

Pain and Glory from Spain's Pedro Almodóvar

By David Walsh
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Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

The latest film from Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar is *Pain and Glory*, with Antonio Banderas. Almodóvar began making feature films in the mid-1970s and came to international prominence in the 1980s with such works as *Law of Desire* (1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989), and later, *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Talk to Her* (2002).

Almodóvar is the most well-known Spanish filmmaker of the post-Franco period. His films have valorized sexual and psychological difference and reveled in desire in various forms. An admiring critic writes that in his “celebration of fluidity and performance, in his hostility to fixed positions of all kinds, Almodóvar anticipates that critique of identity and essence that was later to become so familiar in academic feminist, minority, and queer theory.” This passes for high praise indeed in some quarters.

The new film treats the crisis of a famous Spanish filmmaker, Salvador Mallo (Antonio Banderas), who has ceased being able to create. Salvador suffers from a variety of physical and psychic maladies. His back hurts, he suffers from terrible headaches and increasingly he chokes for almost no apparent reason.

One of Salvador's earlier films is being re-released. This spurs him to pay a visit to the film's lead actor, Alberto Crespo (Asier Etxeandia), with whom he has not spoken in 30 years. At Crespo's, Salvador smokes heroin. In the state then induced, memories of his childhood flood back to him. He remembers traveling with his mother (Penélope Cruz) and moving into a whitewashed underground “cave” in a new town which is the only dwelling his impoverished father (Raúl Arévalo) has been able to find.

In further flashbacks, we see Salvador at a school run by priests where he succeeds as a choir soloist. During those same years, he teaches a local laborer, Eduardo (César Vicente), with a talent for drawing, how to read and write. Later, Eduardo will be the object of his first serious sexual desire. In the present, in a Madrid gallery, Salvador comes across the drawing Eduardo did of him as a child.

Salvador becomes addicted to smoking heroin. Ironically, Alberto comes across the copy of a text, *Addiction*, that Salvador has written, concerning his relationship with a man who was himself an addict. Alberto asks if he can stage the work. At first, Salvador refuses.

Salvador's friend Mercedes (Nora Navas) stands by him in his sad state and attempts to encourage the inert, depressed filmmaker, “You should do something.” He replies, “Without film my life is meaningless.”

Salvador has more recent memories of his mother (now Julieta Serrano) during her last days. He feels he failed her, neglected her. He

wasn't even able to grant her last wish: to die in her village.

Eventually, Salvador allows Alberto to perform *Addiction* in a small theater. The individual around whose drug-taking Salvador based the monologue, Federico (Leonardo Sbaraglia), who now lives in Buenos Aires, attends the play during a visit to Madrid. He pays Salvador a visit. Having given up drugs years ago, he is now married with two children. After Federico leaves, Salvador throws away his own drugs and determines to straighten his life out, including sorting out his medical condition. He takes up filmmaking once again.

Pain and Glory is a relatively somber work, with little of Almodóvar's “frivolity” that certain critics claim is so subversive. Banderas has been directed to be expressionless and largely humorless, and often suffering physically, in this semi-autobiographical work.

The film is the most successful Spanish film this year, and has won praise from critics internationally.

There are certain interesting elements in *Pain and Glory*. The picture of Salvador's crisis rings true by and large, as do a number of scenes from his childhood, including his being overcome by “first desire.” The final moments, in which we realize that Salvador is directing two actors as his mother and younger self, are among the most affecting. The serious and “serene” tone has obviously struck some viewers.

However, *Pain and Glory*, in the end, suffers from some of the same difficulties and limitations that weaken Almodóvar's more apparently “lighthearted,” sexually “transgressive” or anarchic films.

Almodóvar is living proof that the historical conditions and social atmosphere under and within which an artist matures carry enormous weight. He is an obviously talented individual, damaged by the period in which he has been working.

Born in 1949 into a poor family in rural Spain, Almodóvar attended a religious boarding school and considered becoming a priest. Instead, he moved to Madrid in 1967 with plans to take up filmmaking. Steven Marsh in *Senses of Cinema* writes that “following the death of Franco in November 1975, Almodóvar was steadily becoming the leading figure in Madrid's flourishing alternative cultural scene that would become known as *La Movida*. Commencing as a stage hand for the theatre troupe, Los Goliardos...he also performed in a punk rock group, wrote pornographic photo-novels and, significantly, purchased a super-8 camera with which he shot a series of outlandish shorts which guaranteed his burgeoning notoriety.”

His first feature film in 1980, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom*, “a bizarrely ribald chronicle of life on the wilder fringes of the Madrid night-time experience ... captured the spirit of the times—above all the sense of cultural and sexual freedom—and

established Almodóvar as a force with which to be reckoned.”

