ONE PUNK'S GUIDE TO THE FILMS OF PEDRO ALMODOVAR

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Razorcake is a bi-monthly, Los Angeles-based fanzine that provides consistent coverage of do-it-yourself punk culture. We believe in positive, progressive, community-friendly DIY punk, and are the only bona fide 501(c)(3) non-profit music magazine in America. We do our part.

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It was around 1990 when I first heard the name Pedro Almodovar. Most of my social activity at the time involved getting together with people and watching videos. It was a time of awakening that a lot of movie nerds idealize: a period of discovering that movies are good for reasons other than making you laugh or allowing you to see explosions from a safe distance. Often, a cache of movies lingers from this time period. Two films I was exposed to early on by a friend were both by Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar. *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1990) and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) influenced me heavily as a burgeoning fan of film. These two films were largely responsible for bringing his vision to the attention of the world. They are among his first widely distributed in the United States, or at least distributed widely enough to catch the attention of someone like me who, at the time, had only a peripheral knowledge of filmmaking outside of Hollywood.

The films portrayed Madrid as a paradise for eccentrics. Almodovar movies are simultaneously an exploration and cannibalism of genre, produced with a D.I.Y. ethos and a strong grasp of behavioral anarchy among the characters. Even as his style continues to progress and become more mature, there is still a sense of mayhem to his storytelling that flouts the standards of convention.

In interviews, the director is consistently vague about elements of his films echoing events in his life. His known biographical timeline seeps through his narratives. However, it is apparent through examination of his interviews and essays that the director is decisively enigmatic. It is difficult to tell where the biographical information in his stories ends and where his real life begins. He consistently maintains that his films are mostly fictional. This denial is somewhat confirmed by the bizarre nature of his stories. Direct links between his life and his movies are sometimes present.
and apparent in his movies, but the significance of any known details can be lost in the realm of broad facts and crazy plot lines. He has stated in numerous interviews that he hopes no one will ever write his biography. I found that out after reading too many interviews to give this up, so please keep the following to yourself.

**EARLY YEARS**

Pedro Almodovar was born in Calzada de Calatrava, Spain on September 25, 1949. Calzada de Calatrava lies in the providence of Ciudad Real. The land of Don Quixote, Ciudad Real is a rural community that, at the time of Almodovar’s childhood, did not have a movie theater. He was around eight years old when he was sent to a larger township called Caceres to study at a Catholic school. Coming from a small township, he had been exposed to a few movies, but there was an important difference between Calzada de Calatrava and Caceres: Caceres had its own cinema. It was within the confines of a dark theater where he spent much of his free time. Almodovar’s education on the screen began to trump the education he was receiving in his proper classes. Like most artistic types living in rural towns, he clung to available culture. That culture included movies, books, and pulp magazines. He was exposed to Hollywood directors such as Blake Edwards and Billy Wilder and French New Wave directors such as Truffaut and Godard. The Italian neo-realist films of Visconti and Antonioni resounded strongly with him as well, especially their use of location shooting and their focus on class issues, which came to be a prevalent theme in many of his films.

Shying away from his religious studies, Almodovar remained in Catholic school until he was sixteen. Much to his family’s dismay, he moved to Madrid in 1967. He intended to pursue an education at the National School of Cinema, but Spain was firmly under the rule of the dictator Francisco Franco at the time. Franco permitted a shallow range of culture to be explored under his reign. Choices in personal expression were relegated almost exclusively to bullfighting and Flamenco dancing. In an attempt to thwart criticism through filmmaking, Franco had Spain’s National School of Cinema shut down.

Franco’s penchant for controlling the citizenry was not casual.
Violent police forces were dispatched to patrol in both the cities and the rural areas. Strict Catholic policies were not implied; they were part of the edict of the law. Student protests were dealt with violently. Massive graves containing the bodies of those who upset the regime served as reminders of the consequences of questionable behavior. There were few avenues available to those who wished to explore the arts and little motivation to speak out publicly.

As in many oppressive societies, underground clubs of writers and artists formed. This became somewhat less of a liability in the early seventies, particularly towards the end of Franco’s life. As Franco’s attention turned towards the dynamic in his inner circle, his control over the day-to-day activities of the citizens loosened in the cities. Caesarian politics would begin to attract Franco’s attention, particularly in regards to naming his successor. Whatever freedom there was to be creative due to the subsiding oppression in the country, Almodovar appears to have taken advantage of it. He published writing and drawings in underground magazines, sang in a band, and worked on and off with a theater group.

