

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 54, NUMBER 3 · [MARCH 1, 2007](#)

Review

The Women of Pedro Almodóvar

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)

Volver

a film directed by Pedro Almodóvar

1.

In the 1995 Almodóvar film *The Flower of My Secret*—a work that stands at the chronological midpoint between the director's earliest movies, with their DayGlo emotions and Benzedrine-driven plots, and the technically smoother and emotionally subtler films of the past few years—a successful middle-aged writer called Leocadia (Leo) Macías is caught, as Almodóvar's characters so often are, between the exhausting emotional demands imposed by a complicated life and the equally exhausting demands imposed by what you might as well call Art. Leo is an author of a series of very popular *novelas rosa*, romance novels (literally, "pink novels"), but her life of late has been so tortured—her handsome army officer husband is leaving her, very likely for another woman; her impossible mother is driving her and her put-upon sister nuts—that, as she tells her bemused editor, whatever she writes comes out not pink, but black.

This wry pun is meant by Leo to explain the manuscript she's just submitted, to which the editor, Alicia, has reacted not at all well. As Alicia points out to a weary Leo, the new novel, a violent tale of murder and incest whose female protagonist "works emptying shit out of hospital bedpans, who's got a junkie mother-in-law and faggot son who's into black men," not only is appallingly inappropriate to the publishing house's "True Love" series, but violates the terms of Leo's contract, which stipulates "an absence of social conscience.... And, of course, happy endings." The plot of the new novel smacks less of Barbara Cartland than of Patricia Highsmith; as a sputtering Alicia puts it, it's about

a mother who discovers her daughter has killed her father, who had tried to rape her. And so that no one finds out, she hides the body in the cold storage room of a neighbor's restaurant...!

When Leo, defending the artistry of *The Cold Storage Room*, gently protests that "reality is like that," Alicia launches into an outburst about "reality":

Reality! We all have enough reality in our homes! Reality is for newspapers and TV. Look at the result! With so much reality, the country's ready to explode. Reality should be banned!

But it's clear that to Leo, the gritty reality of her lower-class characters is far worthier of artistic representation than the rose-hued, gossamer fantasy world of her earlier work. When Alicia glumly asks why Leo's writing has changed, Leo shrugs. "I guess I'm evolving," she says.

Pedro Almodóvar is a director who, over the course of a career that now spans a quarter-century, has famously loaded his films with references to mass

e

entertainment, its producers and consumers; his characters tend to be directors, talk show hosts, novelists, *toreros* (and, in *Talk to Her*, a *torera*), actresses, journalists, publishers, dancers, fans—people who are frequently shown in the act of watching dances, plays, television shows, movies, bullfights, concerts. For this reason, exchanges in his films about the nature and merits of popular genres and their ability to represent reality are not to be taken casually. And indeed, it's hard not to think of the argument between Alicia and Leo as one that's about Almodóvar himself—about his own evolution as an artist, a progress in which *The Flower of My Secret* seemed, as critics at the time and Almodóvar himself have commented, to mark a watershed moment.

Before then, when you talked about "an Almodóvar film," it was pretty clear what you were talking about: an exaggerated aesthetic imbued with the lurid neon glare you associated more with certain genres of entertainment—radio and TV soap operas, film noir, pop lyrics—than with anything recognizably "real." There was the flashily self-conscious penchant for hyperbolic (and sometimes, you couldn't help feeling, ad hoc) plotting: murder, suicide, and hostage-taking were favorite mechanisms to keep the action going (in the 1987 gay stalker melodrama *Law of Desire*, you get all three), and—as with soap operas—hospitals and police stations were favorite settings. There was the hysterical pacing, which was only occasionally intentionally amusing (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, the director's 1988 breakout hit, was self-consciously constructed as a filmed stage farce). And above all there were the demimondaine characters—drag queens, transsexuals, prostitutes, junkies—who were handy, vivid symbols of the transgressive themes the then-young Almodóvar, during the heady years of the post-Franco cultural explosion, was clearly eager to explore—and to flaunt.

