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A Symposium on Pedro Almodóvar

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A Symposium on Pedro Almodóvar

Editor's Note: Every once in a while, an individual artist seems significant enough to warrant his own Threepenny Review symposium, and such is the case with the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. The following pieces—by three fiction writers, a translator, and a critic-editor—were written simultaneously and independently in response to the assigned topic; any overlaps, parallels, or disputes are therefore purely serendipitous.

KNOWN FOR larger-than-lifeness, gloriously melodramatic plot twists, and a hypersaturated palette, Almodóvar nonetheless worships at the shrine of detail Flaubert set up and decorated with an emptied phial of arsenic and parrot feathers. Consider *Live Flesh*, a thriller beginning with the January 1970 radio broadcast announcing that Spanish citizens' civil rights, including free speech, have been suspended. The broadcast is interrupted by the piercing screams—a kind of hapless free speech, the body's outcry—of a young prostitute going into labor. Briskly, the bewigged and kimonoed madam hustles the young prostitute, wearing only a bright slip of a dress and shabby slippers, out the door, into the dark street; and, after a show of unexpected bravery—the madam goes down on her knees in order to bring a city bus to a halt—the older woman and the younger take shelter in the bus, which rolls along through an emptied, terrified city. Labor pangs intensify, the young woman's face contorts with anguish (she is Penelope Cruz), and a close-up shot down between her widely parted knees shows liquid spattering the bus floor between her slippers. Despite the speediness of the sequence and the haphazard comedy of this view between the prostitute's knees, this is among the most empathetic visual presentations anywhere in art of a woman's vulnerability during labor.

But Almodóvar doesn't leave it at that. *Live Flesh* is about gazing, and holding the blood-streaked newborn up to the bus window, spotlit monuments flashing past in the velvet winter darkness, the madam says, "Look, Victor. Madrid."

And still, Almodóvar doesn't leave it at that. Later in the movie, a twenty-something Victor, newly released from prison, stands gazing into the chaotic living room of the house his mother left to him. Scattered junk, a chair of royal blue velour, a truly horrifying couch whose upright back is buttoned like a mattress and whose seat cushions are missing. This couch is the nastiest possible shade of mustard yellow. The colors of mustard, royal blue, and the pea green of a plastic bucket form an off-kilter triangle whose center is a pair of shoddy green-soled espadrilles, very like those the prostitute was wearing when she gave birth on the bus. Victor can't know the significance of those slippers, and they occupy one-eighth of a second of screen time, if that. There is the son, in need of some emblem of homecoming, and there are the slippers, splayed as if his mother's ghost had just stepped from them into the air. The viewer would love to communicate the slippers' importance to Victor, somehow, but let's look at this wish: it's the wish to convey to a fictional character

the importance of an instant's glimpse of a pair of slippers like those worn by a whore who gave birth on a city bus—absurdity heaped on absurdity—yet the whole is infused with a sort of desperate tenderness, allocated now not to any of Almodóvar's characters, but to the viewer.

Almodóvar, being Almodóvar, doesn't leave it at that, either, and before long the entranced young convict, still a virgin, will find himself gazing up between his older lover's parted knees at her vagina, saying, "I've never seen anything like it."

"I've never seen anything like it": the ideal response for an inhabitant of Almodóvarland, character or viewer.

The uses of extravagance in Almodóvar are a subject in themselves, because in fiction or film extravagance mostly aligns with absurdity, and a ridiculous appearance is often a heavily inked arrow pointing right at a character's flaws. In Almodóvar extravagance figures as it does in nature: it is widely distributed, morally neutral, and often carries an erotic kick, as in the plumage of birds of paradise. Excess in Almodóvar attests to the world's extraordinariness, something like what Marlow means in *Heart of Darkness* when he says, "The earth seemed unearthly"—reality squared, itself only more so, because we've walked into a strangeness we always suspected lay at the far end of the spectrum. That's why Almodóvar feels at once so strange and so familiar, because the edge he explores is an edge we've believed in since childhood, when we got the first disillusioning hints that maybe adults really were satisfied with what seemed, to a child's eyes, incalculably boring, repetitious lives. That once seemed fantastically unlikely. It didn't matter if those adult lives were good, steady, ethical, responsible: they just seemed improbable.

