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FUTURE CHIC

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Pedro Almodóvar's new film *'Kika'* may have attracted the rage of Spanish critics, but it shows his talent for glossy perversity is as sharp as ever. By Paul Julian Smith

● It promises to be a cold winter in Madrid. As the long hangover from the Olympic *annus mirabilis* of 1992 drags on, Spain is facing up to record unemployment, continuing political scandal, and mounting concern over the intrusions of the newly deregulated media. In a mirror image of the UK, a long-serving government, incapable of managing either the budget deficit or the rising tide of crime, is confronted by an ineffectual opposition and an alienated electorate. The only difference is that in Spain the government is socialist and the opposition back-to-basics conservatives.

In the week that Pedro Almodóvar's *Kika* was released, 17,000 people applied for 200 clerical jobs in Madrid city council. They sat competitive examinations in the former municipal abattoir. When Almodóvar shot a bizarre fashion show in the same location for *Matador* (1986), it was a campy joke; but as unemployment heads for a ten-year high, no one is laughing. Ever sensitive to the mood of the moment, Almodóvar's latest feature offers evidence of a new pessimism clouding a famously sunny outlook; the erstwhile muse of Madrid now proclaims the city to be "unliveable", swamped by drug-related crime.

The winter would also seem to mark a new low for the once promising Spanish film industry. Now the high hopes inspired by the generous state subsidies of the 80s have gone unfulfilled, policy has shifted to protectionism. The government has passed panic measures to reduce the dubbing licenses granted to US-hungry distributors, and is vigorously campaigning for film and television to be excluded from the GATT agreement.

At this inauspicious moment comes *Kika*, the longest-awaited and biggest-budget film of the year and the tenth feature from Almodóvar, the most profitable Spanish director in both domestic and foreign markets. Three questions arise. First, how will Almodóvar adjust to the end of the wonder years of the 80s, the decade of conspicuous pleasures and quick profits with which he is so closely identified? Second, what is his relationship to a Spanish film industry whose perpetual crisis now ►

Naive, sexy and vigorously independent, Verónica Forqué, left, is an incorrigibly optimistic heroine; Victoria Abril, opposite, is Andrea, video vamp extraordinaire



◀ seems in danger of becoming terminal? And finally, why has his undisputed commercial success attracted such critical derision, both abroad, where he is often dismissed as “crazy” or “camp”, and at home, where the attacks are more personal, and increasingly bitter? The answers are not what we might expect; and they derive ultimately from a suspicion of identity politics which is typically Spanish and somewhat mystifying to foreigners.

Rubber and real life

Kika still offers fans the frantic farce and gloriously saturated colours and costumes we have come to expect from its director, and in the title character we find the incorrigible optimist typical of Almodóvar’s heroines. As played by Verónica Forqué (previously cast as the perky prostitute in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, 1984), *Kika* confronts the vicissitudes of urban rape and multiple murder with disturbing equanimity. By turns naive, sexy and vigorously independent, Forqué, known to Spanish audiences for her appearance in domestic farces with titles like *Salsa Rosa* (*Pink Sauce*, Manuel Gómez Pereira, 1991), suggests a curious combination of Judy Holliday and Barbara Windsor.

The benevolent *Kika* is matched by Victoria Abril’s malevolent Andrea Caracortada (Cut-face), the presenter of an exploitative real-life crime show entitled *The Worst of the Day*. This is sponsored, with conspicuous incongruity, by a milk manufacturer. Abril clearly relishes the role, sporting much-publicised black rubber outfits by Gaultier and revealing what must be the bushiest female armpits ever shown on screen. In the central scene of the film, *Kika* is raped by an escaped convict who has grown tired of screwing “queers” (*maricones*) in prison. The crime is presented as a comic *tour de force*; certainly it provoked much hilarity from the young, mainly female audience on the night I saw the film in the massive Palace of Music theatre in Madrid. However, *Kika*’s humiliation comes not so much from the act itself (which she vigorously resists), as from its television screening by the wicked dominatrix Andrea, who has procured graphic video footage from a mysterious voyeur.

While such sequences will surely try the patience of UK audiences, they hint at a new social concern in Almodóvar – albeit one that is typically ironised and distanced. Once again, in the very week of *Kika*’s release, a Spanish family who were victims of a kidnapping complained of the “disgusting” exploitation of their case by a private television channel. And the newly hostile press coverage of Almodóvar himself has revealed hitherto unplumbed depths of that combination of unhealthy curiosity and ghoulish delight known in Spanish as *morbo*. Thus the film prompted reports of Almodóvar’s supposed marriage to long-time collaborator Bibi Andersen, now celebrated as a chat-show hostess and once billed as the tallest transsexual in Europe. Denying he was the source of the wedding rumours, Almodóvar compared the press coverage he has nurtured so carefully throughout his career to a “bomb”, liable to explode in his face at the worst possible moment. *Morbo* is, however, a two-way street.



Dames and divas:
Almodóvar’s long-time collaborator, transsexual Bibi Andersen, with Peter Coyote, top; Victoria Abril models Gaultier’s new line in high-tech, above; opposite, *Kika* (Verónica Forqué) is raped while her maid (Rossy de Palma) looks on

And by including gleefully gratuitous frontal nude shots of Andersen in *Kika*, Almodóvar himself might not be seen to be upholding the highest standards of cinematic propriety.