After the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975, a transition into democracy began almost immediately in the streets and nightclubs of Madrid. As Richard Nixon unwittingly declared
Franco to be a “loyal friend and ally to the United States,” the façade created by Franco’s years of propaganda and coercion began to crumble on the world stage. The cruelty and conservative values enforced under his dictatorship were beginning to be exposed and, in congress with the designing of a democratic state, a period known as La Movida Madrileña (the movement) was beginning. A political transformation was at hand, and it was a period of awakening for artists and writers. Before 1975, culture as innocuous as Playboy magazine was treated as highly illegal contraband in Spain. Between 1976 and 1978, criminal laws outlawing pornography, homosexuality, contraception, abortion, and laws promoting the subjugation of women were systematically lifted in an attempt to create a democratic state and promote Spain’s connection to the world for the sake of tourism. Artistic content in all mediums became more open as a clear, reactionary explosion of exiting decades of tyranny. A resurrection of the economy and artistic freedom brought on a new identity for Spain. A scene that would divest from the conservative norm was forming rapidly. Concurrent with an emerging art movement in America dealing with transgressive themes, La Movida Madrileña explored breaking the repressive standards Spanish society was steeped in.

Almodovar was active in the burgeoning scene and forged relationships with many like-minded members of the Spanish underground. Artists, actors, filmmakers, and musicians that would comprise Spain’s approaching cultural explosion were congregating under the cover of Madrid’s nightlife. It was here that Almodovar first met a band considered to be Spain’s first punk band, Kaka de Luxe, a group fronted by a teenage girl known as Alaska—who would herself become an icon in Spain’s cultural awakening—and play a significant role in his first film. He worked with an experimental theater group called Los Goliardos where he

Rossy de Palma: one among a unique stable of actors who started out in Almodovar films.
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met Carmen Maura, an actress who would star in a number of his movies. Maura and Almodovar became close friends quickly and began working together on his 8mm films. Maura would become the anchor to a stable of actors who would appear regularly in many of his early films and a large portion of his middle ones.

**THE FIRST TWO**

For years, Almodovar maintained a regular day job at Telefonica (the Spanish telecommunication company). He saved money from his paychecks and bought an 8mm camera. Spain’s film school had reopened, but Almodovar was settled in his job at this time and, like many underground filmmakers of his generation, became interested in using his 8mm camera to produce films. Almodovar’s first 8mm films were produced to exhibit in nightclubs, artist gatherings, and 8mm film festivals. He was regularly producing silent films with titles that were as sexually driven as they were comedic, including *Two Prostitutes, Or History of Love That Finishes in Wedding* (1974); *Sex Goes, Sex Comes* (1977); and *Fuck Me, Fuck Me, Fuck Me, Tim* (1978).

A predominance of filmmakers were using 8mm as a tool for experimental film. Those who considered films that tell stories to be passé frequented 8mm festivals at the time. Almodovar used the medium early on for narrative stories and early attempts at genre dissection. While his films were sometimes seen as old fashioned by the festival crowds who were more interested in experimental filmmaking, his wild performances were becoming standbys in bars, nightclubs, and art galleries. 8mm cameras did not, for the most part, come equipped to record sound. To round out his silent film exhibitions, he would bring music on cassettes and speak the characters’ dialogue himself using a variety of voices. He learned to feed off of the crowd’s reactions to the humor in his wild narratives by adding elements such as phony commercials and movie trailers to his programs and criticizing actors during his narration.

Since his regular shift at Telefonica ended in the afternoons, Almodovar became a regular presence in the flowering creative climate of post-Franco Spain. Artistically, the stage was set for
him to enter into making full-length films. He was enjoying good working relationships with actors, cultivating an interested audience, and was gaining proficiency with shooting. As with many budding directors, a lack of money was the main issue holding him back from producing longer projects.

He and Carmen Maura had recorded some 8mm footage that would become the basis for his first full-length film to be shot on 16mm film. 16mm is an acceptable standard in professional filmmaking, but it also brings about a greater expense. Almodovar completed his first film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, shooting while on leaves of absence from his job at Telefonica with a cast and crew of volunteers. His desire to create a more focused and extended story came about at a time when Los Goliardos was ready to work on a larger narrative. *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was produced through this series of shooting sessions, causing the film to come across as more of a compilation of loosely connected vignettes than a fully formed feature. Nonetheless, Almodovar’s strengths were apparent in the film. His extensive exploitation of vibrant colors, deep understanding of camp style, and use of sexually explicit themes were
prevalent in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* and became core elements of his unique style of filmmaking.