I don't mean that Almodóvar is childlike, or that he doesn't value adult qualities such as persistence and pragmatism and compassion, because he does, and has an unusually felicitous touch with good characters. The transvestite Agrado in *All About My Mother* is lovable partly because she embodies kindness, loyalty, and good cheer. But Agrado is a character whose charm is intertwined with the unlikeliness of her existing at all, and a marvelous moment in the movie is when Agrado entertains the disappointed audience of a canceled play by taking the stage and explaining just what she paid for separate aspects of her transformed body. Goodness here gives a delicious account of itself: it's pieced together at some cost, and it takes spiritedness to manage the feat.

Like John Updike, who must in other ways be Almodóvar's aesthetic oppo-

site, Almodóvar is fond of red-headed women, whether transvestites or to the body born. Red in Almodóvar is potent, vibrant, overdetermined—a Chanel suit, a rose on a breakfast tray—but it is just as often shabby, hasty, trashy, a wig on a madam's dressing table, taillights glimmering in oily puddles. Once certain movies (*Live Flesh*, for one) have spun their own visual fable, scarcely a scene passes without red's signature: it's as if eros scribbled a note in each frame. In *Live Flesh*, a pivotal, sexy encounter occurs between a couple seated on a bench in a jungly garden, a setting so energetically, edenically green it seems to rule out red's wink; but no, there, over the man's shoulder, is a bush starred with hothouse blossoms. Just as there is Yves Klein blue or Schiaparelli pink, there should be an Almodóvar red, shade of an August tomato or (maybe more to the point) a glossy Fifties Revlon lipstick. It's as if the collected works of Almodóvar are, among other things, an iconography of red.

In Almodóvar, visual extravagance doesn't necessarily imply emotional extravagance. It may well be the opposite, as when the conventionally pretty apartment of the married couple in *The Flower of My Secret* shelters one of Almodóvar's most passionately volatile characters, the romance writer Leo. (She is played by Marisa Paredes, auburn-haired, with pale gray eyes, blue in some lights, and a splendid upright carriage, as if the small of her back is continually being urged forward by an affectionate hand.) When Leo tips the pharmacopoeia of pills she'll use to attempt suicide into an ashtray, the ashtray's tiny square tiles are a mosaic of pale pastels, and the whole film, which feels uncharacteristically overcast and deliberate, is a medley of noncommittal hues whose nemesis is the flagrant red dress the pre-suicidal Leo changes into when she expects her adored but elusive husband's arrival. The doorbell rings. The camera gazes down the apartment's long hallway at Leo, running full tilt in high heels down the length of highly polished parquet floor, her dress a torch carried with thrilling recklessness toward the viewer, though the man on the other side of the door will never possess this view. The approach of this impetuous red dress (for it's almost the dress that's in love) belongs to the viewer alone, and makes of the viewer a lover.

—Elizabeth Tallent

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COMING BACK to *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* after twenty years or more, I was struck, once again, by the sheer verve and outrageousness of it. Everything is outrageous—the colors and the clothes, the way people behave and speak. The colors are brash and primary and clashing. The clothes are not so much fashion statements as statements of intent, loud and bright and individual. People do outrageous things: throw answering machines out of the window, burn beds, hijack motorbikes, keep chickens and rabbits on the terrace of a penthouse apartment in downtown Madrid. And the characters speak like real

people, like real Spanish people, freely and frankly and often crudely—*joder, hija de perra, váyase a la mierda, gilipollas, hostias* (fuck, stupid cow, piss off, wanker, oh, Jeez). They are the opposite of the honed dialogues of the Hollywood films that Pepa and her faithless lover, Iván, dub into Spanish. We don't believe in Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden and their woes, but despite the outrageous plotline of WOTVOANB, we do believe in Pepa's and Candela's distress. We believe in them because they are so often messy and incoherently upset, sometimes funny, always real. Like Pepa, we distrust Iván precisely because he is so blandly fluent—emotionally and linguistically—but never outrageous. (Significantly, Iván, the lying, faithless lover, is shown in a black-and-white dream sequence at the beginning of the film, uttering smooth, meaningless compliments to a variety of women. Color is real; black-and-white is fake.) Outrageousness becomes, then, a seal of authenticity—Iván's ex-wife in her lampshade hat and Sixties make-up; the taxi-driver in his mambo-themed taxi.

