However, Era 1 does offer legitimacy to the notion of liminal sexuality in the form of *Sobreviviré.* Yet, although individual characters are allowed to linger in the grey area of amorphous sexual identity, broader cultures of desire remain polarised as heterosexuality and homosexuality are delineated along the homonormative lines of respectability and disreputability.

## 'Una paja entre colegas': mutual masturbation and sexual ambiguity

As Spain continued through the new millennium, a reluctance to forgo the binaries of sexual identity still permeated its cultural production. In the drama *En la ciudad* (2003, d. Cesc Gay), Judith flirts with the idea of romance with her best friend David but ultimately retreats back to where the viewer first finds her: a committed lesbian. Kyril (Dritan Bilba), the immigrant love interest in *Los novios búlgaros* (2003, d. Eloy de la Iglesia) adopts a faux sexual fluidity to use wealthy protagonist Daniel (Fernando Guillén Cuervo) for financial gain. In the ensemble teen drama *Mentiras y gordas (2009,* Alfonso Albacete and David Meknes), liminal sexuality is merely a transition zone for female friends-to-lovers Marina (Ana Polvorosa) and Leo (Duna Jové). Yet, narratives involving a more stabilised and assured bisexuality do emerge in the form of Jaime Gil de Biedma biopic *El cónsul de Sodoma* (2010, d. Sigrid Monleón) and polyamorous romcom *El sexo de los ángeles* (2011, d. Xavier Villaverde).

Though, it is with the advent of streaming services in Spain that I argue that a post-queer modality has emerged in which sexuality is less frequently defined by the necessity for specific categorisation. The shift from the restricted fluidity of Era 1 to the post-queer modality of Era 2 can be seen clearly through the comparison of mutual masturbation scenes from two pivotal texts, Cesc Gay's 2003 coming-of-age film *Krámpack* (2000, d. Cesc Gay), and Netflix-produced teen drama *Élite*[9]. The scenes are critical to the development of gay identity as the act of mutual masturbation itself is symbolic of burgeoning sexuality as it is most likely to be the first act of same-sexual behaviour among young gay men, as evidenced by multiple US studies (Halkitis et al, 2011; Halkitis et al, 2021). Both texts share a framing of adolescence as a prime time for erotic adventure with sexual fluidity presented as a transition zone for leaving heterosexual identity. However, there is a noticeable change in the way in which the exploration of queerness is dealt - with apprehension in *Krámpack* and unashamedness in *Élite* - and ergo the extent it contributes to problematisation within each narrative. Furthermore, though it does uphold certain tenets of heterosexism when viewed through a post-

[9] Mutual masturbation is a trope in the canon of Spanish Queer Cinema mostly notably exemplified in the influential drama *Historias del Kronen* (1995, d. Montxo Armendáriz). The film also explores the issue of repressed homosexual feelings in a homosocial context and has been deftly analysed by Jesús Rodriguez (2008).

feminist lens, *Élite* is more radical in its disruption of the sexual binary by actively rejecting identity labels whereas *Krámpack* characterises its two protagonists through their dichotomous sexualities.

As its title would suggest, mutual masturbation is the central focus of sensual exploration in Krámpack. The film is a slow-burn drama based on a Catalan play and is the second feature from Gay, preceding the aforementioned *En la ciudad*. We follow Nico (Jordi Vilches) and Dani (Fernando Ramallo), two 17-year-olds who spend the summer at Dani's parents' beach house while they are away. Alongside escapades of drinking, dating and partying, the pair practice mutual masturbation which fosters a sexual bond between them. Although straight-identifying Nico sees the Krámpack as nothing more than a heterosexual erotic release, Dani begins to discover homosexual inclinations through this sexual bond and conflict arises between the friends as platonic and romantic emotion collide.

From the start of the first scene of mutual masturbation in the film, adolescence is framed here by Gay as the ultimate stage at which to delve into one's own sexuality in a way very typical of a coming-of-age narrative. Rachel Moseley addresses this in her discussion of the genre of teen drama when she declares that 'teenageness is a significant in-between period' and audiovisusal culture often uses it as a vehicle to deal 'with the stuff of adolescent anxiety: friendship, love, sex and impending adulthood' (2015: 54). As Nico and Dani are getting ready for bed in their shared room, the two discuss their plans for their sexual antics over the summer. Dani reminding Nico that, as minors above the age of consent, 'podemos follar con quien queramos' without any legal repercussions. This realisation generates a long pause between the two, heightening both the youthful awkwardness and the erotic tension of the scene. Nico nods and looks away whereas Dani maintains eye contact with him. Clearly, the 'adolescent anxiety' that prompts the adventure of fluid sexuality does more to destabilise the assuredness of heteromasculinity than supress nascent queerness. This is only reinforced further by the gender ambiguity of the subject 'quien queramos'.

Yet the excitement surrounding such intimacy is undoubtedly tinged with a sense of nervousness and shame. To start with, the pair are framed in a two shot with Dani positioned in foreground facing away from camera and Nico in the background positioned towards the viewer. Already, inner feelings

of queerness are framed as guilt-tinged and clandestine, unlike the proud heterosexuality fronted by the front-facing splayed Nico. Moreover, as the scene progresses and Nico suggests mutual masturbation, Dani proposes they sit on their dominant hands until they are numb in order to simulate the feeling of receiving a hand job. Though the lack of feeling and sensation in each of their hands signifies their aforementioned naïve sexuality as they both teeter on the precipice of having genuine tactile sexual encounter, it also invites a psychological detachment. This facilitates sexual exploration without the shame of stigma consciousness, the degree to which those from minority groups anticipate stereotyping and discrimination by others (Pinel, 1999: 114). Clearly, there is a degree of internalised homophobia at play, certainly with Dani and potentially with Nico, which inhibits their ability to acknowledge an interest in reinscribing their own sexual identity. The pair are then depicted masturbating in a medium closeup with their hands and genitals are just out of shot. This framing creates an atmosphere that is not quite distant but not quite intimate. The ambiguity is extended as both characters face each other with their eyes closed, not only creating a sheepishness characteristic of incipient sexual encounters but also representing an attempted refrain from both Nico and Dani from directly placing erotic desire on the other. This sexual displacement clearly sits more comfortably with Nico who confesses that he is imagining the hand of a TV anchor-woman on his penis. In response to this harsh reminder of heterosexual reality, Dani turns off the lamp in the foreground and tells Nico to be quiet as he is distracting him. Evidently, for Dani mutual masturbation is tool of escapism from the heterosexist everyday with him plunging the room into darkness to delve into liminality and subconscious desires. Though these desires are given credence on-screen, they are confined to the fictional private sphere.

Furthermore, Dani's burgeoning sexuality is problematised by this anxiety which is ultimately the core of the film's narrative. The aforementioned scene fades out to an intertitle which reads: 'no tan rápido que me hace daño'. As a quote from the next scene of mutual masturbation, the intertitle provides a direct narrative bridge between the two sexual encounters and highlights the centrality of Nico and Dani's sexual bond to the film's storyline. Although the second scene of mutual masturbation itself takes eroticism a step further with Dani eventually performing fellatio on Nico, the

act is similarly portrayed as a device to experiment with budding sexuality with Dani not only taking the lead but becoming seemingly more romantically attached to his friend. The trope of unrequited same-sex desire – also seen in *El Mar* (2000, Agustí Villaronga) and *El desenlace* (2005, d. Juan Pinzás) – is once again deployed in Spanish queer cinema to fashion homosexual characterisation in relation to the heterosexuality by which it is surrounded. Sexual fluidity therefore becomes the source of the inner turmoil that comes to define Dani's role in the film.

As such, while the film progresses and the emotional intimacy of its mutual masturbation scenes intensifies, Nico and Dani are ultimately outlined by dichotomous sexual identities. As this antonymic relationship becomes crucial to the plot, the narrative calls to mind the work of Structuralist theorists, like Lévi-Strauss, who argue that the world is divided into binary oppositions - like male/female, hero/villain and past/future – which are a universal model for narrative structures from those of mythology to those of popular culture (1955: 429). As such, Dani's identity is centralised on his 'otherness', that is, his queerness in the homosexual/heterosexual binary, with the narrative tension of the film mostly stemming from his anguish of unrequited attraction. This 'otherness' allows him to participate in exploratory sexual practices with a comparative ease to Nico, but it also prevents his emotional fulfilment as his characterisation leans into what Richard Dyer defines as the filmic trope of the 'sad young gay man' (2001: 117). It must be said that a sense of equilibrium is delivered by the end of *Krámpack,* with the friends reconciling and demonstrating a homosociality between homosexual and heterosexual men rarely seen in the preceding queer cinema of 20th century Spain. However, sexual fluidity is ultimately curtailed as each character completes their narrative by adopting the labels of antonymic sexualities. Therefore, mutual masturbation in Krámpack may remain a crucial formative experience for male teenage sexual exploration, but the characterisations of Nico and Dani leaves no room for liminality. As such, it is only a structuralist, and therefore homonormative, view of sexuality that is examined.

However, with the rise of streaming services in recent years, a more assertive sexual fluidity has emerged LGBTQ+ characters on-screen. This is nowhere more prevalent than in *Élite*, the Netflix teen drama that I contextualised in my previous chapter. I propose that sexual fluidity in the series

contributes to the post-queer modality that exemplifies contemporary portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in Spanish audiovisual culture. Here, I define post-queer in parallel to Angela McRobbie's concept of postfeminism. She states that postfeminism 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force' (2004: 255). By applying this to a queer context, I argue that post-queer modality looks favourably upon the successes of the gay liberation movement while simultaneously characterising it as a thing of the past. As such, post-queerness favours identity construction away from clearly delineated sexualities and consequently purports acculturation, retaining aspects of queer radicalism as well adopting properties of homonormativity. According to Silvia Díaz-Fernández, post-queerness manifests in *Élite* as 'fluid sexualities and polyamory disrupt dominant monogamy' (2022: 2) while also reinforcing 'articulations of hegemonic masculinity with marked classed and heterosexist dimensions' (ibid.). These aspects push *Élite* into a realm beyond Pelayo's 'modalidad integrada' (2011). Although the show characterises teenagehood by erotic curiosity in a similar way to *Krámpack*, its sexual fluidity doesn't create the same level of narrative tension and instead destabilised the hetero- homosexual binary. Yet, normalisation falls foul of upholding another binary: the heterosexist power dynamic.