Almodovar had, at some point, a roommate who kept marijuana plants on their shared balcony. This real life detail drives the opening of *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. A sleazy cop (Felix Rotaeta) confronts a young girl named Pepi (Carmen Maura) about her growing marijuana on her balcony. Without much drama, Pepi offers to make a deal and exchange sex for the cop’s promise to keep quiet about her window box plants. If you weren’t paying attention, you could be tricked into thinking a porno was about to begin. Although the situation is inherently awful due to this insidious rape, Pepi is more upset because she wanted to sell her virginity. Almodovar’s full-length film career begins with a scene that casts puzzling emotional light on the crime of rape. It wouldn’t be the last time. Production of the film was halted several times due to financial considerations. Almodovar considered completing the film in the tradition of his 8mm films, by standing in front of the camera with music playing in the background and explaining what happened. After about eighteen months of on-and-off shooting, he prevailed, and *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was released in 1980, becoming his first full-length picture shot on 16mm film.

*Pepi, Luci, Bom* was well received by the midnight movie crowd. The film is not only among his most notorious, but perhaps is one of the largest monuments to bad taste since John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* was released in 1972. Besides playing for shock value, the movie opens a window into his style. The confused plot of the film is palpable, but his manipulation of complicated stories would improve quickly. The convoluted nature of some of his early work lays groundwork for pushing the envelope in some of his more masterful labyrinths of storytelling. Although he maintains affection for straightforward Hollywood narratives and simple Italian Neo-realist stories, Almodovar rarely goes from A to B.

Almodovar’s collaboration with Carmen Maura in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* would be the first of many in the 1980s. Julieta Serrano is another actor who would start with Almodovar’s first film and continue to act in several of his productions. His years of working with an ensemble cast indicate he is an actor’s director. Some are
Pepi, Luci, Bom is one of the largest monuments to bad taste since John Waters’ Pink Flamingos was released in 1972.

chosen by their abilities to exude a wide emotional range. Others are chosen for their spontaneity. Almodovar seems to have no qualms discussing their strengths and weaknesses in interviews, perhaps a throwback to his criticism during the 8mm days. While his discussion of performances comes across as good-natured, a thick skin would be a necessity for an Almodovar regular. Yet all seem to have a deep understanding of the director’s dark sense of humor when they are on the screen. His inclination to return to the same stable of actors served him well throughout his films and culminated in the late 1980s with the screwball comedy Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown.

While still holding onto his job at Telefonica, Almodovar gained the attention of an established production company named Alphaville. Alphaville was impressed with the cult status that Pepi, Luci, Bom received on the late night movie circuit around Madrid, and, no doubt, by the fact that it did not lose money. Almodovar
claims none of his movies have lost money, a statement few directors can echo. Of course, he did not spend much to create *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. Alphaville became the producers of his next film, *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982).

While Almodovar’s unique storytelling often orbits around wild and taboo subjects, his development as an artist did not languish by relying solely on shock value. His exploration of calculatedly complicated plot lines began as early as his second film. While elements of the story include characters steeped in eccentric behaviors, *Labyrinth of Passion* deeply explores a standard practice of the director: genre cannibalism. Abiding his long-term interest in deconstructing established Hollywood narratives, *Labyrinth of Passion* recreates the tone and feel of a traditional Hollywood screwball comedy. In spite of his pattern of working regularly with the same actresses, *Labyrinth of Passion* deviates, recycling few of his original players from *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. It is, however, the first time Almodovar regular Antonio Banderas appears in one of his films. Banderas has a small role in *Labyrinth of Passion*, but his ability to radiate a diffusing of traditionally Spanish machismo values will come heavily into play in some of Almodovar’s seminal work and become a jumping off point of Banderas’s international stardom. The director’s ability to manipulate multiple story lines matured quickly as he honed his skills of construction, but the most relevant window into his style exhibited by *Labyrinth of Passion* is his ability to take an established genre and make it his own.

Both *Pepi, Luci, Bom* and *Labyrinth of Passion* illustrate Almodovar’s shaping of Madrid into a diegetic world of his own liking. Both films are occasionally muddled due to a maze of characters coming and going. Perhaps because of this, his next film would be among the more straightforward narratives of his career and would begin to unite the dream team responsible for his most internationally popular film. It would also see the end of his job at Telefonica.