Such style and such material ideally suited the over-the-top passions that have always been this director's subject, passions that, like those in soaps, were never less than excessive—and, too often, excessively symbolic. (In *Matador*, the male and female leads are a former matador and his icily beautiful lover, both of them serial murderers who can achieve orgasm only in the act of killing.) The very titles of the early work have a hysterical or camp edge: *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *High Heels* (1991), and, most famously, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. It comes as no surprise that the director's earliest champions in this country were to be found among urban gay men, who were also enjoying, during the mid- and late 1980s, a newfound sense of political power and social visibility—and, of course, were feeling no little anxiety as well. Because a kind of hyperactive ebullience mixed with an edge of hysteria was the hallmark of Almodóvar's early style, too, the appearance, back then, of a new Almodóvar film felt to many of us obscurely like a confirmation. This perfect concentricity of the films' style and their historical moment no doubt explains why those early films, celebrated as being so gratifyingly "fabulous" at the time, feel today a bit overwrought—a bit dated.

When it came out, *The Flower of My Secret*—a film about an artist's need to outgrow an earlier, insufficiently serious aesthetic—was felt, with no little relief by Almodóvar's admirers, to signal a welcome renewal of creative energies after a number of films (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, *High Heels*, *Kika*) in which the deliciously outré boldness or the archly knowing camp fun of earlier work like *The Law of Desire* or *Women on the Verge* had hardened into shtick. Leo, to be sure, is a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown—her attachment to her wayward husband has a familiarly hysterical edge to it—but what's interesting in this film is the way in which that mad passion fails to lead to the kind of emotional and narrative carnage with which the director had earlier liked to conclude his films.

Law of Desire, for instance, is also about an obsessed, rejected lover (an ostensibly bisexual young man, played by Antonio Banderas, who stalks and eventually seduces a famous film director and then kills the film director's boyfriend); but

whereas the earlier film's melodramatic ending had the stalker shooting himself in his lover's arms —after a police siege and a hostage crisis, no less—*The Flower of My Secret*

rejects luridly dramatic death scenes in favor of something subtler and truer. Leo's impulsive suicide attempt is foiled when, having swallowed a bottle of pills, the semiconscious woman hears her crazy mother's voice on the answering machine—at which point she races into the bathroom, forces herself to throw up, and gets on with the painful, messy business of living. The theme of eschewing melodrama for the mundane realities of everyday life is implicit in the film's trick opening, in which we see a distraught woman, whose husband or boyfriend, we are given to understand, is brain-dead, being gently pressured by two doctors to sign a donor consent form: the camera pulls back to reveal that the woman is merely an actress participating in a training exercise for physicians at a transplant clinic run by Leo's best friend.

The self-conscious turning way from hyperbole that seems to be a consistent theme in *The Flower of My Secret*—the transplant clinic feint, the rejection of *Law of Desire*'s dénouement in suicidal violence, the shift in emotional interest from an erotic, solipsistic obsession with the lover to the dutiful relationship with a mother—looks forward to a larger change that's been in evidence over the past decade or so. Among other things, since 1995 the writer-director has seemed to realize that invocations of and allusions to pop culture can be more than idle, postmodern games or advertisements for one's own cleverness. *All About My Mother* (1999), about a woman seeking emotional meaning (not least, in mothering other people's children) after her adored teenaged son is killed in a car accident, is beautifully organized around a series of echoes of *All About Eve*, with its theme of stolen identities, and of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with its overriding preoccupation with fragile female psyches. *Talk to Her* (2002), which begins and ends with characters watching performances of Pina Bausch works, contains a brilliantly original set piece in which we get to see scenes from a bizarre 1920s silent film—Almodóvar's invention, amusingly evocative of that era and genre—whose plot comments suggestively on his characters and their motives. (An obsessive, sexually repressed male nurse describes the film—in which a man who's been shrunk to the size of a human finger as the result of a botched experiment enters the vagina of his sleeping mistress—as he himself finally enters the body of a comatose patient with whom he's been obsessed for some time.)