The mutual masturbation scene in *Élite* takes place in the second episode of season 2 and features Guzmán (Miguel Bernadeau), Ander (Arón Piper) and Polo (Álvaro Rico), three friends and principal characters in the show's ensemble cast. After an evening of excessive drinking to cope with the death of his sister, Guzmán is taken home and put to bed by Ander and Polo. As they both make to leave, Guzmán asks them to stay. He suggests that they all sleep in his bed together like they used to do when they were all younger. He then passes out. Ander is initially hesitant and when reminded by Polo that it's not they first time they've all shared a bed, he replies: 'Ya. Pero yo no había salido del armario y tú no eras bi'. Already, this is an acknowledgment that in teenagehood, tactility and bodily contact carry a weight that is less innocent than in childhood, not least in a fictional setting where 'male characters in the show are constructed as tolerant, liberal and sometimes fluid in their sexuality' (Díaz-Fernández, 2022). In response, Polo asks '¿Bi? ¿Eso es lo que soy, bi?', using sarcasm to

rebuke the idea of labelling his sexuality in reference to who he sleeps with. At this point in the series, his primary sexual relations have been with his ex-girlfriend Carla (Ester Expósito) and Christian, a straight-identifying classmate who the former couple invited into their relationship. Although Carla is originally the principal focus of their erotic desire, Christian and Polo end up developing a relationship of their own by transgressing their normative heterosexual desires for Carla. In her article on the term 'queer', Lisa Duggan argues that the pioneers of the gay liberation movement drew upon 'the more constructionist versions of psychoanalytic theories of sexuality, visionaries planted a utopia in which everyone was potentially polymorphously sexual with everyone else'' (1993: 808). Clearly, this sexual fluidity was the focus of the movement when it was grounded in radicalism rather than the moderation needed to negotiate and integrate with state institutions. Therefore, the rejection of the ontological categorisation of sexuality from Polo also becomes a rebuttal of the homonormativity with which queerness has developed an association.

Furthermore, the unwavering sexual openness in this scene leads to post-queer sexual fluidity bolstering masculine hegemony. When Polo suggests mutual masturbation for them to both relieve themselves, Ander, with his eyes darting to the other side of the bed, reminds him of the unconscious Guzmán. Polo shrugs and pulls a suggestive face, indicating that he is unperturbed. The pair soon start to masturbate together, kissing as the camera pans to Guzmán, lying fast asleep next to them. This shot highlights the way in which the sexual act destabilises hegemonic heterosexuality as it takes place not only in the presence of a non-consenting heterosexual subject, but on his bed, a manifestation of heterosexual activity and, considering Catherine Harper's essay on 'the commonplace rituals and universal emotions of [the] bed (sex, death, birth, sleep, comfort, warmth, nurture, and so on)' (2014), a core site of identity construction. Although, this may at first seem like a radical queering of heterosexist space, given the power dynamics at play between Polo and Guzmán at this point in the series, this destabilisation is actually symptomatic of the show's postfeminist discourses that reinstate ideas of traditional gender roles. When Polo first told Guzmán of his aforementioned arrangement with Carla and Christian, Guzmán infers that Christian is taking advantage of Polo and orders him to end it. Guzmán is the embodiment of traditional masculinity –

heterosexual, physically strong, dominant – and Polo is constructed as his subordinate: softer, more liberal, with queer desires. These traits match James Messerschmidt and Michael Messner's definition of 'new masculinity' which is often employed by men as a tool for 'concealing and reproducing gender, race and class inequalities' (2018: 30). Thus, Polo is still culpable of performing a problematic masculinity, albeit one that could only be identified as such through a postfeminist lens. With his nonchalant attitude towards violating Guzmán's heterosexual space, it's clear that Polo encourages Ander to mutually masturbate to slyly regain dominance over Guzmán for denigrating his non-normative sex practices. Though Polo exhibits a softer 'new' version of masculinity, he is still confined to a constant struggle of performing hegemonic masculinity. These traditional gender practices, of course, underpin typical behaviours of homonormativity.

It is also essential to note how the act of mutual masturbation has a varying degree of eventual relevance to the overall narrative of *Élite* in comparison to *Krámpack*. In the episode following the scene of mutual masturbation, the two are getting changed in the locker room when Ander is standoffish with Polo after the latter asks the former for help with studying. Then, Polo loudly asks 'Solo fue una paja entre colegas, no?'. Two background characters pause and stare in shock. Ander confronts them, asking 'Qué miráis?'. They then look away and busy themselves with getting dressed. For two queer characters to be so publicly brazen and confrontational about their sexual history in a locker room, itself an environment symbolic of masculine hegemony, demonstrates a shift in queer audiovisual representation from an activist to integrated as described by Pelayo (2011), which itself has paved the way for depictions of sexual identities with permeable limits. Moreover, the phrase 'una paja entre colegas', is used on separate occasions by Polo and Ander refer to the practice of mutual masturbation both before and after it occurs. Evidently, the characters' attitude towards casual sex demonstrates that 'the fluidity of adolescent relationships […] challenges traditional perspectives on the meaning and measurement of dating and sexual relationships' (Manning et al, 2014), as many studies on the psychology of teenage sexuality have concurred. Furthermore, the limited change in the 'colegas' relationship after their experience of mutual masturbation is indicative of the previously stated 'up for it' (Gill, 2007: 153) attitude of the show's characters and the overall incidental nature of

the act – a stark difference from Nico and Dani in *Krámpack*. Although, Ander eventually admits that he has been avoiding Polo as he feels guilty for cheating on his current lover Omar, the incident is only mentioned in the two stated episodes. From a narrative perspective, mutual masturbation is primarily used as device in *Élite* to question Ander's loyalty to Omar and the status of their relationship rather than as an integral exploration of burgeoning homosexuality like in *Krámpack.*

Thus, the two texts analysed in this section present a clear shift in the modality of representation of sexual fluidity in Era 1 and 2. For *Krámpack*, though sexual fluidity is presented as a transition zone for leaving heterosexual identity, it is tinged with heteronormative modes of shame and apprehension that ultimately serves as a drive for the narrative. By its conclusion, its protagonists abandon fluidity and retreat to polarised sexual identities. As for *Élite*, liminal desire is instead exhibited with pride and does not directly contribute to the problematisation of its narrative. Furthermore, *Élite* is more radical in its disruption of the sexual binary by actively rejecting identity labels. However, its post-queer modality does uphold certain tenets of heterosexism which contribute to its homonormative framing.

## Post-queerness in *La casa de papel*

A study of Spanish-produced Netflix content would seem incomplete without a mention of the heist crime drama *La casa de papel*. Created by Álex Pina, a veteran writer-producer, the show started its life as a weekly broadcast series on Antena 3, a subsidiary of Atresmedia, between May and November 2017. With moderate viewing figures and respectable critical acclaim, Netflix acquired exclusive global SVOD rights before the end of the programme's initial run. By amping up the following season's production budget by more than 50% (Hopewell & Lang, 2019), the streaming service saw success as the show 'eventually rose to be the number one worldwide in-demand show on Netflix, holding that position for 995 straight days' (Edgerton, 2023: 131). Even at the time of writing, Part 5, 4 and 3 of *La casa de papel* respectively occupy the 2$^{nd}$, 4$^{th}$, and 5$^{th}$ positions of the platform's most popular non-English language TV series of all time. As an undeniable breakout hit,

the show was the first to prove to Netflix that locally-produced non-anglophonic content can resonate with global audiences.

Considering the history of the show's production and the fact that this research focuses on Netflix as a case study, my analysis will focus only on the series funded by the platform: namely Part 3, 4 and 5. The premise continues along the same lines as the show's primary run where, following the events of the first heist, the gang plan and execute a second robbery. With the help some new additions to the original crew, the team aim to plunder gold from the Bank of Spain and must manage the challenges of hostages, external police forces and their own interpersonal relationships. One of the new additions who is at the centre of several of these said relationship is Palermo (Rodrigo de la Serna), an Argentine engineer and the group's leader inside the bank. He engages in sexual intimacy, and eventually in romance, with Helsinki (Darko Perić), the crew's muscle man. However, he is still grief-stricken over Berlin (Pedro Alonso), the second-in-command of the initial heist who died in Part 2 of the show but still appears in the Netflix iteration in the form of flashbacks. The use of sexual classifications in these relationships has a twofold effect. Firstly, in a similar vein to *Élite*, a post-queer modality is partially constructed through masculine assertions of dominance but is ultimately undermined by feminine emotion and same-sex desire. Secondly, the indeterminate nature of Berlin's sexuality allows a layered and complex approach to attraction and desire to be explored. I argue that both these elements characterise the shift from Era 1 and 2 in the Spanish cultural depictions of sexual fluidity.