Being outrageous, or (for us) just watching the characters being outrageous in the middle of the outrageous set and costumes, is terribly liberating. And that, it seems to me, is what the film is about and why it retains its freshness. It is a film of liberation. It moves from "Soy Infeliz," the glum, lovelorn song played over the opening titles—"I'm so unhappy because I know that you don't love me anymore"—to "Puro Teatro," the defiant song played over the closing credits, in which the singer finally sees her phoney lover for what he is—pure fakery and theater. The film ends with all its loose ends flapping free, but, then, neatly tied-up ends are fake too. What we are left with—listening to Pepa and Marisa's conversation on the roof terrace in the dark—is an assertion of life and joy.

—Margaret Jull Costa

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THE PIVOTAL film, I think, is *The Flower of My Secret* (1995). It's not a great film, but it does strike me as representing a shift in Almodóvar's aesthetic intentions.

Significantly, in a Spanish-language trailer, the director himself, addressing the camera, refers to it as his "most mature" film so far. Also significantly, it puzzled contemporary critics and fans. Roger Ebert awarded it a piddling one-and-a-half stars, for example, and unintentionally put his finger on precisely the right issue by complaining about the seriousness of the film's ambitions. He tells us that Almodóvar appears to want to be serious, but that his talents lie elsewhere. His strength, according to Ebert, is "cheerful, anarchic trashiness."

Perhaps Ebert should be forgiven. He had no way of anticipating the films that were to follow.

It's my sense that Pedro Almodóvar began by thinking of himself as a sort of Spanish hybrid of Douglas Sirk and John Waters. His intention seemed to be to entertain at all costs; his aesthetic was pure camp, with extreme, over-the-

top stories, great washes of garish color, grand irrational passions erupting in anomalously small-scale soap-operatic settings. His sympathies, as is frequently noted, lay with his long-suffering female characters, victimized by unfeeling, brutish men. He had a weakness for physical and psychological grotesquerie and for all manner of lurid emotional excess. His strength, in other words, was cheerful, anarchic trashiness. And God knows he produced some entertaining and accomplished films during this early period. They were good enough for one to say, *Dayenu*. But they were eccentric, peculiar, and ultimately minor. Ghettoized.

But somewhere along the line, Almodóvar seems to have discovered a more serious artist lurking within himself, agitating for release. Something in the stories he was telling began to elicit a deeper response from him. Without altogether abandoning the camp extravagance of his earlier work, he began to explore more nuanced emotions and more complex relationships. His dramatic vocabulary became more subdued and more tender, and the dramatic situations he explored more serious and more haunting. And by the time he got to *All About My Mother* (1999), I think he could lay fair claim to being a great filmmaker, one of the best currently functioning.

It's disconcerting when an artist leapfrogs categories like this. Critics (and not only Roger Ebert) prefer them to remain safely in their pigeonholes, and the truth is, they usually do. They may improve as they mature, but they rarely confute expectations so radically as this. From camp jester to major artist: it's a progression in which we should exult.

