



## Issue 12: Book Reviews

### Pedro Almodóvar (Contemporary Film Directors Series)

By Marvin D'Lugo

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A Review by Heather Macdougall, Concordia University, Canada

In *Pedro Almodóvar*, Marvin D'Lugo undertakes the complex task of interpreting and summarizing the work of Spain's most prominent and celebrated contemporary filmmaker. Almodóvar's own life is as eccentric as many of his characters', and his colourful, irreverent films have earned him an international cult-like following while also bringing non-judgemental representations of marginalized communities (prostitutes, transgendered people, and gypsies, among others) to mainstream cinemas and multiplexes around the world. His commercial success outside of his domestic market, combined with the relative lack of other internationally prominent Spanish directors, has led to a widespread misinterpretation by contemporary cinema audiences (outside of the Spanish-speaking market) of Almodóvar's films as emblematic of Spanish national cinema. This book addresses this misconception by emphasizing the auteur nature of his films, and by demonstrating the ways in which his work either subscribes to, or departs from, the various cinematic spheres of which it is a part: Spanish cinema, European cinema, gay cinema, and genre cinema.

D'Lugo points out, for example, that when Almodóvar found himself involuntarily representing Spain at international festival screenings of *Entre tinieblas* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1983) in the early 1980s, "it was an ironic position for him, since at home the industry ignored him, and establishment critics mocked his films as amateurish" (8). Furthermore, D'Lugo compares Almodóvar's films to those of directors that could be considered more typical of Spanish film, such as Carlos Saura, Víctor Erice, Jaime Chávarri, and Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, to conclude that "Almodóvar's films seem antithetical to the patterns of Spanish film production that had been lionized since the early 1980s as auteur cinema and *the national cinema*" (9).

As well as providing critical analyses of Almodóvar's films, the book includes numerous references to the Spanish cultural, political and economic developments which help to provide a context in which to consider the films. While some important aspects of Almodóvar's career are dealt with perhaps too superficially, as will be discussed below, the author writes clearly and competently within the scope he has chosen. As such, this book is a suitable resource for film students (or any interested movie-goers) who have seen and are intrigued by Almodóvar's films but would benefit from some additional background in Spanish cinema and history to better understand them.

The book opens with a section on how the director's life, "or at least the autobiography he

constructs for interviewers" (1), follows a number of patterns of melodrama, the movie genre that has been most closely identified with his own films. D'Lugo prefaces the ensuing biographical portion of the book with a proviso: "[T]hese are the details as he [Almod—var] has 'invented' them" (11). Despite numerous further insinuations that there are more (or, just as likely, fewer) juicy anecdotes in Almod—var's past than those included in the self-scribed official version, D'Lugo disappointingly does not propose anything to contradict it. The book addresses Almod—var as a personality only so far as it is necessary for an understanding of his work, so if one is looking for an incisive biography, one may do well to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the introductory chapter outlines clearly the most significant highlights of Almod—var's early life as they relate to the themes of his later films, including his migration from rural Extremadura to urban Madrid, his religious education, and the development of his sexual identity. D'Lugo also includes the briefest details of important Spanish movements which deeply influenced Almod—var's work, such as the Franco regime (which Almod—var rejected) and the Madrid *movida* (which Almod—var embraced). These movements shaped Almod—var's aesthetic preferences, and his early films were identified with "various clichés of Andalusian folklore that had long been the hallmark of Francoist kitsch culture" (5) such as folk songs, religious Catholic imagery, gypsy culture, and bullfighting. D'Lugo explains, however, that

Almod—var's embrace of popular culture was not a frivolous identification with these nostalgic elements but part of an aesthetic process of recycling the 'desecho hist—rico,' the historical dregs of cultural forms and styles identified with Francoist culture that his films endow with countercultural meanings. (5)

The subsequent chapters each focus on one or two of Almod—var's feature films, following his career in chronological order beginning with *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del mont—n* (1980) up to *La mala educaci—n* (2004). Unfortunately, as with other volumes in the Contemporary Film Directors series, *Pedro Almod—var* is out of date almost as soon as it is published, with no mention of his latest offering, the critically acclaimed *Volver* (2006). It is regrettable also that D'Lugo does not find a little more space, beyond a brief mention in the introduction, to devote to Almod—var's short films shot on super-8. It was through these early creations that the director learned his craft, and the "happenings" surrounding their exhibition played an important role in cementing Almod—var's position as one of the star creators in the *movida*. Their inclusion in the book would perhaps be all the more relevant since of all Almod—var's films, they would be the most difficult (and in many cases impossible) for a reader to procure for personal viewing and analysis.