The first notable scene to consider occurs in the fifth episode Part 3 after a tense standoff between Palermo and Nairobi (Alba Flores), another crew member, over his use of violence towards a hostage. As a retort, Palermo mocks her over her attachment to Helsinki, telling her that she can only ever be 'la amiga del maricón'. Here, the aforementioned trope of unrequited same-sex desire, as exemplified in *Krámpack*, is reversed but the narrative reinscribes a similarly traditional dichotomy of sexuality. However, there is arguably a degree of radicality in the heterosocial bond between Nairobi and Helsinki. As Stephen Maddison writes in his monograph *Fags, Hags, and Queer Sisters*, women in such relationships are 'undertaking acts of gender dissent' (2000: 10) and 'do so as a form of political

resistance' (ibid.). However, instead of examining the subversive potential of their attachment, the narrative highlights it as a weakness for Nairobi and Helsinki as crew members, with Palermo referring to it as 'mochilita emocional'. Indeed, the relationship becomes a component of the post-queer love triangle constructed in this scene as explained by Palermo: 'Vos amás el gordo. El gordo me ama a mí. Y yo no amo a nadie'. I define this triangle as post-queer for two reasons. Firstly, Helsinki's homosexuality does not diminish Nairobi's attraction to him. Secondly, Palermo speaks it into existence in order to assert a heterosexist dominance of the feminine, represented here by emotional connection. This scene, after all, has the primary narrative function of deciding the victor of the power struggle between Palermo and Nairobi. Yet, *La casa de papel* still manages to undermine the dynamics of heterosexism by emphasising a strength of sentimentality. Nairobi proudly admits her love for Helsinki before reminding Palermo that he didn't have the courage to do the same to Berlin while he was alive. As Palermo stands dejected, she tells the group 'pongámonos a trabajar'; she has won the battle for leadership. Male sexuality as means to assert male power is thwarted by Maddison's 'heterosocial dissent' (2000: 13) as a desire that is not strictly heterosexual emerges as the dominant force. Although the sexual identities in this scene are more fixed than fluid, they still hold subversive potential for challenging existing heteronormativity.

Palermo and Berlin's relationship is revisited in more depth in the concluding episode of Part 4 in a scene that alludes to a more complex definition of sexuality. The episode opens with a scene where Berlin confronts Palermo's barely concealed attraction towards him. The former admits that there is something between them that surpasses the feelings he has had for any of the women he has married. However, he then states that 'tú y yo somos almas gemelas pero al 99%' and that 'ese 1% es una pequeña mitocondria me lo marca el deseo'. Here, the narrative presents sexuality as a multi-faceted concept where romantic attraction and erotic inclination cannot always be assumed to be synonymous. Newly coined labels like demisexual or homoromantic may help define what Berlin is describing but the show instead punts for something more indeterminate. By breaking down the need to categorise desire in this instance, unlike in the aforementioned examples of Era 1, a post-Queer conceptualisation of sexuality is projected. Moreover, later in the scene two do passionately kiss, but

Berlin expresses a lack of sexual attraction towards Palermo. Here, he is not a depicted as a repressed homosexual, à la Alberto in *Segunda piel*, as he is willing to explore the components of his sexuality without exhibiting anguish over being caught between two identities.

Consequently, *La casa de papel* exemplifies a post-queer modality similar to *Élite*. To reiterate my previous definition, this frame simultaneously retains aspects of queer radicalism while adopting properties of homonormativity. Thus, it is conceived in the show's depiction of sexual fluidity in several ways. Firstly, in homonormative assertion of masculine dominance from Palmero in his power struggle with Nairobi. Secondly, in the radical destabilising of this dominance through feminine emotional. Lastly, a post-queer modality emerges through the lack of classification, and problematisation, of Berlin's nebulous sexual identity.

## Conclusion

Above all, this chapter outlines a clear change in the portrayal of sexual fluidity between Era 1 and 2. In the former, the overall effort to normalise same-sex desire reflects the contemporary sociocultural shifts for the LGBTQ+ community but liminal desire isn't given legitimacy in the aforementioned narrative examples. Also, tropes regarding homosexuality still pervade such as internalised homophobia and a homonormative reading of promiscuity as inherently negative. However, the mode of representation in Era 2 sees characters express their fluid sexuality with pride in deproblematised narratives. This era is also characterised by its adoption of a post-queer modality. This narratives retain certain radical elements of queerness, like the disruption of the sexual binary, while also purporting elements of homonormativity like hegemonic assertions of masculine dominance.

# Chapter 3: Transgender Narratives

As different contemporary societies grapple with the ever-evolving complexity of postmodern gender identities, the film and television industries have become vital media for shedding light on the experiences of transgender individuals. In turn, they also transform how this community might be regarded by wider society (see: Galán, Puras & Riley, 2009; Pang, 2020). Additionally, the transgender soma has come to represent a core part of the postmodern cultural imaginary. As Jack Halberstam states in his study on gender non-conformity in Anglo-American culture: 'the body in transition indelibly marks late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century visual fantasy' (2005: 76).

The international prevalence of transgenderism on screen has grown since the turn of the millennium (Mocarski et al: 2019). As Rebecca Bell-Metereau asserts in her monograph *Transgender Cinema,* the new millennium 'gave a genuine voice and artistic agency to transgender people' (2019: 47). This can be attributed to the explosion of audiovisual content made available by the internet and the newly-gained commercial value for producers to target niche and diverse audiences. Revry, which in its own words is a 'LGBTQ-first streaming network', was launched in 2016 and caters exclusively to a Queer viewership. Yet, to assume that increased visibility in the fictional sphere automatically elicits a positive response from the transgender community is wrong-footed, as concluded by Villegas-Simón et al in their research on transgender narratives on Spanish television. They argue that 'the representation of trans characters is mainly based on a transnormative pattern, understood as a social construct that decides which trans people are acceptable and which are not' (2023: 1). As such, it is important to chart the qualitative and as well as quantitative change in transgender

representation in the age of streaming, especially in an Iberian Spanish context where there has been little previous research (Cobo-Durán & Otero-Escudero, 2021: 1).

This chapter aims to show that transness in Era 1 is characterised by its focus on transfemininity, the social rejection of gender non-conformity and the destabilisation of the heteronormative gender binary. Moreover, I argue that the modal shift in Era 2 affords an exploration of transmasculinity with a degree of social integration. Yet, there is also a tendency of homonormative gender classifications alongside cultural cliches of transness such as the notion of bodily entrapment, the 'mirror scene' and a hyperfixation on genitalia.

## Transgenderism in Spain

When it comes to transgender narratives in the Spanish context, the country's history is instrumental in understanding a corpus of queer storytelling unique as regards its Western European counterparts. A nation of stifled sexuality lost its inhibitions after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 and the ensuing transition to democracy saw great political and cultural change for the transgender community. In 1977, Maria Carmen G.D. became transgender woman to be legally recognised as such after undergoing gender affirmation surgery (Gradillas, 2003). The case kickstarted a movement to obtain transgender civil rights. Concurrently, the gradual easing of the dictatorship's censorship laws allowed a different type of Queer narrative to take to the screen. The notoriety of actresses Yeda Brown and Bibi Andersen grew exponentially, making them the country's first transgender celebrities. Although both women were preceded by France's Coccinelle, an actress and club singer prominent in 1960s Paris, it is remarkable that stars such a Brown and Andersen could arise from a country still so alien to the liberalised culture of much of modern Europe. Their fame is revelatory of the national psyche and, as John Hooper writes in his monograph on post-

Franco Spain, Andersen especially is ‘evidence that the Spanish feel a need for some sort of antidote to the rigid gender stereotyping which is still so much a part of their culture’ (2006: 163). This need has come to define the public consciousness of the Transition and still pervades analysis of Spanish texts either made or set during the final quarter of the 20th century. The historical drama *Te estoy amando locamente* (2023, d. Alejandro Marín) which follows a Catholic mother’s involvement with the Andalucian LGBTQ+ movement of 1977 is an extremely recent case in point.

It is also important to note that in comparison to other European cinemas in the 20th century, Spain has a much richer history of transgender narratives. *Adam est… Ève (*1954*, d.* René Gaveau*),* the French comedy about a sex-changing boxer, certainly led the vanguard for gender non-conformity on-screen. However, the intervening 43 years between that and the release of the Franco-Belgian *Ma vie en rose* (1997, d. Alain Berliner) saw a scarcity of francophone transgender film. Similarly, Italy offers a couple of strong examples in the screwball comedies *Scusi, lei è normale? (*1979, d. Umberto Lenzi) and *Come mi vuoi (*1996, d. Carmine Amoroso*)*. Yet, it is clear that Spain, perhaps due to Hooper’s previous point, leads Southern Europe in the filmic exploration of gender diversity in the second half of the 20th century.

It is useful to understand transgender cinema in 20th century Spain, as Fouz-Hernández describes, as an evolution from pathological to political to playful to risqué (2007: 160). Firstly, in the examples of on-screen transgender narratives from Franco-era Spain, the gender-nonconformity is characterised by pathologisation. The most prominent example from this era is the comedy *Mi querida señorita (*1972, d. Jaime de Armiñán*)*. The film follows Adela, who is played by famed comic actor José Luiz López Vázquez, who spends decades shaving her facial hair and questioning her attraction to women only to be told by her doctor that she is actually a man. Although the film was radical compared to what was being

produced in Europe at the time, the film's adherence to censorship laws means that Adela's gender is largely played for laughs and conveys a pronounced anxiety around sexual deviation. However, the film is notable As Marvin D'lugo notes in his *Guide to the Cinema of Spain*, it marks the start of a decades-long trend in Spanish cinema which 'emphasizes the grotesque cultural distortions of sexual identity' to highlight 'the cultural and ideological implications of sexual marginalization in Francoist Spain' (1997: 71).

The democratic transition saw a more political take on transgenderism in Spanish cinema with an overall more sympathetic characterisation of its subjects. *Cambio de sexo* (1977, d. Vicente Aranda*)* sees José Maria escape a life of harassment and ostracism to move to Madrid and transition to Maria José under the mentorship of Bibi Andersen, playing a fictionalised version of herself. Similarly, *El transexual* (1977, d. José Jara) chronicles the life of showgirl Lona who fearfully keeps her transgender identity a secret from her partner. However, typical of the era, these two films pathologize transgenderism and centre the concept of 'being trapped in the wrong body'. Gender reassignment surgery is the ultimate driving force for both Maria and Lona, with the latter ultimately dying from her procedure.