Since then, too, there's been an emphasis in the films on intense feelings that somehow do not lead to seduction, murder, and suicide. (The will to survive, the desire to nurture, and the need to commemorate, for instance.) If the Oscar-winning *Talk to Her*, like *Matador* sixteen years earlier, is about bullfighters and gorings, the tone of the movie, the passions that animate it—that of a journalist for the *torera*, and of the great *torero* who is his rival for her affections—are restrained, almost somber. It's as if Almodóvar were daring himself to make a film about that aesthetically and symbolically loaded cultural institution without going over the top, as he did so gleefully in the earlier movie (which opens with a scene of the sadistic retired bullfighter masturbating to slasher films in which women are dismembered, beheaded, hanged). Indeed one of the sly surprises of the later movie is that the famous *torero*

turns out to be rather sweet and nice, and touchingly attentive to his insensate lover—talking to her constantly—as the skeptical journalist, ostensibly the less macho character, does not.

The newfound emotional subtlety and technical restraint that you get in these films seems connected to a deeper appreciation of women than was previously evident—women not as camp harpies or hysterics or vamps (which is to say women as drag icons), but as something closer to the women of real life. This is so even in *Talk to Her*, where the women are more the objects than the subjects of deep emotions; it's as if his two principal male characters' fraught attention to the comatose women they adore has elicited from Almodóvar some deeper feelings of

h

is own. It is surely no coincidence that the most disappointing film of the director's recent period, the overwrought and overrated *Bad Education*—with its frenetically convoluted temporal layerings, its frantic Highsmithesque plot about a handsome and amoral young man whose masquerade as his own dead brother leads him to seduce both the priest who had once abused the brother and the gay film director who'd had a crush on the brother in school years before—has almost no female characters at all.

Almodóvar's finest film, *All About My Mother*, is in fact exclusively about women, of all kinds: young, old, successful, troubled, confused, strong, weak. The film follows Manuela, an employee at a transplant clinic (here Almodóvar once again recycles a motif from an earlier film) as she tries to rebuild her life after her precocious son's tragic death. The shift from men to women, male homosexual desire to maternal feeling, is signaled by a narrative feint with which the film begins. Early on there is a strong suggestion that the woman's fatherless son, with his fierce attachment to his mother, the prized Truman Capote book he's received for his birthday, and his love of camp classics like *All About Eve*, is on the verge of discovering his homosexuality; between that and the way in which the camera lingers on the beautiful face of the young actor who plays him, the film looks as if it might be the story of that discovery.

And yet soon after meeting him, we see the boy being run over by a car after trying unsuccessfully to get the autograph of a famous actress, whose car he chases after in the pouring rain. Here we realize that it's the mother, not the son, who will be our emotional focus; it becomes, so to speak, a story told by him, rather than about him. (Almodóvar has talked about the enormous impact that *L'Avventura* had on him as a young moviegoer, and the narrative dislocation that comes in the first third of *All About My Mother* bears him out.)

I

It is tempting to see the shift from the world of (gay) men to the world of (mostly straight) women as parallel to another, larger evolution that occurs in the movie, and in the work overall—the abandonment of melodrama for something at once subtler and more emotionally profound. This shift is evoked by yet another narrative feint: after the boy's heart is transplanted and Manuela (who because of her job has access to confidential records) goes to spy secretly on the recipient, there's a brief moment when you think the movie is going to be about another sentimental cliché—the mother's relationship with the beneficiary of her dead son's organs. But this, too, comes to nothing, and Manuela returns home to rebuild her shattered life.

Firmly grounded in reality, then, we follow Manuela over some few years as she becomes a substitute mother to several other characters: the brilliant but emotionally unstable lesbian actress who was the unwitting cause of Manuela's bereavement (played by the handsome Marisa Paredes, who had played Leo in *The Flower of My Secret*), and a young nun (Penélope Cruz) who's been seduced and made pregnant by the father, now dying of AIDS, of Manuela's dead son. (Since his affair with Manuela he's become a transsexual named Lola: even the men in this story aren't completely male.) What's remarkable about the film is that despite the presence of hyperbolic elements familiar from the earlier films—the addicts, the sex changes, the trannies, AIDS, the fatal accident, even the transplant clinic where Manuela works and where, in a horrible replay of the scenario with which *The Flower of My Secret* opens, she is compelled to sign the consent form permitting the extraction and use of her son's organs—the emotional tone is muted, tender, intense, and yet somehow sober. The film begins and ends with the death of a young person, but there is no question of such death being glamorized, sensationalized, or otherwise cheaply aestheticized; no question that the emphasis is on anything but life. It's as if, once again, Almodóvar were teasing us with elements from his earlier work only to bring us up short—to remind us of how far he'd come.