Almodovar regular Carmen Maura portrays the leader of a hedonistic order of nuns in *Dark Habits*. 
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Tesauro Productions was a film studio funded by multi-millionaire Herve Hachuel. Among other things, Hachuel was responsible for bringing Warhol to Madrid. Tesauro was a company clearly constructed in an attempt by Hachuel to keep his wife Cristina Sanchez Pascual interested in him. Pascual handled smaller roles in Almodovar’s first two films, but Hachuel’s new financial influence compelled Almodovar to increase Pascual’s participation. Almodovar was initially reluctant to work under these circumstances, but he needed funding for his next film. *Dark Habits* (1983) was developed for Pascual from another story the director was sitting on. In such a heavily Catholic country, it is hard to imagine the story of a convent of nuns entering into the drug trade could be made at all. It would not be his last controversial film. *Dark Habits* was intended to be a story told primarily from the point of a lounge singer portrayed by Pascual. When her limited acting ability became a problem, Almodovar shifted the focus of the narrative on to the emerging roster of actors that were mastering his dark sense of humor.

*Dark Habits* began to solidify the standard for excellent performances throughout his films and set the standard for actors and actresses who followed. Heavyweight players Julieta Serrano and Carmen Maura from *Pepi, Luci, and Bom* returned. *Dark Habits* also brought about the first appearance by Chus Lampreave, a unique actor whose pastoral characteristics fill a specific role in the family structure often prevalent in his films. Lampreave embodies the well-meaning busybody in a variety of roles including mothers, grandmothers, and landladies. The actor was forced to turn down offers for roles in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* and *Labyrinth of Passion* due to various eye surgeries, but the director’s persistence led to a memorable role in *Dark Habits*. From there she would go on to have roles in more of his movies than any other performer besides his brother Agustin, who made regular cameos.

*Dark Habits* was initially rejected from Cannes Film Festival due to its portrayal of nuns engaging in such devious acts as drug abuse. Almodovar maintains the film is not anti-clerical, yet even
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the freedom of post-Franco Spain could not quell reactionary attitudes towards drug dealing nuns. Dark Habits premiered at the Venice Film Festival where Italian critics were divided. It eventually made its way back to Spain to similarly mixed reviews. Dark Habits secured Almodovar’s reputation as Spain’s “enfant terrible,” a term describing an unconventionally intelligent or candid child who acts out in unorthodox ways. His rebellious and sly manner of exposing Spain’s cultural mores was causing some controversy. He was also catching Spain’s ear.

Dark Habits is further exploration in genre dissection, melodrama being the main focus. His next film would continue in this vein. Even with Pascual out of the picture, Hachuel financed Almodovar’s fourth film, What Have I Done to Deserve This? (1984). It was another exploration in melodrama with Carmen Maura at the helm. The film is set in low-income housing blocks similar to those the director would
pass every day on his commute to work at Telefonica years earlier. The film explores the routine of Gloria (Carmen Maura), a housewife whose mounting injustices of everyday life become absurd in their oppressiveness. Although *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* is similar in tone to *Dark Habits*, it demonstrates a distinct maturing of his style. The film also explores the wide range of settings that will create a complex view of Madrid via Almodovar’s lens, which continues throughout his career. Through his films, we see not only the nightlife and tourist spots, but also the more common areas like nunneries and block housing. Madrid becomes a palpable character throughout his body of work, a detail of the influence of the Italian Neo-realists that is most palpable in this film.

Moderate critical attention up to this point had been achieved in European film circles, but *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* began to break Almodovar into North America. The film was shown in Canada at the Montreal Film Festival and received positive reviews in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Village Voice*. Although *Dark Habits* and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* exhibit strong development in his style and his ability to produce more cohesive work when receiving regular funding, Almodovar was learning that he was not content under the thumbs of producers. He aspired to gain financial independence. His next two films would bring him closer to that goal.

**MATADOR (1986)**

Almodovar’s fifth feature length film, *Matador*, was distributed internationally after his next film *Law of Desire* (1986). The film was co-produced in conjunction with Andre Vincent Gomez’s Iberoamericana Films and RTVE, Spanish State Television. The subsidies from the government film office comprised Almodovar’s largest budget to date. Gomez believed in the strength of Spanish export and his relationship with Almodovar was well-timed for collaboration on the production of *Matador*. Spain’s cultural identity was erratically changing. The initial wave of freedom was snowballing and sedating conservative reactions towards taboo subject matter. Topics such as patriarchal dominance and sexual
identity were becoming more acceptable to explore in Spanish art and media. Almodovar was among those becoming a sounding board for redefining the landscape of art for the country.