The 1980s saw many breakthroughs for the transgender community as their concerns became articulated by the Spanish feminist movement for the first time (Lucas Platero & Ortega-Arjonilla, 2016). In tandem, there was also a cultural shift to a more playful sensibility in transgender fictions primarily due to the emergence of internationally acclaimed film director Pedro Almodóvar. His treatment of transgender stories in *La ley del deseo* (1987, d. Pedro Almodóvar) and *Tacones lejanos* (1991, d. Pedro Almodóvar) celebrated the diversity of the transgender experience in narratives that surpass the traditional notions of gender. In fact, as Brigida M. Pastor writes in her study of the former that Almodóvar's eloquent use of bodily inversion 'implies the transgression of a culturally designed model of conduct that is heterosexual, and, therefore, implies the complete negation of that model or norm' (2006:8).

She continues by adding that 'Almodóvar designs a variety of characters, distinctive in their versatile combination of sexuality and gender, in order to illustrate cultural aspects which need to be reevaluated, to make visible what in culture has often become invisible' (2006: 9). Thus, gender non-conformity in Spanish cinema continues its agenda to undo the legacy of Franco and foster a greater cultural tolerance.

Finally, these modes lead 'quite naturally to the more risqué overtures' of transgender cinema in the late 1990s and 2000s. This includes *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999, d. Pedro Almodóvar) and *La mala educación* (2004, d. Pedro Almodóvar) which I will analyse in the following section.

## 'Unlimited transvestism' and 'los chicas' Almodóvar

Almodóvar treatment of transgenderism in his films is characterised by his bridging the disparity between high-brow and low-brow depictions of gender non-conformity. As Fouz-Hernández and Martínez Expósito explain, the former tends 'to challenge commonly held assumptions' (2007: 137-8), the latter 'perpetuate those same assumptions' (ibid), yet Almodóvar 'contested and recycled [this distinction] into a new paradigm, (the quality popular film)' (ibid). This is aptly demonstrated by the two highest grossing films from Era 1 Almodóvar: *Todo sobre mi madre* and *La mala educación*. Where the former allowed the director to obtain a significant global reach compared to contemporary Spanish titles, the latter marked the first time that he revisited the period in which he began filmmaking: the years of the transition to democracy and La Movida Madrileña. Both, of course, have risqué transgender characters at the heart of their stories. I argue that, in a manner which evokes Fouz-Hernández's previous assertion, these films simultaneously exhibit problematic tropes that are seen less frequently in today's narratives while also subvert the heteronormative

matrix. This is achieved the portrayal of the transgender subject as a social outcast with a fluid approach to the concept of gender.

In brief, *Todo sobre mi madre* follows Manuela (Cecilia Roth), a grieving nurse who attempts to track down her late son's father in Barcelona. The man in question, to whom she is estranged, has transitioned in the intervening years and is now living as a transgender woman named Lola (Toni Cantó). Manuela attempts to search for Lola in Raval's 'el campo', known as Barcelona's street prostitution hotspot and a hub for transgender sex workers. As she arrives, Manuela's taxi is a part of a carousel of cars driven by prospective 'johns', an image reminiscent of a production line, reducing Barcelona's transgender women to mere sexual consumables. The audience gaze is then mediated through Manuela's as a long pan of the sex workers show them giving blowjobs, exposing their breasts, and making erotic gestures to attract business, the night-time darkness only adding to the scene's seediness. In the narrative's first introduction of the transgender experience, transwomen are inextricably linked with sexual commodification in a tradition in-keeping with earlier Spanish cinema such as *El transexual (*1977*)* and *Vestida de azul (*1983, d. Antonio Giménez-Rico*).* Considering contemporary developments in both the LGBTQ+ and feminist movements in Spain, this filmic introduction to the community as social outcasts can be viewed as reductive. For example, at the time of the film's release, the word 'travesti' had fallen out of usage due to its association with prostitution (Vartabredian, 2012: 5) and has since been replaced by the more politically correct 'transgénero'. Clearly, the transgender community were actively trying to disassociate with the image of sordidness and delinquency to gain ground in its fight for civil rights. By effectively portraying transgender women as lewd social pariahs, Almodóvar seemingly counteracts his 'larger project' as described by Marvin D'Lugo: 'the demarginalization of gays, lesbians, and transsexuals' (1997: 117). Therefore, despite often been heralded as a critical voice for Spain's LGBTQ+ community, the

hypersexualisation of the transgender body in the Raval scene makes Almodóvar appear behind the curve.

The social rejection of the transgender community is further highlighted as the audience meet La Agrado (Antonia San Juan), Lola's former friend who becomes the primary transgender character of the film. She is introduced in a shot where she is being beaten up by an abusive client. Here, the vulnerability of the working girls of the Raval is emphasised as are the precarious modes of survival that are forced upon transgender women in Spain. Moreover, the normalisation of said violence is reflected in Agrado's humorously unperturbed reaction to Manuela jumping to her defence by thumping her client over the head with a rock. She calls him a 'maricón' and jibes at his failed attempt at murder. The narrative speaks to the harsher elements of social reality as transgender characters are marked by an exclusion that makes them vulnerability to hostility and violence. This points to an actuality still prevalent today as recent studies of the community demonstrate their experience of comparatively high levels of sexual violence (Fernández-Rouco et al, 2017; Aparicio-García et al, 2018). Clearly, the film is not interested in pursuing an idealised imaginary for a transgender audience and instead opts for a form of social realism more in keeping with its risqué mode.

Furthermore, Almodóvar also continues to present transgenderism as an identity destined to live in the margins of society in *La mala educación*. To summarise what is a very complex plot, the text is set in 1980 and adopts the stylings of film noir as well as the device of a narrative-within-a-narrative to explore the relationship between Enrique (Fele Martínez) and Ignacio (Gael García Bernal), two reunited lovers and childhood friends. Towards the end of the film, it is revealed that the Ignacio the audience initially meets is actually an imposter. Bernal's character is actually the younger brother of the 'real' Ignacio (Francisco Boira), a heroin addict who tries to raise money for gender affirmation surgery through blackmail. Again, the transgender subject operates within the sphere of illegality rather than social

respectability. In fact, it is this extortion that causes Ignacio's undoing as his younger brother and his blackmail target Berenguer (Lluís Homar), a former priest who sexually exploited him as a child, conspire to murder him by procuring a fatal dose of heroin. As he is about the ingest this final dose, the camera pans from the drug paraphernalia held by Ignacio to a close-up shot of his semi-exposed breasts. At once, Ignacio is both fetishised and pathologized in a narrative that ultimately punishes him for his transgressions. However, the transgender body in this scene is also revealing of the film's relationship to the history of Spain. The addiction that comes to predominantly characterise Ignacio conjures up associations of the unbridled hedonism of La Movida and its more destructive ramifications. As Isolina Ballesteros observes of Almodóvar's treatment of the infamous countercultural movement, 'he strips it of its glamourous aura and reveals that it was not as liberated as the expressions of the elite, but reduced, group of night birds might suggest' (2009: 94). Although I would argue that filmmaker is no stranger to romanticising this era, as in his earliest works *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (1980) and *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982), his retrospective view of La Movida highlights the physical and mental damage caused by its focus on drug taking. Similarly, in a piece on textual poaching for *The Annual Harvard Film Review*, Marvin d'Lugo opines that the film's evocation of La Movida is 'a cautionary political tale for Spaniards as an allegory of the persistence of old Spain in its varied disguises' (2005: 27). He continues to say that Ignacio can be seen as falling victim to 'the predatory villains of the Old Spanish culture' (2005: 27), namely the social conservatism of the Catholic Church and the ever-prevailing culture of machismo. It is Berenguer that supplies the deadly batch of heroin and Ignacio's desire to forgo androgyny and surgically obtain a feminised form that drives him to his death. At once, *La mala educación* condemns the oppressive society that brings Ignacio's pitiful situation into being while signalling the death of La Movida's utopian illusion of liberation. This

fictional representation of gender transition declares that the subject remains as much of a pariah in 1980 as the postmodern society in which the film was released.

However, the relationship that Almodóvar's transgender characters have to their own gender unlocks a subversive potential that destabilises the heteronormative gender matrix. Paul Julian Smith terms the identities of these characters as 'unlimited transvestism' (2000: 16), a deconstructivist approach to the binaries that compose much of an individual's identity: male/female; heterosexual/homosexual, sex/gender. This is nowhere more prevalent than in the scene of Agrado's theatre monologue, arguably the most iconic expression of the transgender experience in the history of Spanish film. When Huma (Marisa Paredes), an actress who befriends Manuela, and her lover-cum-co-star beat each other up in a backstage fight, the performance of their play is cancelled. Yet, to appease the theatre audience, Agrado steps in and performs and one-woman speech about her life and her 'authenticity'.

In the monologue itself, Agrado recounts the history of various parts of her body by explaining each of her surgeries and their cost. Her account lays bare the stark terms of the idealised female form as one that can be customised: Agrado uses the phrase 'todo hecho a medida'. As she discursively and corporally creates her identity, Agrado defines 'authenticity' as a self-generated concept and highlights how her sum of parts has allowed her to present as a woman despite still being biologically male. Therefore, the reinvention of the queer self is presented as a goal that can be attained by utilising the performative tenets of heteronormativity. Through this characterisation of Agrado, the transgender body is presented as a locus of commodification and metonymical function. In her book *Carnal Thoughts*, cultural critic Vivian Sobchack greatly emphasises the significance of prothetics and metonomy in relation to the concept of 'authenticity'. She writes: 'Metonomy brings together two objects each of which constitutes an absolutely separate whole' (2004: 213) and that the concept concerns itself with the 'purpose of an instrument' and with 'cause and effect' (2004:

213). So, as Agrado has her nose or jawbone shaven down or acquires silicone implants, each component of her body is injected with a life unto itself. The postmodern view of gender purported by the narrative is one of commodification and individualism, free of the constraints of bodily matter or heteronormativity. The desired 'effect' of appearing more feminised is achieved and Agrado fulfils her 'purpose' of 'hacerle la vida agradable a los demás' while still retaining her male biology. Therefore, Agrado exemplifies Smith's 'unlimited transvestism' (1999: 16) as she creates her own definition of authenticity.

