

Document Citation

Title	A black take on post-Franco Spain
Author(s)	Steve Jensen
Source	<i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i>
Date	1985 Sep 11
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	After Dark, pp.13, 21
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?!! (What have I done to deserve this?), Almodóvar, Pedro, 1984

REVIEWS



The different comic styles of (l.-r.) Carmen Maura, Chus Lampreave and Veronica Forque grace Pedro Almodovar's 'What Have I Done To Deserve This?'

MOVIES

A black take on post-Franco Spain

STEVE JENSEN

WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS? Written and directed by Pedro Almodovar. At the Lumiere, SF.

Pedro Almodovar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (*Que He Hecho Yo Para Merecer Esto!!*) is a kick in the teeth to whatever vestiges of authoritarian prudery may yet be lingering from the Franco regime in Spain. The film starts right off with male frontal nudity and explicit on-screen sex. A man stepping out of the shower after his kendo class at the gym spots the gym's cleaning lady, Gloria (Carmen Maura), and propositions her. Gloria readily accepts, but it soon becomes clear that the gentleman's eyes are bigger than his ... libido, and that he isn't going to be up to much. After the unsuccessful coupling, Gloria works out her frustrations by practicing with the discarded kendo sticks.

Madrid madness

Gloria, as we soon see, has a lot to be frustrated about. Crammed into her tiny apartment in what has got to be Madrid's ugliest high-rise, low-income apartment complex are a husband, two adolescent sons and a mother-in-law, all trying to scrape by on an income that won't adequately feed one.

Gloria herself subsists on coffee and No-Doz — the latter because it kills the appetite. Her husband Antonio (Angel de Andres-Lopez), a sexist and singularly shiftless taxi driver, makes no bones about the fact that he's still in love with a woman he knew before he married Gloria. Toni (Juan Martinez), the couple's 14-year-old, sells smack and forges checks — his education, at least, hasn't gone for nothing. Miguel (Miguel Angel Herranz), the 12-year-old, seems to be having such a good time sleeping with his best friend's father that Gloria finally sells the boy to a homosexual dentist for the extra income. Granny (Chus Lampreave) is a diabetic who hoards cupcakes and soda water (which she *might* be persuaded to sell to other family members) and slips in and out of senility. Gloria's neighbor and best friend Cristal (Veronica Forque) is a prostitute and dominatrix who drops by now and then to borrow a whip.

Manic laughs

Dreiser or Zola might have made naturalistic tragedy out of this material (or something very much like it), but Almodovar plays it at breakneck speed for manic, pell-mell laughs — and he gets them. Gloria and her family and friends may be a catalog of drug addictions, sexual inversions, and just about everything else that officially didn't exist in Franco's Spain, but they're much too busy to be very depressed about their woeful circumstances. These people are gleeful, ornery

survivors. With similar glee, Almodovar in *What Have I Done* rudely paints moustaches (and other more suggestive bits of body hair) all over Franco's official portrait of patriarchal, God-fearing, family-centered Spain. Late in the film, Antonio — the father figure — is permanently removed from the action, and nobody even misses him.

What makes writer-director Almodovar's work in this film particularly breathtaking is that he doesn't flinch from showing you the tragedy lurking just below the comedy — just before he turns it all to farce. You can feel the brutalizing poverty and hunger in Gloria's household when Toni opens the refrigerator and finds literally nothing but a tin of moldy tomato sauce, or when Gloria offers Toni a No-Doz in place of the almost-nonexistent dinner he's just missed. In the case of another of Gloria's neighbors, a woman who unaccountably loathes her little daughter, Almodovar shows us an ongoing system of child abuse — but he gives this horror a fantastic backspin by allowing the little girl to get the better of her mother through telekinesis.

Spanish sense

There's something quintessentially Spanish about the way Almodovar stares down tragedy and turns it into rueful but raucous comedy — you can trace a similar tragicomic thread back through Goya's graphics and Cervantes all the way to *La Celestina*.

It may be that *What Have I Done* couldn't have been made in any country but Spain. When the Frenchman Bertrand Tavernier (in *Coup de Torchon*) and the Italian Lina Wertmuller (in *Seven Beauties*) made similar attempts to wring comedy from contemporary horrors, the humor seemed wan and forced, overwhelmed by the solemnity of the respective occasions. Almodovar's dizzy — and dizzying — daring in *What have I Done* makes you laugh out loud, time and again.

In Spain, apparently, Almodovar himself is more celebrated than his films, and it's the kind of Fassbinderesque punk celebrity that wouldn't have been possible under Franco. When not directing movies (*What Have I Done* is his

continued page 21

MOVIES

continued from page 13

fourth feature in four years, but the first to be shown in this country), Almodovar is a sometime cabaret performer, rock singer, newspaper columnist, and author and illustrator of erotic novels. Like some of Fassbinder's films, *What Have I Done* has a frenetically off-the-cuff feel to it, as if thrown together in one brilliant burst of creative energy in a few hours between other projects. The film is technically competent, but technique is always subservient to performance from a fine ensemble cast. Carmen Maura, Chus Lampreave, and Veronica Forque

— three superb comediennes working in contrasting but harmonious styles — capture the various aspects of the director's essentially feminist, anti-patriarchal vision. The very young actors who play Gloria's sons have exactly the right deadpan, nothing fazes-me-approach.

Nothing fazes Almodovar either, but that's not quite the same thing as saying nothing shocks or troubles him; beneath the director's macabre humor lurks a moral sense as true as George Eliot's. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* is an exhilarating, liberating movie because it's the work of an anarchic jokester who is fundamentally a moralist. ■