In *Matador*, Almodovar begins to employ more abstract story devices. The opening credits are bright red and fill the screen with clips of Herschel Gordon Lewis-style gore movies on a television screen. A middle-aged man sits in a big yellow chair masturbating. The man masturbating to the extreme violence is Diego (Nacho Martinez), the matador. Angel (Antonio Banderas) is a student bullfighter under his tutelage. Angel and Diego discuss Angel’s reluctance towards violence and the problems that it causes with his desire to become a bullfighter. Diego asks Angel, respectfully, if he has ever considered the possibility that he might be gay. Incensed, Angel attempts to rape Diego’s girlfriend Eva Solder (Eva Cobo).

On paper, some of the coincidences employed in the film appear unrealistic, but in Almodovar’s early works, Madrid is a small city where the rich and repressed are obliged to intermingle with the city’s wilder eccentrics. The introduction of surrealistic elements such as psychic abilities and noir-style murder present new depth to the arsenal of his plot devices and intermingle nicely into the framework of *Matador*. While Almodovar’s films are largely wild and anarchic up to this point, *Matador* induces a certain maturing in the director’s realm of calculated fun. As the mystery of *Matador* is about to be solved, the entire cast stops to watch an eclipse. It is a strange scene—out of context with the rest of the movie—and a surreal version of the humor that had been prevalent in his earlier films. It is also an indicator of the more subtle brand of humor he would employ from here on. The diegetic world that has developed in his past films leaves less room to consider if there are holes that make the story unreasonable. The more complicated the plots become, the more the world created around the characters seems to make sense.

More new ground arising out of *Matador* is the development of a more complicated male character. Angel’s inability to perform sexually leads to his confessing to crimes he did not commit in an attempt to exude his manhood. Angel as a commentary on the effects
of machismo culture on masculinity is a step in the exploration of male sexuality that will continue throughout his films, including Banderas returning as a stalker in *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*; Javier Bardem as a paraplegic cop in *Live Flesh* (1997); and Rosario Flores as a female bullfighter in *Talk to Her* (2002).

Also prevalent in *Matador* is the further development of his distinct use of color. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* stands out as having a particularly dour mise-en-scene. *Matador* is a sharp return to the world of bright colors. This dynamic is amplified by the increased budget. Aside from *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, Almodovar’s films are laden with primary colors. The urban decay portrayed regularly in his films is countered with reds and yellows in his sets and costumes. His films radiate heat due to his use of loud color schemes. Red dresses are a consistent prop in his films and walls are often bathed in bright paint. The ability of his characters to interact outside of the boundaries of class is reinforced by a melding of Madrid’s culture through the use of these bright settings and costumes. Almodovar’s Madrid is a vibrant place, a world where the lines of class acceptance are blurred, but not extracted.

Almodovar’s relationship with Iberoamericana Films’ Gomez did not last. In contrast to Hachuel’s method of throwing money at his wife’s career, Gomez had a production background and enthusiasm for the future of Spanish cinema breaking through to the world market. It sounded like a perfect situation for a working director to be involved in. But Gomez’ attention was divided among an array of different projects, a situation that would ultimately frustrate Almodovar. Almodovar was learning what he needed to know: not only the craft of filmmaking, but also the business of international promotion and the minutiae of production. Rather than rally for producers’ support, Pedro and his brother and longtime conspirator, Agustin Almodovar, decided to form their own production company.

Antonio Banderas goes shirts off in *Law of Desire* and Julieta Serrano gets strapped in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. 
Antonio Banderas goes shirtless in "Law of Desire" and Julieta Serrano gets strapped in "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown."
Pedro Almodovar’s success up to this point was greatly indebted to his brother Agustin. Agustin acted as a sounding board and served as an extra in nearly all of Pedro’s films. *Law of Desire* was written before *Matador* but was turning out to be one of Pedro’s most difficult films to acquire funding for, due to its largely gay narrative. Agustin and Pedro used the modest earnings from Pedro’s previous films and a large loan from the bank to form the production company El Deseo (the desire) with the purpose of producing *Law of Desire*. Ironically, the attention that *Law of Desire* amassed in the gay community—and with critical acclaim in New York papers and European film festivals—paved the way for *Matador* to achieve wider distribution. Pedro and Agustin launched El Deseo’s first feature film, *Law of Desire*, with a lot of pressure riding on their financial future.