In fact, this radical redefinition of gender performativity is mirrored by Zahara in *La mala educación*. The character is the protagonist of 'La visita' - a script that functions as the film's aforementioned narrative-within-a-narrative - and is played in drag by Bernal's version of Ignacio. As she begins her performance, the viewer first sees Zahara from a slow ground-up pan of her costume, a classic cinematic trope for introducing female characters through the male gaze. Wearing a design from occasional Almodóvar collaborator Jean-Paul Gaultier, her gown is feathered, sequined, skin-tight and flesh-toned with embellishments to represent a nude woman's body. The camera lingers on a glittered triangular patch on the crotch of her dress intended to symbolise a female pubis. This visually fetishistic cinematography not only positions Zahara as an object of desire but regenders Ángel/Ignacio by superimposing femininity onto a masculine subject. To recapitulate Pastor's observation of bodily inversion in *La ley del deseo* (1987), transgenderism for Almodóvar's 'implies the transgression of a culturally designed model of conduct that is heterosexual, and, therefore, implies the complete negation of that model or norm' (2006:8). Much like Agrado's monologue and her redefinition of authenticity, Zahara's presentation emphasises how the queer self-image transcends the boundaries of the heteronormative matrix.

As the narrative moves forward from Zahara's performance, she seduces a male audience member after the show and plans to steal from him in his nearby hotel room. At this point, it

is crucial to consider the film's generic elements to understand its presentation of transgenderism. Although upon its release some critics such as Roger Ebert and Peter Bradshaw highlight the film as a continuation of Almodóvar's passion for melodrama, the general consensus among reviewers is that *La Mala Educación* grounds much of itself in the cinematic tradition of film noir. Likewise, academic discussions of the film have also affirmed its label of film noir with Marvin D'Lugo and Víctor Fuentes citing 'flashback storytelling' (2006: 120) and 'duality and duplicity' (2009: 436) respectively as reasons for its generic designation. Therefore, if one can understand *La Mala Educación* as noir, the viewer can legitimately perceive Zahara as a femme fatale, not least in light of her introduction via a classic slow pan from the ground up.

When Zahara takes a drunken admirer – who eventually turns out to be her estranged school friend – back to his hotel, she mounts him after he passes out. Now, her introductory costume seems like an allusion to Eve, the original femme fatale. Despite being unconscious, he is fully erect and consequently Zahara uses his penis to anally penetrate herself. This image becomes a visual representation of the femme fatale as a siren who, as Angela Martin writes in her study on women in 1940s film noir, offers 'a masculine view of female sexuality' (Martin, 1998: 208). Almodóvar of course take this one step further by centring on the allure and danger of transgender female sexuality. Furthermore, in this example the dominant and submissive roles of coitus are reversed as the penetrated becomes the active participant while the penetrator is passive. This dismantling of the boundaries between oppositional concepts - dominant/submissive, male/female, and homosexual/heterosexual - demonstrates what cultural theorist Marjorie Garber describes as the destabilizing value of transgenderism (1993: 133). The film therefore queers a stock character 'designed to attain agency and power in a male-dominated world' (Walker, 2006: 23) to mirror the way in which queer bodies

rearticulate heteronormative power dynamics to vindicate culturally stigmatized forms of gender expression.

Through the characters of Agrado, Iganacio and Zahara, Almodóvar creates the aforementioned 'new paradigm' of cinematic transgenderism. At once, these characters destabilise notions of homonormativity while simultaneously embodying some of the more problematic transgender stereotypes. This occurs firstly through an approach to gender that centres on 'unlimited transvestism' and the destabilisation of the binaries of identity and secondly through the association of transgenderism with prostitution, criminality and general social rejection.

## All 'woke' and mirrors: Netflix Spain's transgender narratives

Given that in *La mala educación* the villainous Juan gets his comeuppance by having his acting career confined to the lows of the small screen, it is ironic that this research moves onto the now dominant cultural form of televisual narratives. To effectively evaluate the audiovisual representation of transgenderism in present-day Spain, one must acknowledge that as the country's cinema industry has waned, its production for streaming services has blossomed. In their work on video-on-demand services in Spain, Deborah Castro and Concepción Cascajosa assert that streaming platforms have internationalised and increased the production of Spanish audiovisual fiction 'not only by facilitating its consumption outside of the country and the Latin American region (on transnational services such as Netflix) but also by challenging its well established format characteristics to make it more attractive to buyers outside Spain (e.g., by reducing the number of episodes per season)' (2020: 160).

I aim to demonstrate below that this new way of consuming fiction has brought with it an entirely different mode of transgender representation. Like many other SVODs, Netflix has

found profitability in promoting diversity and inclusion in its programming (Oliveira Silva & Lima Satler, 2019: 1). Consequently, the transgender characters on the platform find themselves socially integrated within their (usually heteronormative) environments in contrast to the likes of Agrado, Lola, Zahara and Ignacio. Furthermore, this integration also leads to a gender euphoria that has rarely been shown in transgender narratives as the service attempts to court gender non-conforming audiences by affirming their identities through positive representation.

Nevertheless, much like Almodóvar 's 'new paradigm' continued to perpetuate certain assumptions about transgenderism, these elements of change are accompanied by several well-worn tropes. The first is the 'mirror scene', which sees 'the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject, freezes it, frames it schematically in narrative' (Prosser, 1998:100). Secondly, there is still a prominence of discourse on transgender characters being 'trapped in the wrong body'. As Chung-Hao Ku notes in her research on the bodily entrapment trope in literature, ' "wrong body" discourse makes no room for trans subjects who identified as nonbinary, who pursued non-genital transition, or who conceptualized sex and gender in genital yet nonconformist fashions (for example, eunuch-identified individuals)' (2020: 136). I argue that Netflix Spain largely conforms to this reading. Finally, I aim to show that a hyperfixation on transgender genitalia still exists in Spanish audiovisual culture.

The first example of this new style of transgender portrayal arrived thanks to a key moment in Spain's cultural shift from film to television production. In March 2016 when Netflix announced that it would co-produce, alongside domestic company Bambú Producciones, its first original TV series in Spain: *Las chicas de cable*. The show follows the lives of four young women in 1920s Madrid who work together for the country's first telephone company. Created by Spanish television titan Teresa Fernández-Valdés, the series shares many traits

with *Gran Hotel* and *Velvet*, previous Bambú productions that saw moderate international success. All three programs have a period setting, a focus on feminist themes, and a melodramatic plot structure typical of soap operas. *Las chicas de cable* is a show aimed at a female audience which is unsurprising considering Fernández-Valdés herself attests the success of her production company to its base, proclaiming that 'las mujeres somos más fieles en el consumo' (Faginas, 2017). Therefore, given Netflix's reputation for releasing television with groundbreaking treatment of gender issues targeted at more niche sections of society – see: *Orange is the New Black* or *Sense8* – this transnational collaboration has the potential to offer a progressive and impactful contribution to the social debate on feminism in Spain.

Among the most innovative elements of the shows run is the relationship between Carlota (Ana Fernández) and Sara (Ana Polvorosa). The former is a principal cast member and rebellious aristocrat who gets a job as a telephone operator at the company where the latter is a manager. What starts off as a sexually-fluid, polyamorous love triangle alongside Carlota's initial romantic interest Miguel becomes a monogamous queer relationship as Sara begins to inhabit her transgender identity from season 2, eventually transitioning into Óscar. Although preceded by transgender characters in *Farmacia de guardia*, *Cuéntame comó pasó,* and of course the aforementioned cinematic examples, Sara/Óscar represents the advent of Spanish transgenderism for the global market. This new form of transgender narrative has two noticeable changes. On the one hand, trans characters are allowed to be socially integrated and euphoric with their gender presentation. However, their stories also employ cliches like the 'mirror scene' and the concept of bodily entrapment while also abandoning the more radical elements of Almodóvar's characters like gender fluidity.

In some ways, Sara/Óscar is a departure from historical transgender representation in Spanish audiovisual culture. Firstly, unlike the female subjects who tend to dominate the general

perception of transgenderism, there is a dearth of transmasculinity screen. As recently proclaimed in the Philadelphia Gay News by actor Hennessy Winkler, 'trans male erasure in the entertainment industry is a real thing. A lot of people really don't know that trans men exist yet.' (Kelsall, 2022). Although, Winkler spoke of American cinema, the same sentiment can be applied to a Hispanic context. Furthermore, Sara is introduced to the audience as and initially defined by her managerial status at the telephone company. Even in the show's final series, when the character is fully presenting as Óscar, he works as a journalist reporting on the civil war for a French publication. These roles are professional, demonstrate a decent degree of education and solidify a middle-class status. This level of social integration for a transgender character is a sharp contrast from the streetwalking Agrado or the hustling Zahara who exist on the margins of society and use criminality as a means to survive.

However, even from the beginnings of her gender identity story arc, Sara exhibits shades of cliché in the characterisation of her transness. For context, at the start of season 2, Angeles (Maggie Civantos) kills her abusive husband Mario (Sergio Mur) in an act of self-defence and her friends decide to help her cover up the crime. To throw the police's scent off of Angeles, Sara dresses up as Mario and leaves his suitcase on a train. This is the first time that the audience sees her as male-presenting. Later, Carlota is suspicious of plans Sara has made for the evening and finds a hotel room key among her belongings. Calling up the hotel to found out more, they tell her the room the key corresponds to is booked for an Óscar Ruiz. She then goes to the hotel and finds Sara presenting as Óscar. The fourth episode of season 2 opens with Sara explaining her transness to Carlota. Dressing up as Mario unleashed previously repressed parts of her gender identity. She describes how she used to borrow her brother's clothes and go play out on the street. When her father tried to use threats to make

her stop, she expressed that she felt like ‘un hombre encerrado en el cuerpo de una mujer’. Consequently, he beat her and she stifled her feelings of dysphoria out of fear.

