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# ■ All About My Mother

Director: Pedro Almodóvar

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by Kristoffer Leandoer

Yearbook 1999-2000

**YOU ALREADY RECOGNISE HIM FROM** the title sequence which is always done with an attention and sense of style that only Hitchcock or possibly the James Bond films can match. You also recognise several of the names that appear in the title sequence: Agustín Almodóvar has produced all of Pedro's films; Marisa Paredes, Huma Rojo in this film, has played a diva in several of them. Pedro Almodóvar has through the years staked out his filmic universe with such consistency that Woody Allen looks like a chameleon in comparison. In another way Pedro Almodóvar also bears comparison with his transatlantic colleague: his devoted love for the world of film and the stage, for actors, the ramp lights and the magical metamorphosis of human suffering to celluloid's pure (and purifying) gold.

This consistency and this devotion make Almodóvar one of the great contemporary representatives of auteur tradition (a tradition that maybe constitutes the flagship of film, but hardly the whole fleet), a bastion in the bulwark against making everything into TV; somewhat bizarre when you consider the kind of material his films employ.

What is a typical Almodóvar film about?

It is about sex, which because of Almodóvar's boundary crossing attitude, in principle can be practised by any character with any other character – age, sex or family ties are no obstacle but rather all combinations are always possible. It is about highly fabricated family problems, the daughter always marries the mother's old lover like in *High Heels*, and so on. And it happily contains a little violence to spice it up. Its setting is also not especially sweeping. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* essentially take place in a living room and whatever happens elsewhere a first year film student could place in the living room without any problem.

Perhaps the reader already suspects where the argument is heading, but it is best not to take any chances: the framework that Almodóvar has chosen to move

within is strictly speaking the same as TV soap operas and melodramas. He carefully follows the strict dramaturgical rules of melodrama and doesn't waste an opportunity to place scenes around death-beds, cemeteries (and in melodrama, with few exceptions, only a cremation will do; fiction still requires the potent burial-service symbolism that reality judges it can spare) a few defining moments – birth, illness, death – must be represented in every scene. And beneath the loud sexual change facade with Almodóvar, where gender identity is a game played with a tearful cheek, there is always a simple identifiable primary love like that of the mother or father. During the screening of *All About My Mother* I was struck by the thought of what a fantastic soap opera writer Almodóvar could be. This relationship with the eternal series of TV – a relationship which is, as far as I can understand, completely conscious from Almodóvar's side – has probably been in the way of otherwise quite obvious comparisons with Luis Buñuel, another Spaniard possessed by sexual variety and family life sliding toward the edge.

A retrospective of Almodóvar's films can't avoid illustrating how extremely typical he is of the era that gave him his big breakthrough – the eighties. The loud or pastel colours, the stick-thin actresses in Chanel dresses, the manic fixation on sex and divas, the luxury. His later films have perhaps been better and more expensively produced, but they are also less significant, more contrived. Who wants to recall anything other than the nice suits from *Matador*? Prior to *All About My Mother* there was a nervous question mark: how has Almodóvar managed in a new age, an age governed if not directly by authenticity then at least by its aesthetic markers – *Seven*, the Dogma films and *Blair Witch Project*?

It appears that he has managed very well. It actually appears already during the previously named title sequence, which has maintained Almodóvar's specific aesthetic conciseness, but now stands in relief against gigantic close-ups of the details of drips and other medical equipment. Even if the shaky hand-held camera will never be his totem, Almodóvar brings in von Trier and the nineties. A detail from a medical drip equals reality, we know that just as surely as a pink handbag from Chanel signals the dream world.

That we swallow that division is really a little silly, as what melodrama would manage without a scene from a hospital? How many soaps take place in their entirety within hospital walls, where all the basic material is accessible and within easy reach?