Looking back at the complex evolution of Almodóvar's style over the past two decades allows you, among other things, to see a secret and symbolic irony at play in Leo's argument with her editor in *The Flower of My Secret*. For Leo, greater artistic seriousness was represented by a commitment to subjects that seemed to her more grittily real, more violent, more working-class—more noir, in every sense—than the rose-colored fantasy world of her romance novels, with (presumably) their reveries about intense attentions of men to the erotic and emotional needs of women. And yet the director's own progress to greater depth and maturity has moved, if anything, in the opposite direction.

2.

The theme of returning to and suggestively recycling old material is at the very core of Almodóvar's new film, the Academy Award-nominated *Volver*, as its title reminds us. The Spanish verb *volver* means not only "to turn" —there is, indeed, a recurrent visual motif here of windmills turning—but "to return" and, with a verbal object, "to do again." Here, as in *Talk to Her*, two women are at the center of connected plots; here, as in *All About My Mother*, the emphasis is on motherhood. Most remarkably there is here a crucial allusion to the groundbreaking *Flower of My Secret*. For *Volver* takes as its *donnée* the plot of the very novel that Leo, in her quest for seriousness, had tried and failed to publish in the earlier film. Exactly like Leo's novel, *The Cold Storage Room*, the new movie is about a mother (here called Raimunda), a lower-class cleaning woman, who learns that her deadbeat husband has tried to rape her daughter and, after the husband is murdered, disposes of the body in a freezer in a neighbor's restaurant.

We eventually learn that these crimes —the incest, the murder, the mother's willingness to do anything to protect the daughter—are echoes of, "returns" to, earlier crimes committed by Raimunda's own mother; but this internal return is nowhere near as interesting as the larger one taking place here, which is that of Almodóvar himself once again returning, with delicious self-consciousness, to an old plot—one that sounded hopelessly excessive, too much like his own early work—and reconfiguring it, as he does here even more radically than in his other recent films, in the subtle but provocative manner of his mature style.

V*olver* dispenses fairly swiftly with two props of the old Almodóvar style: melodrama and men. Indeed, an arresting opening sequence suggestively emphasizes what will be the film's exclusive focus on female experience: it's a shot of the women of a small provincial town vigorously cleaning the tombstones of their relatives (or, in the case of one significant character, her own tomb). It is in this context of death and hard female labor that we are introduced to Raimunda, who lives in Madrid but has come for this ritual visit to her parents' graves (we learn that the couple died together in a fire three years earlier); her daughter Paula, a fourteen-year-old nymphet; her plain-looking sister, Sole; and their old friend and neighbor Agustina, who has remained in the village and who looks after Raimunda's senile old aunt, also called Paula. A visit to Tia Paula's house is charged—characteristically, as it will turn out—with intense familial emotion and with the specter of the macabre, even the supernatural. For even as the lonely old woman tells her nieces that "the important thing is that you come back [*volver*]," we soon learn that someone else may have come back, too: the two sisters' dead mother, Irene, whose ghost neighbors claim to have seen, and who Tia Paula herself, perhaps not as crazy as she sounds, insists has been doing the housework for her and cooking her meals.