The author, however, has chosen to focus exclusively on Almod—var's commercially released feature films, and this he does quite competently. D'Lugo brings together insightful criticism and analysis from a variety of sources, presenting a wide spectrum of perspectives from Spanish, European, and North American critics while also pointing the reader towards further resources for more in-depth analysis. Particularly interesting are the plentiful quotes from Almod—var himself, which serve to illuminate his directorial choices and intended meanings. Meanwhile, the book also includes references to important movements in Spain's cultural, economic and political development as they tie into the themes in Almod—var's work. The films are analyzed in chronological order, so it is easy to notice how Almod—var's technical skill and appreciation of the international market improve with experience, but D'Lugo also carefully ties the films together by drawing attention to recurring

themes throughout Almodóvar's oeuvre. Some of the themes discussed include the relationship between artifice and authenticity, the contrast between rural and urban life, the negotiation of sexual/gender identity, the role of the family, and the use of violence as entertainment.

Naturally, the focus is on Pedro Almodóvar as an auteur filmmaker, and D'Lugo highlights the signature aesthetic that the director has created for himself, as well as the autobiographical influence apparent in the films. D'Lugo should also be commended, however, for giving due credit to other players who have contributed to Almodóvar's success. For example, Agustín Almodóvar, Pedro's brother and business partner, was instrumental in the realization of most of the films and co-founded the production company El Deseo, S.A. D'Lugo notes

Almodóvar's notable distribution success may be attributed to the collaboration with Agustín, whose business acumen was balanced with a sensitivity to his brother's artistic needs and a keen sense of the markets to which El Deseo's films could be directed. (53)

One might argue that one of Pedro Almodóvar's prime strengths is his ability to find the perfect actor for each of his admittedly demanding characters. D'Lugo chronicles Almodóvar's "discovery" of actors such as Antonio Banderas and Penélope Cruz, who subsequently became globally sought-after movie stars. He also gives background on other actors, which gives readers an idea of what connotations their performances would have for an audience familiar with their past roles. For example, D'Lugo explains that:

when [Victoria] Abril starred in *Tie Me Up!* [AKA *Áctame!*, 1990] she already had a well-established screen persona. The thirty-year-old actress had appeared in fifty motion pictures, securing a reputation for powerful dramatic performances but also for portrayals of female characters with strong sexual identities, often of a humble or marginal social class. (71)

Any analysis of Spain's most controversial director would be incomplete without an appropriate explanation of the scandals that regularly accompanied Almodóvar's commercial releases. The author provides readers with the reactions of audiences, critics, and the establishment both in Spain and abroad. For example, D'Lugo points out that of all Almodóvar's films, only *La ley del deseo* (1987) and *La mala educación* (2004) were completely ignored by the Goyas (Spanish film awards), in what was considered by many to be "a generalized homophobic response among Spanish film critics and members of the film industry toward what amounted to the groundbreaking treatment of the normalization of gay romantic narratives in Spanish film" (59). D'Lugo also relates Almodóvar's trouble with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which originally gave an X rating to *Áctame!* (1990), effectively disqualifying it from general distribution:

Indignant at the classification and defiant at what he saw as a variation on the kind of censorship tactics used under the Franco regime, Almodóvar and his U.S. distributor, Miramax, sued the MPAA. [É] Miramax and Almodóvar eventually prevailed, and a new category, NC-17, was designed that reflected more appropriately the film's mature subject matter. (75)

The book closes with two interviews, the first a reprint of a 1987 interview from *Film Quarterly*, and the second a "self-interview" from 2004. These interviews are a real treat, as they allow the readers the chance to compare Almodóvar's perspective on his films at two very different points in his career. The fact that the recent interview was penned entirely by Almodóvar himself also brings the book full circle to the point made in the introduction that Pedro Almodóvar has both the desire and

the ability to be in complete control of his own public image.

Throughout the book, D'Lugo concentrates only on Almodóvar's role as director of feature films and is therefore able to keep the book focused and concise. Some more information on Almodóvar's early short films would have been relevant, as mentioned above, as well as some discussion of Almodóvar's other roles in filmmaking, such as his role as the producer of such acclaimed films as *My Life Without Me* (Isabel Coixet, 2003), and *The Secret Life of Words* (Isabel Coixet, 2005). While the critical analyses of Almodóvar's films are interesting, the real strength of this book is the background it provides for readers who have seen Almodóvar's films, but who are not completely familiar with the contexts in which they were made. The information provided about Spain and its national cinema is basic but adequate for the purpose at hand. Similarly, the notes explaining the significance that a domestic audience would glean from certain directorial choices, such as casting, add layers to the reader's understanding of the films. In all, it is a good introduction to Almodóvar for film students or general audience members; readers who have found his films bewildering or distasteful may at least begin to understand why he made some of the choices he did, and those who are already fans will appreciate the films all the more when provided with additional contextual information and critical perspectives.

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