Although Pedro Almodovar is openly gay, gay issues generally appear as peripheral plot devices in his movies. *Law of Desire* is an exception in that it is only one of two films noticeably incorporated in what would be considered the canon of gay cinema. The compelling story of three men in a love triangle is an interesting revision on gay narratives, as the story is presented with the gender of the characters having little bearing on the story. A love triangle is played out in a standard Hollywood format, including the first hint of Hitchcock-style intrigue. In the period following an insulting modern portrait of homosexuals in *Cruising* (1980), a new canon of gay cinema was forming. Along with the English film *My Beautiful Launterette* (1985) and the American film *Parting Glances* (1986), *Law of Desire* dealt with the particulars of a relationship between men at a time when positive portrayals of homosexuals were not as prevalent. It was also a straightforward thriller. Although Almodovar persists with an inclination to withdraw from labels involving niche cinema,
the director has had a hand in presenting some of the most confident and liberated gay characters visible in film.

*Law of Desire* is also the beginning of his exploring Hitchcock thrillers more directly. A strong exploration of identity and themes of mistaken identity resound with classic Hitchcock narratives such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *Rear Window* (1954). His exploration of murder and intrigue will continue throughout his mid-to-late work, including his most recent film, *Broken Embraces* (2009).

Agustin and Pedro’s financial gamble paid off. *Law of Desire* was a success and helped cement the company’s future. Almodovar was enjoying a new level of success. The forming of El Deseo would prove to be a further freeing of an already wildly original filmmaker. After *Law of Desire* gained some momentum abroad, *Matador* followed quickly. This one-two punch fated Almodovar’s style to reach wider audiences abroad. No longer dependent on outside forces, Pedro was free to direct without compromising to pressure from an established studio or conforming to standards set by public funds. As producers, Pedro and Agustin were becoming self-reliant.

El Deseo appears to have been a prudent investment. It flourishes today as the home of the Almodovar brand and has been active in many co-productions with French companies. Worldwide success was about to peak with his next film as his most developed strengths were fused into a watershed project. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* reunites his most honed stable of players and refocuses his tested knowledge of screwball comedy to produce a film that changed the game for him around the world.

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**WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN**

Although some of his earlier films were getting modest attention in film circles, the timing of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* increased the director’s visibility considerably. The film presented a more digestible commentary on sex and murder than *Matador* and *Law of Desire* and elevated Almodovar to a new level of mainstream success in the arena of foreign films in North America. While his previous two films garnered exponentially improved attention from the American and European press, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous*
Breakdown brought Almodovar considerable accolades. The film was nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for best foreign language film. It won several European Film Awards and was chosen Best Foreign Language Film by the National Board of Review and by the New York Film Critics association and won best screenplay at the Venice Film Festival. Almodovar was becoming an international icon. His films began attracting larger audiences around the world and his style was becoming recognized as distinct.

Dumped by her long-term lover Ivan (Fernando Guillen), Pepa (Carmen Maura) decides to rent her apartment out to escape her memories of their long affair. As more and more characters converge on the apartment, much of the chaos of the plot is driven by a pot of spiked gazpacho. The story culminates in another mad dash to the airport, a scenario similar to the one in Labyrinth of Passion and another example of a Hollywood standard applied in his films. This time, the cast attempts to get to the airport in time to stop Lucia from killing Ivan.

Almodovar pulled away from the successful formula that made Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown an international success and moved on to a story that would bring his version of controversy to America, due to its bizarre premise and stark sexual content. Matador presents a confused correlation between sex and death that Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown would streamline. His next film, Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (1990) would undo the levity that American audiences connected with, starting with the film’s subject matter receiving an X rating by the Motion Picture Association of America.

CROSSING THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

More attention meant more controversy. Spain’s initial cultural awakening after Franco’s death was becoming old news in Madrid and the words “un film de Almodovar” emblazed on the screen in bright red letters was beginning to have clout on the international market. As his profile increased, so did the scrutiny of his black style of humor. Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown introduced the director to a wider audience, but this wider audience had not
been exposed to the full range of Almodovar’s exploration into themes of depravity. 1990’s *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* proved to be a rude introduction to the American standards of censorship. In the film, Ricky (Antonio Banderas) is released from a mental institution. Fixated on Marina (Victoria Abril), Ricky seeks her out and detains her in her apartment, convinced he can make her love him.

The Motion Picture Association of America, responsible for movie ratings in America, branded *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* with an X rating. The board of the MPAA is a privately run organization devoid of responsibility to the filmmakers whose films they rate. An X on a film means that the film will not be rated due to extreme content and distributors will not carry the film for wide release.

Almodovar appealed the X rating attached to his film, echoing appeals being made at the time by Peter Greenaway for his film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* and John McNaughton’s film *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. All three directors lost their appeals and released their films unrated in America. Releasing a film unrated can be problematic for a film’s distribution, especially for a foreign language film, as there is a smaller audience willing to read subtitles. An X rating scares most major distributors as it is generally associated with pornography. An X rated film, pornographic or not, will only be exhibited in small, privately run theaters that are not dependent solely on these major distributors.

