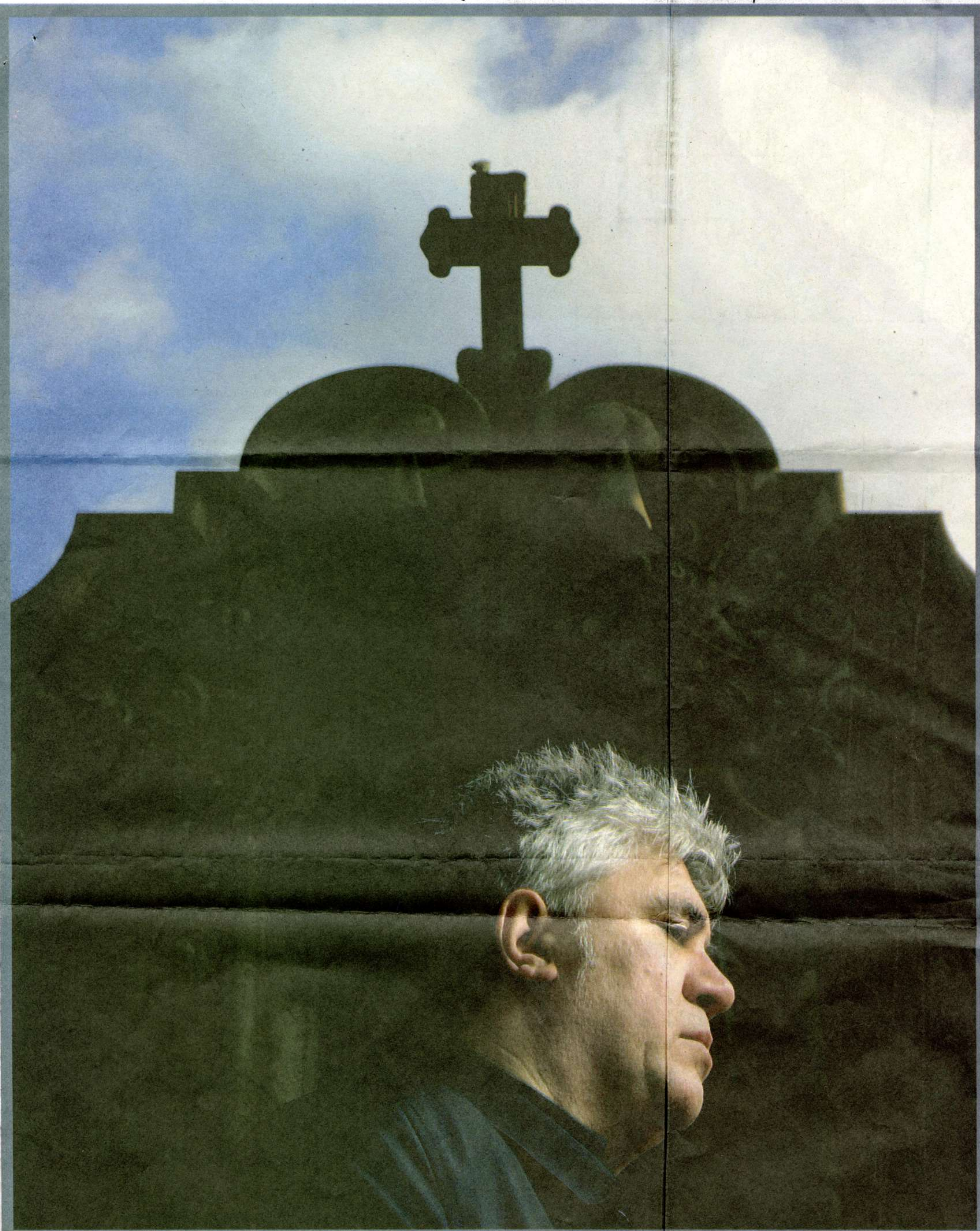


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WALLY SKALIJ Los Angeles Times

**LESSONS:** "Bad Education" is not a settling of scores with the priests who badly educated me, or with the clergy in general," says director Almodóvar. Rather, it's about passion and consequences.



