



## Almodóvar, Pedro (b. 1949)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Pedro Almodóvar is the most successful film director to have emerged from post-Franco Spain. In works that always bear his distinct cinematic and narrative style, Almodóvar presents absurd situations tightly framed by the trappings of everyday life.

An average-looking nun who methodically seduces "lost women" (*Dark Habits*, 1983), a modest housewife who discusses her sado-masochistic desires during sewing class (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Other Girls from the Heap*, 1980), and a priest who is slightly disturbed by the return of his altar boy lover as a voluptuous transsexual (*The Law of Desire*, 1987): these are the forms of queerness that Almodóvar presents as just plain ordinary.

The brilliance of the director's cinematic style, however, lies not merely in the amusing creativity of these situations, but also in the yawning gap between their queerness and their everyday context. In fact, Almodóvar's success resides in his ability to stretch the divergence of this queerness and its normalizing context to an extreme without compromising the believability of either. Although he denies that this strategy has anything to do with his being gay or with gay cinema in general, with it he manages to achieve a radical queering of vision.

Much of Almodóvar's success has come through a conscious adjustment and marketing of his own image. Therefore, the line between fact and fiction has often blurred in his frequent autobiographical reflections.

What seems clear is that the director was born in Calzada de Calatrava, a small village in Castilla La Mancha, where his father worked as a mule-driver. Almodóvar claims that poverty forced his miraculous self-education in writing and cinema; in fact, however, he was educated at a prestigious Salesian seminary located in the city of Cáceres. Upon completing his college degree in 1967, Almodóvar moved to Madrid, where he worked in the state telephone company by day and in a rock band by night.

At this time he began writing screenplays and novels, all of which reflected the increasingly punk style of his music. With the death of Spain's repressive dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, Almodóvar found the freedom to produce one of his feature-length screenplays as *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, which was finally released in 1980. Although this film clearly reflects the punk or *Movida* movement of which Almodóvar was a significant part, its plot focuses on the places where this subculture and the general culture meet.

The merging of the subculture and the general culture is defined most specifically in the relationship of Luci, a forty-something housewife, and Bom, a sadistic female punk musician for whom Luci leaves her policeman husband. That Luci ultimately returns to her far more sadistic husband suggests the normality of her lesbian relationship as opposed to her "perverse" marriage. Almodóvar renders this reversal particularly comic by making Luci and her marriage initially seem so ordinary as compared to Bom's transgressive world of punk.

Similar reversals of extreme normality and transgression appear in *Dark Habits*, where a convent populated

by lesbian and heroin-addicted nuns takes in a "lost" stripper, and *The Law of Desire*, where a gay film director and his transsexual sibling form a family that is quite normal when compared to the mad world around them.

Although Almodóvar's later films, including *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1989), perform these reversals of transgression and "normality" less smoothly, they nonetheless ground themselves in the queer ways of seeing pursued by early American gay films, such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) or James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (1971).

Indeed, it is precisely the amusing way that Almodóvar makes queerness so central and inviting that renders his films so much more broadly appealing than their American precedents.

The broad appeal of Almodóvar's films was underlined when *All About My Mother* (1999) won an Academy Award as Best Foreign Film and the Spanish Oscar equivalent, the Goya, for Best Spanish Film. The director's latest work, *Talk to Her* (2002), perhaps his most complex narrative, has solidified his reputation as a significant filmmaker, while revealing new warmth and emotion.

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**Andres Mario Zervigon** earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and now teaches at Rutgers University. He specializes in the art and design of Germany's Weimar period and in the painting of Britain's post-World War II era.