Immediately, the narrative links the self-discovery of non-normative gender identity with the concept of being ‘trapped in the wrong body’. It is undeniable that this understanding of dysphoria pervaded early discourse of transgenderism. Jan Morris opens her autobiography with the statement: ‘I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body’ (1974: 1) as Christine Jorgensen claims in a family letter that ‘Nature made a mistake, which [she has] had corrected’ (2000) via surgery. As Jay Prosser concludes in his monograph *Second Skins:* ‘If the goal of transsexual transition is to align the feeling of gendered embodiment with material body,’ the notion of bodily entrapment ‘suggests how body image is radically split off from the material body in the first place, how body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to conform to it’ (1998: 69). Yet, new thinking on orientating transness by bodily entrapment has critiqued this approach as limited by a dimorphous, genital-based view of gender. Julian Carter writes in *Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time* that the paradigm of the ‘wrong body’ reduces corporality to ‘inconvenient matter’ in relation to the psyche and also ‘tends to impose a linear temporality on transition’ (2022: 141). That is, the transgender subject is predisposed to hate their own physical body and must alter it to successfully embody transness. This temporality presupposes several requirements for trans identification including the erasure of any preoperative bodily pleasure and essentialising the acquiescence of the ‘right’ postoperative body, an aesthetic predominantly ruled by the heteronormative gender binary.

Thus, the characterisation of Sara is left to occupy and interesting space. As gender reassignment surgery was not available in Spain during the narrative’s setting, there would be limited scope for plot progression in focusing her personal struggles on her own genitalia. In

addition, this would seemingly contradict the sexual enjoyment with Carlota that fuelled the majority of her storyline in the show's first season. However, her dysphoria is still defined by a mind-body duality to enable a mostly heterosexual audience to conceptualise an early realisation of transgender identity. As such, her gender expression is primarily bound heteronormative aesthetics. Her dysphoria is reawakened by dressing up in men's clothes and, in lieu of the possibility of surgery, her avenue to accessing her 'true self' is purely through the medium of stereotypical dress. Employing these visual cues is a simple way for the show's production to demarcate the authentic and performative versions of Sara/Óscar and offer the audience a concrete, albeit over-simplified, presentation of gender transitioning. Evidently, *Las chicas de cable* prioritises the ease of its storytelling over exploring the complexities of sex and gender.

Furthermore, the show employs what is arguably the most predictable convention of transgender fiction: the mirror scene. This trope is analysed at length by Jay Prosser in his aforementioned monograph as he describes how 'the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject, freezes it, frames it schematically in narrative. The difference between gender and sex is conveyed in the difference between body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)' (1998: 100). Mirror scenes are utilised consistently throughout the show's run to chronicle Sara/Óscar's relationship to their corporal form. The first allusion to Sara's gender dysphoria comes during the final episode of the first season in a scene set after her, Carlota and Miguel sleep together for the first time. Leaving the other two asleep in bed, Sara puts on one of Miguel's shirts, walks to the mirror and hold it up against herself. She smells it, smiles to herself, then gazes over at Miguel with a look of sadness. As a visual metaphor, the frame of the mirror envelopes the transgender subject as much as their reflected image imprisons them from obtaining their desired self-perception. Moreover, though Prosser's analysis is pertinent, its literary-based framing

obscures the mirror's power as a cinematic device. As Joshua Bastian Cole explains in his work on the mirror scene in transgender film, 'cinema screens are even more pronounced frames holding the virtual image of the actor's body within them' (2022: 244). He continues, claiming that 'the mirror is the medium through which dysphoria transmits an anticipated sympathy to the audience – viewers who remain safely distanced by the intangibility of the virtual image and the glass boundary that the mirror (and the camera lens) provides' (2022: 244). Through Sara, the arrival at transgender identity is presented as painful, arduous and somewhat confusing. Although, the audience are not forced to identify with Sara on a deeper level, their separated compassion enables a degree of empathy for her medicalised trauma in the following season and the hardship faced by the wider transgender community in the modern day. In fact, there are several fan responses on social media that confirm this, including the one pictured in figure 1.

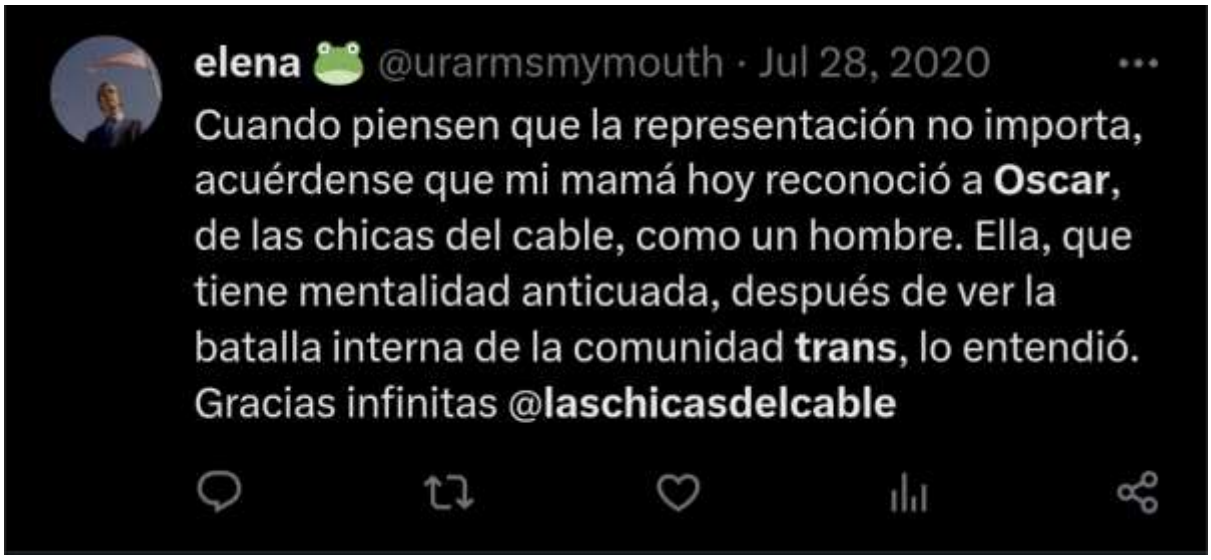


*Figure 4: Fan response post on X (formerly known as Twitter).*

That being said, the mirror scene in *La chicas de cable* also enables the viewer to witness an uncommon fictional example of gender affirmation. In the opening episode of the fourth season, which is the first in which the character discussed solely uses he/him pronouns and is

named as Óscar, there is a brief scene where he binds his chest in the mirror in preparation for his faux wedding ceremony with Carlota. There have been many studies on binding being an essential part of gender presentation for transgender individuals who were assigned female at birth, especially those who cannot access surgical intervention (Maycock and Kennedy, 2014; Peitzmeieret et al, 2017; Lee, Simpson & Haire, 2019). Here, Óscar is able to undergo transition while circumventing the previously discussed cruelty of contemporary healthcare, creating his own framework for gender euphoria and authenticity. This shot is an example of what Cole explains is the capacity of the mirror scene trope to effect more positive outcomes on transgender narratives. He states that 'rather than depicting a delimiting frustrating frame, the 'mirror scene' becomes trans affirming, however, if we isolate the mirror's own properties that can produce agency and subjecthood' (2022: 246). This is also compounded by the fact this episode marks a shift by which the other characters solely refer to him using both a masculine name and male pronouns. Thus, through the mirror, the positive outcome of Óscar's transition on his body image and self-recognition are revealed to the viewer and previous trauma from a dissociated reflection becomes necessary to further changes. The show has flipped a trope to prevent the transgender subject from, to paraphrase Prosser, being frozen and framed by their own anguish. Instead, Óscar is given agency to actively take control of his reflected image to create his own euphoric bodily schema. The mirror as an emblematic part of gender transition allows the audience to chart Sara progress on her journey of self-discovery as the show cleverly thwarts a played-out convention.

Above all, it is important to recognise Sara/Óscar as a new type of transgender character from the likes of Agrado and Zahara. Firstly, such focus and development of transmasculinity has rarely been seen before in Spanish television and should be applauded. Moreover, there is an agenda of social integration that separates Sara/Óscar from their Almodóvarian counterparts which is best reflected in the former's professional status and the overall sympathy evoked

from widespread societal discrimination. The narrative even takes some radical positions by portraying gender euphoria (as opposed to sole dysphoria) and raising questions about anti-pathologisation, reflecting current conversation in Spanish feminism. Yet, unsurprisingly from a program bound by its genre in the characterisation of its other principals, this melodrama still passes Sara/Óscar through the cliches of the transgender narrative. Transgenderism is simplified as being 'trapped in the wrong body' to ease audience understanding and the old chestnut of the mirror scene crops up time and time again. Notwithstanding these overworn conventions, the show manages to depict gender diversity in a positive and inspiring way. Perhaps the reason for the lack of dissidence in the new age of transgender fiction lies in formula. According to Ramón Campos, co-founder of Bambú, despite approaching Netflix with multiple ideas, the production company was told 'we want *Velvet*' (Mónica Zas Marcos, 2017), their previous global success that offered a similarly liberal, yet tepid, take on issues of gender and sexuality. It seems that Fernández-Valdés' power in the TV industry is overshadowed by Netflix's business strategies, a sentiment asserted by López Rodríguez and Rava Bravo in their work on the producer. They opine that 'consequently, the first Netflix original series produced in Spain turns out to be a politically moderate show that repeats profitable formulas and is far from the subversive approach present in other shows on the platform' (2019: 973). Chiefly, Bambu and Netflix are more concerned with producing shows that can be successfully exported and widely consumed in the global market then tackling the meatier and more contentious parts of progressive social issues. Evidently, this new era of television production considers queerness as beneficial to the business strategy, but only as long as it operates within the bounds of marketability.

Furthermore, it is clear that Netflix continues this approach to queer representation with its second original Spanish series *Élite*, which has been contextualised in the previous two

chapters. Although *Élite* covers topics as wide-ranging and taboo as prostitution, incest and domestic abuse, it is not until the show's sixth season in 2022 that we are introduced to Nico (Ander Puig), the series' only transgender character. Although difficulties of the transgender everyday are acknowledged in his narrative, there is a firm culture of acceptance regarding Nico's gender identity. I propose that Netflix has constructed these elements to reflect changing attitudes to gender non-conformity but also offer a fantasy for global transgender audiences. This also applies to the positive examples of Nico's sex scenes in the series. Furthermore, this degree of social integration has also brought with it an assimilationist mode of queerness. However, just like Almodóvar 's treatment of Agrado and Zahara, there remains the cliché of the hyperfixation on transgender genitalia.