# A noir departure

HOW IS IT THAT PEOPLE PERSIST IN OBSESSIONS THAT WILL KILL THEM? PEDRO ALMODÓVAR TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO SUCH QUESTIONS IN BAD EDUCATION.

By ANNE-MARIE O'CONNOR  
Times Staff Writer

**S**PANISH film director Pedro Almodóvar strides through a Los Angeles Catholic church, one that happens to be Bob Hope's former house of worship, built in a Mission Revival style emboldened by the theatrical flourishes of an architectural subgenre known as Hollywood Spanish. He appraises the aesthetic eclecticism with the practiced eye of a connoisseur — the way a restaurant critic might rate a new French bistro. ¶ There's Jesus on the cross, suspended in the filtered light that streams down over the altar. "It's pretty good," he murmurs appreciatively in Spanish. "Not as bloody as the ones we have in Spain." He runs his hand over the church's heavy wooden doors, carved with a jumble of Baroque embellishments. "Here they have taken leave of *all* sobriety," he pronounces approvingly, an amused smile warming his face. ¶ He lifts his eyes to the gilt stencils in the ceiling. "The light in here is beautiful. Churches always give me such a feeling of peace," he says. "Sometimes I wish I was a believer. Imagine coming to a place where you kneel down, recount all of your sins, and you are pardoned. Imagine how *wonderful* that would be. It is a *marvelous* invention." ¶ The unburdening of a long-held secret, and its mortal consequences, are a central thread of his latest film, "Bad Education," a drama fueled by sexual tensions in the Catholic Church that stars Gael Garcia Bernal as the *homme fatale*. ¶ The film has already

opened in such Roman Catholic enclaves as Rome and Madrid. But in the United States, where the church has been beset by sex-abuse scandals, a story driven by the transgressions of a pederast priest may have an unintended resonance when the film opens in December.

For Almodóvar, "Bad Education" is something of a dark departure, a foray into film noir that he says is informed by the hard-boiled style of dated cinematic police thrillers as well as by the more ponderous meditations on power in "The Godfather."

"The idea of the Mafia is something very close to the church, and I'm not the first to allude to that. If you remember, in 'The Godfather' you see the power of the Church and the Vatican. In the 'Godfather,' the church is treated like a kind of Mafia," says Almodóvar, who was now sitting at the dining room table of a two-story Mediterranean-style house on the property of an off-Sunset hotel where he and his entourage stay when he comes to Los Angeles.

Almodóvar, 52, is dressed in a black shirt, black pants and black boots; setting off his spiky grey hair. He is an attentive, effusive conversationalist, with a disarming warmth and ease that gives him the strangely familiar air of an old friend you haven't seen in a long time.

"Bad Education" is "not exactly" autobiographical," Almodóvar says — but it does draw on memories of his boyhood church school, where he said a priest molested a score of his classmates.

When the priest's behavior became notorious, the church simply transferred him to another post, an illustration, Almodóvar says, of a patriarchal culture in which "they protect each other, their fellow priests, not the children."

Once, Almodóvar says, he was sitting on the ground during recess when the pedophile priest of his boyhood school was walking through the



# **Holiday Sneaks; HOLIDAY SNEAKS; A noir departure; HOW IS IT THAT PEOPLE PERSIST IN OBSESSIONS THAT WILL KILL THEM? PEDRO ALMODOVAR TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO SUCH QUESTIONS IN 'BAD EDUCATION.'**

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Once, Almodovar says, he was sitting on the ground during recess when the pedophile priest of his boyhood school was walking through the schoolyard with a young student, Vicente, "who was his favorite, his de facto boyfriend."

The priest cast Almodovar a dark look and asked him sternly what game he could possibly be playing down on the ground. "I said to him 'and Vicente, what game is he playing?' " Almodovar recalls -- and the priest reached down and slapped him hard, twice.

However, " 'Bad Education' is not a settling of scores with the priests who badly educated me, or with the clergy in general," Almodovar wrote in a statement. "If I had needed to take revenge, I wouldn't have waited forty years to do so. The Church doesn't interest me, not even as an adversary."

"The film is autobiographical in a deeper sense," Almodovar wrote. "I am behind those characters but I'm not telling my life story."