Soon we are back in the big city, Madrid, where the relationships among these women—the supposedly dead mother included, as it will turn out— are the objects of the film's restrained and loving attention. Indeed, the knifing of Paco, Raimunda's

husband (a crime committed by young Paula as he tries to rape her), and the disposal of his body are handled with a semi-comical brusqueness; the fact that Raimunda gets away with cleaning up the crime scene and transporting the body from the house to a nearby restaurant freezer and then to a makeshift grave suggests the filmmaker's desire simply to be rid of the men here, too. They're just a plot mechanism, a way of focusing our attention on the women. In earlier films in which murders occur (*Law of Desire*, *Matador*), Almodóvar was clearly intrigued by the high drama afforded by police procedurals; here there are no cops on the murderer's trail, and the only procedure associated with the crime is the almost lovingly filmed sequence in which Raimunda, who cleans vast office buildings for a living, expertly and un sentimentally wipes up the blood with paper towels and then mops the floor. As a cover-up she merely tells everyone that Paco has left her and Paula; when Sole insists that he'll come back (*volverá*), "I don't think so" is the ever-practical Raimunda's opaque reply. To his credit, the director doesn't milk the line for a laugh, as he could well do—as indeed he would have done fifteen years ago.

If anything, when men turn up here, they're soon dismissed; the emphasis repeatedly returns to the bonds that connect these hardworking women. An ongoing joke of the film is the fact that after Raimunda takes over her neighbor's restaurant (typically, he's conveniently gone out of town and we soon forget about him) and makes it thrive, she repeatedly rejects the attentions of the handsome young guy, a member of a film crew, who has hired her to cater for them. The real focus is, if anything, on the way in which a couple of Raimunda's girlfriends, one of whom is a hardworking local prostitute, end up chipping in to help her with her burgeoning business—the way in which these women, without men, start to thrive. Regina, the whore, ends up helping her friend transport and bury the freezer, too—no questions asked. In earlier films, Almodóvar's women were the sort who relied on the comfort of strangers; here, they rely on each other.

It's a tribute to how intensely Almodóvar focuses our attention on female relationships that even after the graphic murder of Paco and the black comedy about the disposal of his body, the only mysteries and the only death we care to solve or to mourn are those involving women. The death is that of Raimunda's beloved Tia Paula, who, she learns after Paco is killed, has died the night before—an event to which, the women of the village insist, the ghost of Raimunda's mother has alerted Agustina. A strikingly photographed scene of the old lady's funeral, which shows us, from above, the black-clad townswomen batting their fans and surrounding Sole while we hear the insistent susurrations of their prayers, once again—perhaps because it suggests a hive of bees—drives home the theme of feminine emotional solidarity.

Of the two mysteries we are led to care about, the first has to do with the disappearance of Agustina's mother, a local eccentric who, she tells Paula, had once been the rural town's only hippie, and who disappeared the day that Raimunda's parents perished—a mystery that torments her plain, kindly daughter, who is dying of cancer. (Agustina begs Raimunda to help her solve the riddle before she dies, even if it means appealing to ghosts—a suggestion that an incredulous Raimunda, never one for fanciful solutions to real-life problems, emphatically rejects.)

The second mystery concerns the true identity of the woman who's buried in Irene's tomb. For it soon evolves that the ghost story is another tease, another suggestion of narrative extravagance that is soon abandoned in favor of something real. Irene, we learn, is no apparition, and when she finally makes herself known to her daughters and granddaughter, she confesses to a crime that not only explains the disappearance of Agustina's mother, but brings about a violently emotional confrontation on the part of all four women with a crime committed by the dead husband, a crime far more terrible than adultery or murder in self-defense: incestuous abuse of the young Raimunda. Irene's discovery of this crime, along with her knowledge of the husband's affair with Agustina's mother, is, we learn, what led her to set the fire that killed the adulterous couple.

The terrible secrets revealed by a sorrowing Irene explain the cause of the long estrangement between her and her now-grown daughter: the daughter's rage at the mother's failure to see what was happening, the mother's uncomprehending resentment before she did learn the truth. More emotionally significant still, the sensational revelation makes us realize that the two women are poignantly similar to each other: in the daughter the admirable spirit of the mother has, after all, "returned." For each is a mother who has been willing to incur an awful guilt in order to punish a terrible crime against her daughter: although it's the young Paula and not Raimunda who kills Paco, her mother makes it clear that she's willing to take the blame if the crime is ever discovered. (Incestuous abuse by a terrible father is itself a motif to which Almodóvar has returned here: it occurs as an eleventh-hour revelation in *Law of Desire*, but there it feels gratuitous—it's just another outrageous incident among many, introduced as an attempt to explain a character's erotic life. Here, it has greater narrative significance and a profounder emotional impact.)