For ease of later reference, I will briefly summarise Nico storyline in series 6 of *Élite*. Arriving for the start of a new term, he is congratulated by his peers after having legally changed his name and gender. He has also undergone a double mastectomy which was performed by his surgeon father. While he is sleeping with his classmate Sonia (Nadia Al-Saidi), Nico also begins to develop a relationship with Ari (Carla Díaz). Although, the romance faces turbulence throughout the season due to Ari's clumsy transphobia, alcoholism and the trauma she carries from the death of her ex-boyfriend Samuel (Itzan Escamilla) in the previous series. After a couple of disappointing sexual encounters and an incident with a STP (stand-to-pee) prosthetic causing him to wet himself, Nico decides he wants to undergo sex reassignment surgery. However, unlike his double mastectomy, his father refuses to perform his phalloplasty as he is suspicious of the suddenness of his decision. Left with €20.000 to raise for the procedure, Nico begins stealing hormones from his father and selling them as PEDs (Performance Enhancing Drugs) to his often-antagonistic classmate Hugo (Guillermo Campra). Yet, Nico's close friend Isadora (Valentina Zenere), who was raped by Hugo in the previous season, discovers the deal and is hurt. As revenge for her assault, she asks Nico to

secretly sell Hugo a drug that will effectively sterilise him. In return, she offers to pay the full amount Nico's surgery. He accepts the deal and enters the clinic in his final scene of the series.

Immediately, there is a noticeable degree of support and acceptance for Nico from those around him. The viewers are introduced to him for the first time in the locker room where he looks around, slightly sheepish, and strips down to his shorts. Nico's mild apprehension reminds the viewers that the single-sex changing room is a traditional space for reinforcing heteromasculinity (Worthen, 2014: 171), as well as a catalyst for the recent moral panic linking transgender liberation with the facilitation of sexual predators. In their study on transgender locker room membership, Ali Durham Greey concludes that gender non-conforming individuals 'develop and employ strategies for avoiding locker rooms and for minimizing the visibility of transness within them' (2023: 1625). These strategies include avoiding nudity which 'can function to revoke an already tenuous membership in locker rooms' (Greey, 2023: 1619), hence Nico's refrain from full-frontal exposure unlike other men in the scene. Yet, *Élite* cleverly balances the acknowledgment of difficult reality with the intention to avoid catastrophising transgender identity in its narrative. Nico walks to the showers, his mastectomy scars visible, and greets fellow classmates Patrick (Manu Rios) and Iván (André Lamoglia), with the latter telling him 'Felicidades, guapo' at the news of his official name change. Not only is Nico unafraid to display physical signs of his transness but the cisgender men around him are also willing to welcome him into the space and affirm his gender through masculine descriptors. This subverts Greey's assertion that 'access to locker rooms is proportionate to one's ability to the minimize the visibility of transness or gender ambiguity' (2023: 1617) and fosters an idealised fictional space of complete social integration. From the offset, *Élite* signals that the crux of Nico's characterisation will not stem from societal hostility to gender diversity or the problematisation of transgender identity

itself. Instead, viewers are offered a mould-breaking insight into the transgender experience in a liberal-minded, postmodern Spain.

This approach is only solidified as we begin to learn more about Nico's family background. Unlike any of the transgender characters discussed in this chapter, Nico has parents who are completely supportive of his transition. In fact, it was his father, a highly-respected and wealthy surgeon, who performed his double mastectomy. Here, it is important to note the socioeconomic dynamics at play with Nico's transness in light of his upper-middle class background, a trait typical of characters in teen dramas (Jenner, 2014: 135). Firstly, as a reflection of real-life familial rejection and workplace discrimination, fictional transgender characters have historically operated on the fringes of society and rarely have good financial standing. Thus, Nico's socioeconomic status and stable family environment offers the potential for a new type of transgender narrative that casts aside the challenges of social isolation. Secondly, in present-day Spain, accessing gender-affirming healthcare remains a minefield despite the legal advancements seen in the 21st century. The five main private medical insurers explicitly exclude all surgeries in aid of gender affirmation and although some autonomous regions cover these procedures via public insurance, service guidelines are often lacking or not publicly available (Karsay, 2017). With his father providing him free trans-specific healthcare, Nico is able to access realms of transition unavailable to much of his community. Both his parental support and capital privilege contribute to a transgendered version of the adolescent fantasy often at the core of teen dramas. At once, Netflix the acknowledges acceleration of public acceptance of gender diversity and creates routes of escapism for transgender viewers. Considering the global reach of Netflix, this is especially pertinent for international trans audiences in countries more hostile to gender diversity than Spain. This way the streamer carves out interests for a niche audience in a way that is foundational to the success of VOD services.

Having said this, Nico does face a degree of adversity throughout his storyline although the transphobia he does encounter mainly stems from ignorance rather than hatred. This is primarily represented in the character of Ari with whom Nico has an on-and-off romance during the series. For example, while drunkenly flirting with Nico in a club, Ari asks him 'Lo de ser guapo es mérito de tu padre o ya lo eras de chica?' and requests to see a photo of him pre-transition. In her study on deadnaming, Julia Sinclair-Palm and Kit Chokly highlight that for transgender individuals 'traces of the past self […] can bring about a wide range of reactions and emotions, and often point to sites of oppression and violence' (2022: 372). Therefore, although she is seemingly devoid of malintent, Ari's insensitivity at bringing up Nico's personal history inappropriately recalls his past trauma and undermines the authenticity of his gender identity. Following her comments, Nico leads Ari outside, calls her an Uber and tells her that he has disliked 'el cuadro tránsfobo' she has been tonight. As Nico shows care while establishing boundaries and calling out Ari's prejudice, he elicits empathy and respect from the viewer. Consequently, *Élite* reveals its approach to depicting the tribulations of non-normative gender. The show does not feel as though it must convince its audience of the validity of transgender existence and instead focuses on spotlighting examples of casual transphobia for a sympathetic viewership that is willing to learn.

However, despite the laudable unconventionality of the show's take on transgender narratives, Nico's characterisation remains grounded in one familiar trope: the hyperfixation on genitalia. Though perhaps it is unavoidable for a teen drama so absorbed in the sexual relations of its cast, a bulk of Nico's screentime is concerned with corporal dissatisfaction. The problems start after Nico and Ari begin to have sex after a successful date. Nico guides Ari's hand to pull down his underwear but she resists, instead suggesting they order more alcohol. He accuses her of trying to get drunk 'para pasar el mal trago de verme desnudo'. He tells her to take off his underwear but she refuses. Feeling humiliated, Nico leaves. On the

one hand, it must be acknowledged that this setup succeeds where many previous transgender narratives have failed. In her work on the cinematic trans/romance dilemma, Traci B. Abbott uses anglophonic examples such as *The Crying Game* (1992, d. Neil Jordan) and *Transamerica* (2005, d. Duncan Tucker) to note how directors 'avoid the taint of deviant sexuality in the film's central romance' (2013: 35) so the audience won't interpret a transgender individual's gender identity as inauthentic and read the relationship as transgressive. This is usually achieved by casting cisgender actors who align with the chosen gender of the trans character and avoiding erotic physical contact between the romantic interests, especially after the visual confirmation of birth genitalia. Abbott continues by stating that 'the trans/romance dilemma then occurs when the director's strategies promote the delegitimization of a trans character's gender identity so audiences recategorize it as the biological or birth sex' (2013: 35). *Élite* eludes this traditional 'delegitimization' by casting transmasculine actor Ander Puig in the role of Nico, featuring him several intimate sex scenes with both Ari and Sonia, and avoiding graphic shots of full-frontal nudity.

However, the development of Nico's story still promotes the homonormative idea that one's transition is only complete once one's sex organs match that of their chosen gender. In the episode following the aforementioned sexual encounter, the friend group are drinking and smoking in their underwear on a visit to Isa's penthouse. Nico notices Ari and Bilal (Adam Nourou), a cisgender male in the group, making eyes at one another, with Ari also eyeing up Bilal's crotch. This stirs up feelings of insecurity in Nico and he abruptly leaves the party. This scene displays what can be described as a transmasculine iteration of Freud's 'penis envy', a stage of psychosexual development whereby females suffer anxiety upon the realisation that they do not possess a phallus (Freud, 1908). Here, such a crude depiction of 'penis envy' dilutes gender dysphoria to a simple inadequacy to heterosexist standards. Nico not only wants to conform to the physicality of the cisgender male, but his motive for doing

so is for the benefit of satisfying the sexual demands of cisgender women. After this scene, Ari and Bilal have sex which only serves to further undermine Nico's self-confidence and position sex reassignment surgery as the solution. Later, he tells Ari 'a ti te la suda la conexión. Lo único que buscas es un buen rabo.' Not only does heteronormative society espouse the views of biological essentialism but so too does the trans subject. By the end of the episode, Nico admits that 'no me averguenzo de quien soy ni de lo que he pasado, pero es que hay veces que siento que… que no es suficiente'. From this point until the end of the series, Nico's plotline becomes driven by the desire to acquire a penis. Thus, despite having a supportive social network, altered legal documentation, and the results of gender-affirming procedures, Nico remains dissatisfied. *Élite* seems to suggest that full transition, and thereby complete happiness, can only be acquired through sex reassignment surgery. Yet again, the narrative of the trans subject, as well as their wellbeing, becomes wholly centred on their genitalia.