*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* suffered a bit in America, but it maintained a respectable run due to an increasingly receptive climate for foreign and independent films. Smaller distributors and art house cinemas began having a larger role in exhibiting foreign and independent films. The controversy of appealing the X rating also helped these films gain moderate attention. In spite of the MPAA’s determination to keep these films out of theaters due to sexually explicit material, Almodovar’s career maintained an international upswing. The controversy surrounding this film exposed the world to the side of the director that earned him the nickname “enfant terrible” in Spain.

In the scope of the bulk of his work, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* could be considered tame by comparison, especially compared to a film like *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* which,
unwittingly, gives hope to stalkers. A backlash to Almodovar’s brand of anarchy was eminent due primarily to a graphic love scene between the main characters. Feminist groups criticized *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* for inherently containing degrading acts towards women in its premise. Comedy is a factor in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, but Almodovar’s freewheeling anarchy peaks in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and fades distinctly as his films begin to regularly express a more solemn tone.

**MATURING WITH HIS CHARACTERS**

Characters in Almodovar movies appear to age in congress with what one would expect of those exposed to the early artistic movements and excessive personal freedoms who are the subjects of his early work. His characters make the switch from being in punk and new wave bands to being lounge singers and legendary singers of boleros—the bolero being considered somewhat passé and corny in Spanish culture. These songs are used to evoke a certain sentimentally and create a certain level of camp in his movies, much in the way John Waters uses ‘50s pop music to present Baltimore as a land infused with nostalgia.

Having spent much of his time in the pursuit of making films, Almodovar turned heavily towards meta-narrative story elements. Many of the films throughout his career contain characters in various occupations in film production. This dynamic escalates as the stories begin to revolve around screenwriters and directors in transitional stages of their careers. Although there are still few concrete insights into his personal life, Almodovar’s characters grow with him. Madrid through his eyes relies heavily on the point of view of people in the entertainment industry. His characters are singers, aging actors, frustrated writers, stagnating drag queens, and a host of eccentrics who further explore the depths and peaks of the creative process beyond the years of angst his earlier characters embody.

His maturing at this point created a temporary rift with his American audience. The splintering of underground culture and the return of conservative values caused the release of an Almodovar film to be less of an event in America than it had previously been.
While *High Heels* (1991) seems to have garnered minor attention on the heels of *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down!*, the film suffered at the hands of Spanish and American critics attacking the film on similar moral grounds. Almodovar's legacy as an underground figure was in some transition. His next three films would enter and exit American theaters without much notice. *Kika* (1993), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), and *Live Flesh* (1997) suffered in the hands of mainstream distributors as well as in the mainstream press. At the mercy of an audience that is disinclined to see foreign language films, the unorthodox story lines did not resonate with mainstream audiences. His limited runs in large theaters also kept him under the radar of the underground writers and patrons who had elevated his career outside of Spain.

**ALMODOVAR'S NEXT TWO FILMS**

**DIVE DEEPER INTO THE REALM OF DISSECTED MELODRAMA**

*All about My Mother* (1999) focuses on the relationships of a group of women assembled by circumstance, but clearly united in the drama of life. Abandoning the mystery narrative, *All about My Mother* explores the darker side of the camp inherent in his movies and comes across as perhaps a more serious version of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. As Almodovar often references the world he has created within his films, a transgender character named Agrado dresses in a phony red Chanel suit as a parody of Victoria Abril's character in *High Heels*. *All about My Mother* brought American audiences back, amassed his largest list of awards thus far, and received much praise from critics.

*Talk to Her* begins another short phase of re-focusing on male characters. Benigno (Javier Camara) is a nurse who specializes in coma patients. He is in charge of Alicia (Leonor Watling) and falls in love with her despite her being unconscious. A female bullfighter named Lydia (Rosario Flores) ends up in his ward. Benigno befriends Lydia's boyfriend Marco (Dario Grandinetti). Marco is abstractly dumped by his girlfriend in a coma, bringing the two men closer together; another example of Almodovar's bizarre sense of humor bleeding through in his more mature work.
All about My Mother and Talk to Her result in a resurgence in attention to his films, Oscar nods, and various award nominations including Cannes, Golden Globes, and various critics associations. The upswing of attention these two movies grabbed seemed to anchor the filmmaker back into a realm of success that surpassed Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown. In the same—almost sabotaging—manner as Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down, Bad Education (2004) temporarily derailed the upswing the director experienced after Talk to Her.