Thanks to the Stalinist Communist Party, above all, the Spanish bourgeoisie, frightened to death by the example of the Portuguese revolution of 1974, had managed to suppress the working class and maintain capitalist rule following the end of the Franco regime. Almodóvar emerged out of the social disappointment, cynicism and hedonism that developed within certain social layers.

In 1998 (in a review of *Live Flesh*), we cited the filmmaker’s comments about the changes that had taken place in Spain since the early 1970s: “The circumstances are very different: twenty-six years earlier the streets were deserted, now the crowds make it impossible for the cars to move, the sidewalks are filled with cheerful, drunken consumers. The people have lost their fear long ago.”

We wrote: “Naturally, no one would argue that the end of the Franco regime did not represent a significant change for the better. But does the situation in Spain—where, after all, unemployment is at record levels and extreme right-wing forces are again very active and vocal—or anywhere else warrant such complacency?”

The review continued: “One commentator writes that Almodóvar’s films, which have enjoyed considerable international success over the past decade, ‘are steered in post-Franco Spanish subculture. The director speaks for a new generation that rejects Spain’s political past for the pursuit of immediate pleasures. ‘I never speak of Franco,’ he says. ‘The stories unfold as though he had never existed.’ ... His postmodern style reflects the spirit of these youths, known as *pasotas*, or ‘those who couldn’t care less.’”

It would be wrong to simply dismiss his body of work on this basis. There are, in almost every one of his film, “interesting,” colorful or lively elements. A re-viewing of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* confirms its overall weakness. The film, about a number of women undergoing emotional or other sorts of crises, seems relatively trivial. The bright and artificial look is mannered and almost heavy-handed. Nonetheless, in the performances of Carmen Maura, María Barranco and a youthful Banderas, there are hints of genuine anti-establishment sentiment and mischief.

Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! is more consistently and successfully mischievous. Banderas, allowed to shine here, plays a discharged mental patient and inveterate thief who kidnaps a former star of pornographic films and drug addict (Victoria Abril) presently attempting to make her way as an actress in legitimate films. He is determined to make her love him—and succeeds in the end. It is a slight movie, but quite amusing, and Banderas, Abril and Loles León, as the Abril character’s sister, are outstanding in their roles.

There is something to this work, but comparisons with filmmakers such as R. W. Fassbinder and Douglas Sirk, both of whom brought a left-wing critique of capitalism to the screen, are entirely inappropriate. At his best, Almodóvar displayed an admirable social irreverence, including an irreverence for the Catholic Church and its rituals.

To his credit, upon receiving an Academy Award on March 23, 2003, for best original screenplay for *Talk to Her*, only days after the criminal invasion of Iraq by US forces, Almodóvar read out remarks in which he dedicated the award “to all the people that are raising their voices in favor of peace, respect of human rights, democracy and international legality, all of which are essential qualities to live.”

Overall, however, Almodóvar’s career has far more negative than positive features. Films such as *All About My Mother*, *Talk to Her*, *Bad Education* (2004), *The Skin I Live In* (2011) and *Julieta* (2016) suffer from murkiness, disorientation and a lack of interest in the

concrete social world that is not healthy or productive. In his defense of Almodóvar, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, Paul Julian Smith suggests that it is unfair of critics to charge the filmmaker with being “apolitical” and “ahistorical” and that he has carried out his own, peculiarly Spanish “forms of resistance” imbued with a serious “commitment to the analysis of social and psychic concerns.” This type of claim, typical of “left” cultural analyses these days, is simply not supported by Almodóvar’s body of work.

Pain and Glory, to be blunt, is plagued by self-involvement and similar disorders. The film’s attitude toward the remarkable self-pity evinced by the central character, a celebrity who lives in a splendid apartment and obviously has no material or financial disadvantages, is by no means clear. His doctor, late in the film, points out that “there are people worse off than you,” and that comes as a breath of fresh air, but for the most part the filmmaker seems comfortable with Salvador’s self-obsession.

Without his noted frivolity and transgressiveness, how much is there to Almodóvar’s work? Entire stretches of *Pain and Glory* are terribly dull, flat and mundane, including a number of the scenes from Salvador’s past involving his impoverished mother. The content of *Addiction*, Salvador’s “breakthrough” work, seems familiar and even banal. What we see of Alberto’s performance is not terribly moving or insightful. It is unclear why Salvador’s various encounters with his past, which are of a very diffuse character, inspire him to resume his career.

We are led to believe that Salvador is or has been a great filmmaker, but in what does his greatness lie? The filmmakers who have truly meant something to audiences, in the end, have been those who attempted to grapple with and dramatize the central conflicts of their time or who represented the situation confronting wide layers of the population. Neither the fictional Salvador nor the real Almodóvar has done either of those things. They speak for and to a relatively narrow, privileged layer in Spain and elsewhere. The stagnant times have not been Almodóvar’s fault, but their consequences and influence on his work should not be glossed over.

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