Though, it is interesting to note that the show displays some degree of self-awareness when it comes to its assimilationist modes of queerness. During one of Nico and Ari's numerous arguments, she accuses him of being interested in her for being 'la tipica rancia cishetera' and that winning her represents 'una vida normative, que te recuerdea la de tus padres'. Nico does not deny these claims. In this interaction, it is made plain that Nico yearns for homonormativity. He does not negate his transness and is proud to display it publicly but ultimately seeks a conformist social framework, one that is traditionally gendered and monogamous, like that which he witnesses in his private sphere. In fact, throughout the season, his parents and usually depicted interacting at mealtimes around the dining table, a symbol of the harmonious nuclear home. As Nico aims to attain the hegemonic tenets of masculinity through gender transition, the parameters of the gender binary are reified and further entrenched. Like Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble*, 'the very notions of an essential

sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative characters and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination' (1990: 192-3). That is, this type of transgender representation upholds the social performance of masculinity and femininity and does not disrupt the rigid categorisation of the gender binary. Yet ultimate the narrative does not go as far as to use transgender identity to destabilise the foundations of the gender binary itself. Furthermore, characterising Nico as driven by homonormative love speaks to Netflix's strategy for *Élite.* Romance is a key component of teen dramas with mass appeal and queering such an established generic element could create, as Abbot describes in her previously discussed text 'an entry not only into the trans perspective but also into a comfortable space where all audiences may find this commonality' (2013: 35). However, it is worthy of note that many LGBTQ+ fan reactions to Nico and Ari's romance were negative as they criticised the show for making its sole transgender character fall in love with someone who exhibits transphobic behaviour (Prance, 2022). Much like in *Las chicas de cable,* Netflix is willing to explore transgenderism to entice a curious postmodern viewership. Yet, while ensuring that its presentation of gender dynamics isn't too alienating to for heterosexual viewers, it perhaps still manages to narrow its potential audience by its adherence to heteronormativity.

Overall, Nico is by far the most socially integrated character in this chapter. Although he does face some transphobia from other characters, this is generated by awkward social interactions and ignorance. It is clear that he is not in an environment that is generally hostile or discriminatory. What's more, having supportive parents means that his minimal emotional trauma and his easy to gender affirming healthcare sets him apart from previous fictional transgender characters. It is also worth noting that such graphic and intimate sex scenes have seldom been preceded in Spanish television and the depiction of both an STP prosthetic and a

strap-on can certainly be classed as groundbreaking for the transmasculine community. However, Nico's characterisation is not exempt from cliché. The most obvious trope employed is his goal of sex reassignment surgery and his hyperfixation on genitalia. Additionally, homonormotivity permeates his gender transition as it is seen as incomplete without undergoing a phalloplasty, as evidenced by his bodily dissatisfaction. This alongside his desire to recreate the nuclear family structure of his parents with Ari maintains the binary that gender diversity seeks to dismantle.

## Conclusion

It seems that Spain's penchant for weaving transgender narratives into its audiovisual culture shows no signs of fading. Where the nation's audiences once sought out fictional gender non-conformity as an escape from the country's rigid patriarchy, they now do the same to seek sense in globalised world of postmodern identity. Though what is undeniable is that the potential of those transgender characters has certainly broadened. Through this analysis I have demonstrated that subjects from Era 1 are characterised by transfemininity and their nature as social outcasts. Conversely, representation of trasngenderism in Era 2 allows an exploration of transmasculinity and afford its subjects environments of social acceptance. However, in the shift to the latter modality, a fluid attitude towards gender has been forsaken in favour of upholding the heteronormative binary. Furthermore, the cultural tropes surrounding fictional transness still prevail such as the notion of bodily entrapment, the 'mirror scene' and a hyperfixation on genitalia.

# Conclusion

This thesis has examined fictional audiovisual depiction of queerness in Spain by charting the shift in representational modes between two defined time periods: Era 1 (1998-2005) and Era 2 (2015-2022). Not only did the standing of the LGBTQ+ community in Spain drastically change during both these timeframes, but the country's dominant form of audiovisual culture change from film to television with the waning of Spanish cinema and the rise of SVODs. As such my first era concerns cinematic representations whereas my second deals with the televisual. Furthermore, instead of anchoring my study in the superficial discourse of visibility politics and positive/negative representations, I have analysed my texts in relation to Duggan's definition of homonormativity: 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them' (1977: 1).

My selection of texts has allowed me to contribute to widely-discussed films in Hispanic cinema studies while also analysing recent streaming content on which very little scholarship exists. The array of texts I have chosen to study is also bolstered by the interdisciplinary approach to my research which spans sociological, psychological, and Queer studies in addition to close-filmic analysis.

In Chapter 1, I concluded that lesbian representation in Era 1 is symbolic of a Spain where queer demands were generally making their way onto the political agenda but were yet to be fully realised. Although there are glimpses of radicalism in the portrayal of an older gay woman, remnants of sensationalism and stereotyping of homosexuality still remain Furthermore, in this time period, lesbian visibility comes with the caveat of assimilating into the heterosexual family blueprint as narratives often reinscribe homonormative gender and sexuality regimes. As for Era 2, its narratives reject the convention established in its generic counterparts of the 1990s and 2000s. Frank lesbian intimacy, a defocalisation on 'coming

out', and extended storylines for gay female characters all contribute to that refuses to pander to homonormativity for a heterosexual audience. However, the growing value of promoting a liberal brand and targeting LGBTQ+ audiences that has emerged in Era 2 has led to marketing strategies and algorithms that fall foul of 'queerbaiting'.

In my second chapter, I demonstrated a clear change in the portrayal of sexual fluidity between Era 1 and 2. In the former, the overall effort to normalise same-sex desire reflects the contemporary sociocultural shifts for the LGBTQ+ community but liminal desire isn't entirely granted legitimacy. Also, tropes regarding homosexuality still pervade such as the feelings of internalised homophobia and a homonormative reading of promiscuity as inherently negative. However, the mode of representation in Era 2 sees characters express their fluid sexuality with pride in deproblematised narratives. My analysis also allowed me to define and apply the post-queer modality, in which narratives retain certain radical elements of queerness, like the disruption of the sexual binary, while also purporting elements of homonormativity like hegemonic assertions of masculine dominance.

My final chapter analysed a breadth of transgender narratives in Spanish audiovisual culture to chronicle the broadening potential of fictional gender non-conformity. I concluded that subjects from Era 1 are characterised by transfemininity and their nature as social outcasts. Conversely, representation of trasngenderism in Era 2 allows an exploration of transmasculinity and afford its subjects environments of social acceptance. However, in the shift to the latter modality, a fluid attitude towards gender has been forsaken in favour of upholding the heteronormative binary. Furthermore, the cultural tropes surrounding fictional transness still prevail such as the notion of bodily entrapment, the 'mirror scene' and a hyperfixation on genitalia.

Overall, there are no hard and fast rules of the modal shifts in queer representation between Era 1 and 2. However, there are some general observations to make. Era 1 can be broadly outlined as a transitory era for the relationship between queerness and Spanish national identity. As such, there is a general attempt from filmmakers to refrain from catastrophising the sexuality of an LGBTQ+ character as narratives begin to ingratiate them into the heteronormative frameworks of the everyday: the nuclear family; the middle class; monogamy and matrimony. Yet, these texts are unable to fully shake off the queer stereotypes of shame, promiscuity, and disreputability that operate as an overhang of decades of cinematic (or even centuries of societal) homophobia. By the onset of Era 2, these harmful prejudices have generally disappeared even if some of the well-worn audiovisual tropes still prevail. Yet, the main change comes with the new profitability of courting an LGBTQ+ (or other niche) audiences in the age of streaming. The has brought with it a post-queerness that courts aspects of radicalism, most often gender and sexual fluidity, while also promoting a homonormativity that appeals to LGBTQ+ viewers with the creation of an idealised acculturated imaginary.

Furthermore, I strongly believe in the importance of this thesis' contribution to the study of both Hispanic and international film. The trends and tropes identified in this work can be used as a springboard for future studies on other emerging Spanish-language streaming markets. For example, popular Mexican productions on Netflix such as *La casa de las flores* and *Alguien tiene que morir* already feature LGBTQ+ characters and storylines. Additionally, the conclusions of this study are worth attempting to apply to streaming markets worldwide. As SVODs continue to give an international platform to other non-anglophonic queer cultures, this study proves its relevance to research beyond Spanish screen studies. Examples include France's *Call My Agent!* and Italy's *Suburra* which both feature LGBTQ+ main characters. This thesis could also support future studies that are not focused

51on European productions with LGBTQ+ streaming content emerging from countries like Brazil (*Super Drags*) and India (*Colbalt Blue*).

For Spain however, the penchant for fictional portrayals of subversive sexuality that started during the transition to democracy shows no signs of slowing. Though its national cinema has wilted, its audiovisual culture has found a new lifeline in the rise of SVODs. Now that Spanish television production has seized a worldwide audience in the age of streaming, the already broadened potential of queer narratives looks sets to be blown wide open.

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*Élite (*Netflix, 2018-*)*

*El cónsul de Sodoma* (dir. Sigrid Monleón, 2010)

*El sexo de los ángeles* (dir. Xavier Villaverde, 2011).

*En la ciudad* (dir. Cesc Gay, 2003)

*Jamón, jamón* (dir. Bigas Luna, 1992)

*Krámpack (*dir. Cesc Gay, 2003*)*

*La casa de papel (Netflix, 2019-2021)*

*Las chicas de cable (*Netflix, 2017-2020)

*Ley del deseo, La* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar , 1987)

*Los novios búlgaros* (dir. Eloy de la Iglesia, 2003)

*Mala educación, La* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar , 2004)

*Mentiras y gordas* (dir. David Menkes, Alfonso Albacete, 2009)

*Perdona bonita, pero Lucas me quería a mí* (dir. Dunia Ayaso and Félix Sabroso, 1997)

*Segunda piel* (dir. Gerardo Vera, 1990)

*Sky Rojo (*Netflix, 2021-2023)

*Sobreviviré* (dir. David Menkes, Alfonso Albacete, 1999)

*Todo sobre mi madre* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar , 1999)

*Toy boy (*Netflix, 2020-)