—Erik Tarloff

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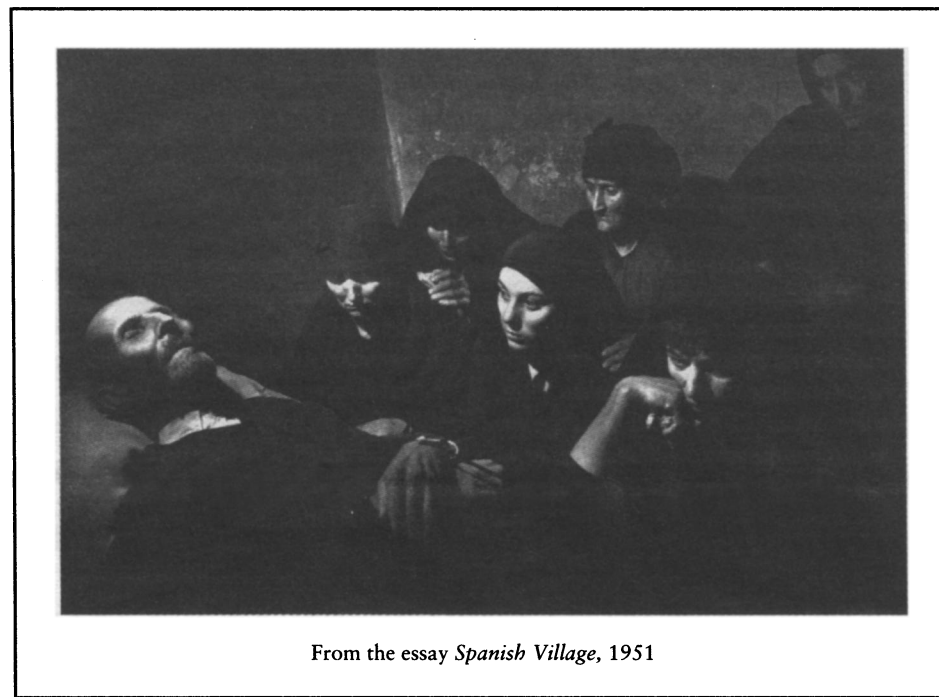
ONE SPRING evening when I was living in Grenoble, France, I tagged along with some friends to an Almodóvar film playing at a cozy "original language" theater in a back alley of the town center. Naturally, the film was subtitled in French, and watching it was something of a personal linguistic triumph, since at the time my French was poor and my Spanish nonexistent. This may be the reason the opening scene, which has no dialogue, remains the most vivid in my mind. It is a dance performance: Two elderly women in nightgowns, blind with despair, or in physical pain, clutch at themselves as if to soothe an ailing soul. At one point, they bump into the wall at stage right and slither toward the ground in a slow-motion fall, feet rising above the rest of the body in a gesture of extreme defeat. Later, they run across the stage like specters, arms hanging limply at their sides, palms outward. A very slight old man is frantically keeping them from tripping over the chairs that clutter the stage.

Each time I've started *Talk to Her* since that first viewing, I almost forget I'm watching an Almodóvar film. The opening performance has a certain solemnity and pallor that isn't at all in keeping with his usual strident aesthetic. The reason, of course, is that the dance isn't his; it is a piece of choreog-

raphy by the German modern dancer Pina Bausch. And yet I've come to think of this sequence as a kind of epigram for his female characters, not because these dancers resemble them, but because of the discomfort the dance elicits. My chest tightens. I am both repulsed and mesmerized by these bodies. They are ravaged, hair gray and stringy, limbs emaciated, faces wrinkled by a lifetime of sorrow or heartbreak. Are they ghosts in a dream? What sort of violence have they seen or suffered? Are they grieving? Or are they dying? The beauty achieved through the dance is not sculpted, it is a contradiction—born out of the material of some elusive disgrace.

When the camera moves from the stage, we see the two central characters of *Talk to Her* for the first time, sitting together in the audience. One of the men is crying, and every time I see his tears it is a relief. He helps me too to weep.