The irony of *Volver*'s reenactment of the fictional plot from *The Flower of My Secret* is that the real focus, the real story here, is not in fact what had seemed so repellently sensational to Leo's editor—the murders, the dead bodies, the poverty—but rather a series of subtle, complicated, intense yet finally manageable feelings among female characters, emotions that, in the new film, really do constitute a kaleidoscopic vision of what "True Love" is. The self-wounding anger borne by daughters against their mothers; the subtly etched competitiveness between close friends and particularly between sisters (Almodóvar and his excellent cast brilliantly evoke the intricate currents that run back and forth between the plain Sole and the beautiful Raimunda, played with great effectiveness by Penélope Cruz, who seems at once more voluptuous and tougher than in her earlier work for Almodóvar, and who has certainly earned her Oscar nomination); the immense and unbearable pain felt by Irene (the great Carmen Maura), a mother who has inadvertently wounded her child by failing to see what was happening to her: these things occupy our attention to the exclusion of virtually everything else, with satisfying results.

It must be said that this newly exclusive focus on deep emotions among fairly ordinary people is a bit disconcerting for many who have come to enjoy the cinematic brand that "Almodóvar film" has long represented. The comparatively subdued reception that *Volver* has received may have much to do with the fact that the film does not deliver the kind of fun we've come to associate for a long time with this director's work. Or even with the kinds of extremities of incident and character that his fine, more recent work still revels in: the fantasy silent movies, the miraculous reanimations of comatose girls, the glitter and gore of the *corrida*.

Here I should mention a "return" of my own: on my first viewing I was fairly unaffected by *Volver*, largely, I think, because what I saw on screen strayed so far from my expectations of it (particularly having read of the murder with which it begins). Gone were the men, the eroticizing of the masculine that to my mind had always seemed to give the director's films either a campy or an erotic traction; gone, too, was the ostentatious appeal to "marginal" elements, gone the elaborate narrative frames created by reference to icons of pop culture, the films within films and plays within films, that gave the earlier work an elaborate and sometimes delicious self-consciousness. The only bit of trashy pop culture you get in the new movie is a scene in which the cancer-ridden Agustina goes on a daytime talk show to appeal to the viewing public for information about her mother. (Significantly, instead of embracing that tacky form of entertainment, the film rejects it—Agustina walks off the set in disgust, and keeps her stories to herself in the end.) The only performance you get here is, moreover, an almost painfully straightforward one: at the wrap party for the film crew, Raimunda, who we learn had once had auditioned for a talent show, shyly sings a song called "Volver." (One lyric is "I'm afraid of the encounter with the past that's coming back.") And the only outtake from another director's work is a terribly brief glimpse of the movie that Irene watches as she cares for Agustina: Visconti's 1951 film *Bellissima*, in which a mother goes to poignantly

fantastic extremes to make her little daughter a child film star.

In Spanish, *volverse* can mean "to change one's ideas" about something. It wasn't until I myself returned and saw the film a second time—and stayed long enough to confirm the identity of the film clip you see at the very end—that the merits of this subtle new film started to affect me, and I began to see what a great change in ideas it represents. For if *Bellissima* is about a mother whose fantasies of glamour adversely affect her family's ability to live real life (the Anna Magnani character uses up their small funds for grooming little Maria), what's interesting and, finally, moving about *Volver*—what suggests that it's the logical (if not quite as extraordinary) next step from the masterful *All About My Mother*—is that in Almodóvar's new film, motherhood trumps Art.

At the very end of the movie, when Raimunda, bidding her mother goodnight, tells Irene almost as an afterthought that she wants to tell her about what happened to Paco, Irene is too busy at this point caring for a new daughter-figure, the dying Agustina (shades of *All About My Mother* here), to listen. And so she tells her daughter that the story must wait. This poignant final assertion of the value of life over the allure of overheated narratives suggests that Almodóvar, like the erstwhile romance novelist Leo Macías, has successfully evolved: out of an abandoned melodrama he has fashioned a drama that, in its very restraint, may be the most radical thing its creator has yet attempted.

Copyright © 1963-2007 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the publisher.