Manuela (Cecilia Roth) works at a hospital in Madrid and part of her duties as a

nurse include arranging organs for donation as well as making efficient calls to relatives for the benefit of medical students in order to teach them how to convey a death and simultaneously get the go ahead for an organ donation – as a birthday present her son Esteban (Eloy Azorín) wants to be present at such a telephone conversation as he is engaged in a writing project that gives the film its title. Esteban is a portrait of the sensitive mother's boy, who wonders about his absent father, identifies with his mother and reads books by other sensitive mother's boys like Truman Capote.

The day of his birthday is concluded with Esteban and Manuela attending a performance of Tennessee Williams' (yet another sensitive mother's boy) play, »A Streetcar Named Desire«. As a young woman, Manuela had acted in an amateur production of the play where she had met Esteban's father who currently works as a prostitute in Madrid using the name Lola La Pionera (Toni Contó) – which doesn't prevent him from conceiving yet another son with a young, virgin nun, Rosa (Penélope Cruz). After the performance Esteban is run over and killed when he chases after the play's star (Marisa Paredes) to get her autograph; which leads to a: Manuela travelling to Barcelona to inform the father, b: that »A Streetcar Named Desire« becomes the play that both gave her her son and took him away from her and c: Manuela finds herself in the receiving end of a call for organ donation as well – her son's heart ends up in another body and she can't prevent herself from donning dark glasses and scarf to see who has received it: »What were you doing there?« »I was following my son's heart«. You could say that Almodóvar's dialogue utilises the rich possibilities of intrigue to maximum effect – without ever really abandoning the tongue in cheek stance.

Of course Manuela meets Rosa, who is expecting a child, and of course she meets Huma Rojo, and of course... everything happens that should happen in a melodrama of this type, even if the tone is more gentle and the end far lighter than in earlier films. Pedro Almodóvar can, like few others, hold all the threads of intrigue together in an improbable and highly constructed melodrama. But this time he does it with an artistic motivation in every detail which I think has perhaps eluded him earlier. Every component, almost every scene in the film, turns up at least twice: as true and as false; as real and as a reflection; as theatre's imitation of reality or as reality's imitation of theatre; as a transsexuals attempt to live up to the image of how a woman should be or as completely normal women's attempt to live up to a transsexuals image of how a woman should be.

The hysterical sobbing of melodrama when the right emotional buttons have been pressed as hard as possible has been augmented by genuine tears; something that is as new for Almodóvar as quiet melancholy over the human predicament: why are we so helpless in shaping ourselves, so exposed to favour and disfavour in the mirrored room of our own dreams?

*All About My Mother* is largely stolen by Antonio San Juan in the role of La Agrado, the transsexual version of one of modern culture's (inherited from Dostoevsky) most cherished clichés: the good-hearted whore. La Agrado is transformed from an abused, down-at-heel and slightly hysterical street prostitute to an elegant theatre assistant filled with wisdom and endless generosity. La Agrado has the best scenes and partakes in all the funny one-liners. Everything about Almodóvar points backward to classic film, although he adds a little spice by filling the roles with homosexuals and transsexuals; La Agrado is a modern variant of the classic character, namely *The Ugly But Funny And Somewhat Daring Girlfriend*, updated with breast implants and a penis.

It is also La Agrado who has the monologue that contains the intellectual core of the film. »It costs to be genuine«, she says and palpably demonstrates what her different body parts cost to reshape. »Nothing costs quite as much as being genuine«. Why? Well, because you are genuine only when you've made yourself identical to the representation of your dreams, being genuine means living up to your dream and becoming like your icon, your idol. If Marilyn Monroe is your ideal then you are, according to La Agrado, not genuine until you have, with the help of the surgeon's scalpel, done your best to become a Marilyn copy, even if fundamentally you were more like Ricky Bruch.

It is a possibility – and a demand – that no others have had before us. But Almodóvar's film is more than part of a debate about cosmetic surgery, it wants to touch our very deepest recesses where we once, with the aid of popular culture formed our dream images, no matter how similar or dissimilar to ourselves they were, and decided whether or not we could live up to them. To what degree *All About My Mother* succeeds in its intentions depends in some small degree as to who the viewer is, how personally loaded certain popular-cultural icons are to us. This much is certainly true: Almodóvar knows what explosive force these images have – and what a lifetime's work it is reformulating them into something somewhat more acceptable, more people-friendly.