Almodóvar's female characters always startle and repulse me at first, even the ones I come to adore most,



From the essay *Spanish Village*, 1951

like Manuela in *All About My Mother* and the sisters Raimunda and Sole in *Volver*. I'm from a long line of Northern European women for whom understatement is a point of pride and exhibitionism an embarrassment. We are guarded, unemotional, reserved to the point of reticence, self-critical to a point of immobility. Almodóvar's women are nothing like this. They strike me as a bit alien, oversized, maybe overexposed. Whether faced with a fear of the dark or a fear of abandonment, they embrace their terrors unabashedly. For them, suffering is a matter of fact, and they barrel forward from trauma in vivid display. The human body is often, in Almodóvar, unwieldy and inglorious, messy, smelly, or just ugly, but it is also a source of endurance and fortitude and grace. The violence his women sustain almost always signifies both a loss (of a son, a father, a home) and a debasement, but also a new beginning—a demand on the self to find creative ways to move on from an unsavory past, to repair a life. In the end, I'm always sobbing.

It is with difficulty that I accept Almodóvar's unapologetic celebration of the darker aspects of womanhood. But it helps to imagine him watching Pina Bausch's dance alongside me and

the two men in the audience, seeing reflected in it his own sense of strange beauty.

—Kathryn Crim

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I DON'T SEE a lot of Spanish cinema, and I lay the blame for this, in large part, on the exaggerated patriotism of the Spanish press and Spanish movie critics. Years ago now they decided that *there simply must* be several Spanish masterpieces of cinema every season, but, unable to decide which movies were masterpieces, they decided to praise to the skies any and every movie made in Spain. To listen to them, anyone would think that there was a pool of talent in this country comparable only to 1950s Hollywood, when the "pool" included, to name but a few, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Billy Wilder, Anthony Mann, Otto Preminger, Joseph Mankiewicz, John Huston, Stanley Donen, Vincent Minnelli,

the critics and the prize-givers: *Al sur de Granada* [*South of Granada*] by Fernando Colomo.

I've spoken before about the ancient phenomenon of ghosts. Over the centuries, many have believed in these beings who resist leaving the world and can find no rest beyond death. Nowadays almost no one *seriously* believes in them. Some of us pretend to believe in them a little, mainly because we do not wish to discredit a literary genre that has produced some genuine masterpieces. Others mix them up with the various esoterica currently in vogue, but those who embrace all the exotic or anomalous beliefs that have ever existed (from horoscopes to Templar legends) tend to be bewildered, ignorant skeptics who don't really believe in anything and are simply trying them on for size. *Volver* is a ghost story and remains so to the end, because, despite the explanation given in the penultimate section, which puts everything back in its rational place, the return of Raimunda and Sole's mother continues to function like a spell or enchantment and continues to belong to the realm of fantasies, of the improbable and the marvelous. The reason why *Volver* is so moving as well as so funny, and the reason why it works so well from start to finish, is possibly because it speaks so naturally of domestic ghosts, which are the ones who appear most often in dreams, the only territory where they really do appear.

We all dream now and then of our dead. We see them so clearly, we hear their laughter, we talk to them, and sometimes, as Milton said in his sonnet about his dead wife, they're so vivid that day, when it wakes us, brings back our endless night. There exists a fantastical dimension to life which is in no way at odds with the rational one except when the two become fused, and in that dimension everything is imaginable, even what really happened. Indeed, in my opinion, what really happened only becomes truly real once we have imagined it, that is, once we have told it to ourselves as if it were a story. In that double dimension, of the lived and the imagined, which Almodóvar's film explores, everything is perfectly straightforward and normal, almost sociological—a world of women accustomed to having to cope with even the worst situations with unexpected energy and pragmatism; there are lots of women like that everywhere. And yet, without it in any way undermining that normality, something extraordinary happens to them, something fantastic, or something, at least, which is experienced as such and is immediately incorporated, without contradictions or difficulties, indeed almost gladly, into the problems of everyday life. That's why it leaves an echo in those who see the movie, that's why it resonates in the memory, why it invites us to fantasize, to imagine the potentially livable and to live the potentially imaginable, and to ask what we all, slightly dreamily, ask ourselves from time to time, when we think of our dead: What would we do if they came back? Where would we put them? What would we want to ask them now? What would they think? What would they say to us? Why don't they come back?

—Javier Marias

(translated by Margaret Jull Costa)