## **A STORY OF PASSION**

The theatricality of the church has been a leitmotif in the films of Almodovar, who was a soloist in his church choir and took Mass in Latin. But a morality play was not Almodovar's intention with "Bad Education," though it is partly, he says, about the abuses of power. For him it is a film about "the many faces of passion" -- including the obsessive passion that was a staple of his earlier films.

"This is about people who live passionately, without limits, without caring that the passion will lead them to their death," he says.

It is also a cinematic celebration of the sensualism of Garcia Bernal, whose physical charisma -- the planes of his face, his eyes, the muscles of his body -- become as much an element of the film's aesthetic as the lushly saturated colors and beautifully composed shots that make all Almodovar films a visual feast. Garcia Bernal plays three characters, including a transvestite, an interesting stretch for an actor who stars in "The Motorcycle Diaries" as Che Guevara, Latin America's premier machista leninista.

"Gael is very unusual," Almodovar says. "I never dreamed he would be such a beautiful woman. I discovered he has a very delicate profile. Turn him one way and he looks very masculine, turn him another way and he looks delicate and feminine."

"Bad Education" is suffused with a familiar complexity of character and moral ambivalence. In the world of Almodovar, gender distinctions are blurry. Sinners are illuminated by saintly impulses. Men dress as women and women become bullfighters.

Motives are as mixed as the emotions of the young Islamic exile commando in "Labyrinth of Passion" -- played by a young Antonio Banderas -- who is handed a photograph of his next victim, the son of the Shah of Iran, and recognizes him as the guy he has been pining for ever since he picked him up in a nightclub and shared an evening of passion.

Even his plots are scrambled, with characters propelled through labyrinthine twists, parallel plots, blind alley plots. Dramas that are, as Almodovar says of "Bad Education" -- "multiple stories that, like Russian dolls, are hidden inside each other and are really only one."

## **COMEDIES ARE BELOVED**

AlmodOvar admits that people miss his funny movies. When he walks down the street in Spain, he said, people call out to him: "Pedro! Make us another comedy!"

But his earliest comedies, he said, captured the frenzied energy of the "Movida" -- a word that literally translates as "the movement" but is used to mean "the scene" -- the name of the cultural rebirth unleashed by the 1975 death of fascist dictator Gen. Francisco Franco.

"I lived it. I enjoyed it. And I created from it," Almodovar says. "I was much younger. Spain was exploding with liberty. It was a very stimulating moment. Now I'm older. And I'm preoccupied with other things."

His latest films, "Talk to Her" and "All About My Mother," have grown more contemplative by degrees, and social commentary has crept into his social satire. In "Talk to Her," a nurse remarks to another nurse that priests in Africa had raped nuns because they were too afraid of AIDS to continue coercing local women into sex. Almodovar says the character was expressing his own shock at the church scandal in Africa -- and his impatience with the underlying social inequalities.

"Women should be priests, just like men," he says. "The church is a place where a woman is an inferior. It's a manifestation of secular machismo. I ask myself: When will nuns rebel against their status in the church?"

It's late afternoon by the time the black limousine carrying Almodovar and his entourage -- after a pit stop at a Mexican restaurant -- pulls up to St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in North Hollywood for a photo shoot.

Almodovar keeps up the conversation between shots, talking about such things as the turn-of-the-century Catalan architect Antonin Gaudi, creator of the astonishingly surreal Barcelona church, La Sagrada Familia, that has been in perpetual construction for 100 years.

He stares heavenward and points to the face of the church, where the word "Humilitas" is emblazoned over the doorway. Humility. "How strange to see that word on a facade," he said, with a sense of wonder. "It's lovely."

Almodovar is admiring your earring, leaning over to touch it, when his cellphone rings for the millionth time. Then he's lost in animated conversation, as members of his entourage, fretting that they're late for his next engagement, leave you with his cellphone number and coax him toward the limousine waiting at the curb.

La Movida Almodovar moves on.

<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/access/735698401.html?dids...S+HIS+ATTENTION+TO+SUCH+QUESTIONS+IN+%27BAD+EDUCATION.%27&pf=1>