Is melodrama flourishing? Possibly the modern audience is too conscious of

expressive and stylistic means and numbed by their codification to be able to accept anything else other than stark contrasts. Perhaps melodrama is the only way to depict the hard reality of abuse, prostitution and drugs amongst Spanish transsexuals. Perhaps only witches can be depicted documentarily today.

*All About My Mother* could well be included in the competition for the filmic conclusion of the twentieth century and not only because Almodóvar's competitors have achieved such belly-flops (with Michalkov's *The Barber of Siberia* in the lead). It is in essence a film about film and divas – Bette Davis' *All About Eve* is a major reference, as is *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Blood Wedding* – a film based on exclusively twentieth century phenomena: sex changes, organ donations, intravenous drug abuse and – that's right – film's cabinet of mirrors where in Erik Lindgren's words, »one makes them too much for many«. Almodóvar's film illustrates a dilemma that is of our time in so far as the possibility of cosmetic surgery makes it concrete, but is no newer than when Hamlet knew of it: the possibility or need to choose who you want to be.

**Kristoffer Leandoer.** Born 1962 in Stockholm. Writer of poetry, books for teenagers and cultural journalism. Writes on French literature for *Dagens Nyheter*. His latest books are the poetry collection »Två apelsiner« (Two Oranges – Pequod Press) and the book for teenagers »Fjädrar på vinden« (Feathers in the Attic – Bonnier Carsen). Last appeared in the festival publication *Filmkonst Reportage* (no 59) with a feature portrait of the Russian film maker Nikita Michalkov.

**Title:** All About My Mother

**Original title:** Todo sobre mi madre

**Direction, script:** Pedro Almodóvar

**Producer:** Agustin Almodóvar

**Photo:** Affonso Beato

**Production design:** Antxon Gomez

**Editing:** Jose Salcedo

**Music:** Alberto Iglesias

**Cast:** Cecilia Roth (Manuela), Marisa Paredes (Huma Rojo), Penélope Cruz (Rosa), Antonia San Juan (La Agrado), Candela Pena (Nina), Rosa Maria Sarda (Rosas mother), Eloy Azorin (Esteban), Toni Canto (Lola, La Pionera)

**Length:** 103 minutes

**Production:** El Deseo, Renn Productions, France 2 Cinema, Spain 1999

**Swedish distribution:** Sandrew Metronome AB

**Pedro Almodóvar.** Born 1951 in Calzada de Calatrava, La Mancha, Spain. Worked in the early 70s in the theatre in Madrid but switched over, when the Franco era ended in 1975, to experimental film on Super 8 with titles like *Two Whores* or *A Love Story That Ends in a Wedding*, *The Fall of Sodom*, *Sex is Coming*, *Sex is Leaving*, *Salomé* as well as the feature film *Folle ... Folle ... Fólleme ... Tim* (1978). In 1979 Almodóvar managed to shoot his first real feature film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Other Girls*. He quickly acquired cult status in Spanish fashionable circles – they loved his decadence, blasphemy and unrestrained sexuality. His big international breakthrough came in 1987 with *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, a film that was awarded around 50 prizes (including an Oscar nomination). With his thirteenth and latest film *All About My Mother*, Almodóvar was feted in Cannes in 1999 and the film was awarded the prize for best direction.

**Filmography:**

**Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Other Girls 1979**

**Labyrinth of Passion 1980**

**Dark Habits 1983**

**What Have I Done to Deserve This? 1984**

**Matador 1986**

**Law of Desire 1986**

**Women on the Verge of A Nervous Breakdown 1988**

**Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! 1989**

**High Heels 1991**

**Kika 1993**

**The Flowers of My Secret 1995**

**Live Flesh 1997**

**All About My Mother 1999**