BAD EDUCATION

Talk to Her appeared to be a warm up for returning to a focus on male relationships. Bad Education is Almodovar’s second decidedly gay narrative involving a love story centered around two men. There is also a return to uncertain commentary on the Catholic Church. The director does not consider these stories to be anti-clerical, but has also stated that he is not so naïve as to think people will not be offended by them. When he swipes at the church, he does so in a way that almost dares the viewer to be offended. An early scene in Bad Education portrays Angel (Gael Garcia Bernal) as he returns to his Catholic school to face a nefarious priest. Angel attempts to blackmail this priest who had molested him. As the two have a mostly tense interchange, the film flashes back to Angel as a child. As the film progresses, the scenes we are seeing are actually from a movie that Angel has written. As the film within the film progresses, Angel casts ambiguous light on his role in his relationship with the priest.

There is a funny dynamic when comparing the main characters in Bad Education and Talk to Her. Bad Education experienced a large drop in the director’s visibility—due to the religious themes—while Talk to Her accumulated much more positive attention. Bad Education deals with the point of view of a man confronting a priest about their sexual relationship when he was a young boy. Talk to Her tells the story from the point of view of a man having sex with a woman in a coma. It is naïve to think that reactionary views on subject matter like religion will not affect a movie’s attendance.
Yet the young man confronting the priest for being raped as a child becomes less sympathetic due to blackmailing and the questionable role he plays in their relationship, while the nurse who is violating the coma patient in *Talk to Her* becomes a sympathetic character, even though he is performing an unthinkable act. Mainstream mores make the release of an Almodovar film and the critical reaction a constant guessing game. But if the Catholic Church actually thought hard about the themes prevalent in *Bad Education*, a case could be made on their behalf that would certainly not be present in any other film. On paper, it is easy to figure out who the bad guy is on one of his movies, but there are rarely decisive answers in an Almodovar film. His ability to make a subtle point through the manipulation of his characters makes his movies some of the most vexing stories ever put to film.

**AND BEYOND...**

His most recent films, *Volver* and *Broken Embraces*, are two caper-type narratives with a heavy nods towards Hitchcock’s style and techniques. Both films are labyrinths of diverging plot lines and have resonated strongly with worldwide audiences. Clearly, the DIY ethos has served Almodovar well. He stood out among a cultural blossoming in Spain’s post-Franco era. He stuck with his vision through an obstacle course of financial barriers, making an astoundingly minimal number of compromises. He experimented outside of various trends in filmmaking and produced solid work by creating novelty out of existing genre conventions, including plot devices established by screwball comedies, melodramas, and Hitchcock thrillers. Shaping Madrid into a diegetic world of his own image, he created settings where prostitutes, cross-dressers, and other downtrodden members of urban society have a voice beyond laughs or fodder for unsavory circumstance. He never adheres to formula and produces work without consideration of the morals of his audience or attempting to re-shock the world for the sake of getting attention.

Occasionally, it keeps him out of sight, but there is not a film he created solely for a paycheck and not a frame of his work that is not worth seeing. Almodovar films are an unyielding orgasm
Pedro Almodóvar stuck with his vision through an obstacle course of financial barriers, making an astoundingly minimal number of compromises.

of color and anarchy. There is a noticeable transition in his career from shock cinema, to more exploratory forms of transgressive cinema, to the exploration of the aging artist. As his abilities mature, he successfully manipulates classic Hollywood narratives and redefines genre conventions while simultaneously paying homage to the films he grew up with. While adherence to kitsch, color, and wildly unpredictable characters will always be in play, it seems there will never be a standard Almodóvar picture. An unstoppable force in cinema, Almodóvar continues to flourish as an independent and continues to make the world a safe place for camp.

In her review of Matador, Pauline Kael wrote that Almodóvar “reactivates the clichés of film noir and brings them into the land of punk.” There are a handful of filmmakers whose grace and style are unquestionably unique. Almodóvar has often proclaimed he is a thief, but his vision and ability to guide a story through a complex maze at a relatable pace is an undeniable gift to cinema.
SUGGESTED VIEWING

Pepi, Luci, Bom
Law of Desire
Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown
High Heels
Kika
Talk to Her

BIBLIOGRAPHY


RAZORCAKE is a 112-page bi-monthly magazine dedicated to DIY punk, independent culture, and amplifying unheard voices. As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, we’re sustained by subscriptions, donations, advertisements, and grants. All support is greatly appreciated. We feel when we work together, life is a little more bearable. On one side is a terrifying culture of manipulation, and on the other side are all of us.

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