The typically stylish credit sequence of *Kika* features a spotlight, a keyhole, and a camera shutter. This can be read socially as a reference to the increasingly intrusive voyeurism of the Spanish media; it also points quite clearly to that reflexive and ironic attention to the cinematic apparatus that has run through Almodóvar’s work since his first feature *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) had its three eponymous heroines make a video version of their lives. An unlikely Spanish Godard, Almodóvar uses *Kika* to rub our faces in the self-conscious (hi)stories of cinema held to be typical of a post-modern culture. Indeed, all *Kika*’s characters are shown to fictionalise their experience: *Kika* herself is a make-up artist, shown at one point adding ‘natural colour’ to a corpse; Andrea circles Madrid with a camera on her futuristic helmet and arc lights in place of breasts; the two



male leads, Kika's boyfriend Ramón (Alex Casanovas, in the Antonio Banderas role of the attractive and sensitive young man) and his stepfather Nicholas (Peter Coyote, dubbed unconvincingly into Spanish) play a voyeuristic photographer and an autobiographical novelist respectively. Most gratuitously and intrusively, Almodóvar casts his own octogenarian mother as a television presenter and has her drop knowing references to her son's profession. The viewer can only agree with her when she tells Nicholas, an expatriate American, "Nothing compares to Spain."

Cruel but cool

The commercial background of *Kika* is, however, perhaps more important than these emphatically self-conscious elements. The second co-production between Almodóvar's own company El Deseo, S.A. (Desire Ltd) and mainstream French producer CiBy 2000, *Kika*'s generous budget enables glossy production values which few films outside Hollywood could

aspire to. If European cinema is in Stuart Hall's words "on the verge of a nervous breakdown", the continuing success of the Almodóvar trademark, most spectacularly in France, might provide a model elsewhere for a film practice which is both grounded in domestic concerns and attractive to foreign audiences. In the Spanish capital, where *Kika* is currently the most conspicuous local film playing the vast picture palaces of the Gran Vía (Madrid's Shaftesbury Avenue) and the only domestic product to figure in the top ten grosses (bringing in a healthy \$300,000 in the first three weeks), *El Deseo*'s dominance is such that it is claimed that industry insiders are unwilling even to criticise King Pedro the Cruel.

It seems likely, however, that Almodóvar has been a victim of his own success. Foreign audiences now expect stylish eroticism and furious farce from Spanish films, and they now have other directors such as Bigas Luna (*Jamón, jamón*) to provide it for them. In Spain itself, the newly cautious mood has made Fernando

Trueba's bland period comedy *Belle Epoque* (soon to open in London) the most critically and commercially popular film of the year preceding *Kika*'s release. And an ill-timed announcement has just awarded the earnestly highbrow Víctor Erice (*The Spirit of the Beehive*; *The Quince Tree Sun*) the National Prize for Cinematography. *Kika*'s gorgeous art design and consistently inventive cinematography (by Alfredo Mayo, an Almodóvar regular) produce pleasure, but no longer surprise. It seems only fair to ask: has Almodóvar painted himself into a corner?

Almodóvar once claimed, facetiously, that he could not wait to go out of fashion so that he could become a classic. It would seem that only the first part of his wish has been granted. *Kika* was greeted in Spain by a crescendo of critical abuse, in which Almodóvar served as an unwilling and perhaps unwitting litmus test for the problems of misogyny and homophobia which continue to dog Spain more than a decade after the socially progressive Socialists took power. The responses relate both to the film itself ►

◀ and to Almodóvar's typically idiosyncratic promotion of it. Based, as ever, on a cavalcade of strong women (from 'good' *Kika* to 'bad' Andrea by way of Rossy de Palma's gloriously 'ugly' turn as a lesbian maid in love with her mistress), *Kika* shamelessly proclaims itself a woman's film and one whose female characters are granted both the 'ultra-feminine' visual pleasure characteristic of mainstream film and the central narrative position generally occupied by men. This implicit threat to masculinity is confirmed by the male leads who, as so often in Almodóvar, are comparatively dull: the cataleptic Casanovas is muted; the saturnine Coyote merely bemused.

Identity parades

Moreover, as a consummate female impersonator, Almodóvar has clearly placed himself on that side of the cinematic gender division which is coded as feminine. Thus he posed cheekily for Spain's best-selling daily *El País* peeking out from behind a pair of curtains, an

oversized polka-dotted bow in his bushy hair. The same paper carried pictures of the director in costume for all the principal roles of the film, male and female. Even *Cahiers du cinéma* ran a spread of parallel shots of director and actors acting out scenes on the set, with Almodóvar vigorously ironing the laundry or firmly bound to a chair like Rossy de Palma's maid during the rape sequence. Such antics seem to have provoked the latent homophobia of the Spanish press, usually liberal by UK standards. Indeed one paper accused Almodóvar of promoting "a homosexual fashion", an accusation he proved over-eager to refute.

At a deeper level, the threat of Almodóvar's performances is in their hints of subjective merger and fluidity. Just as his films are full of characters unable to separate from their parents or lovers (in this case the mother-obsessed Ramón), so Almodóvar's over-identification with his creations, his compulsion to repeat and act out their dilemmas both on and off the set, put fixed individual boundaries into crisis

and throw the rigid divisions of gender binaries into confusion. Wilfully frivolous and superficial, Almodóvar's films can be read as identity parades, an acting-out of roles with no depth or essence. This cult of the surface is nowhere more evident than in *Kika*. Gloriously shot, beautifully dressed and skilfully acted, it is poorly plotted and characterised, its rogues' gallery of grotesques provoking little of the audience identification that Almodóvar was clearly hoping for.

Flashy fun

But if *Kika* may well be seen as a mid-point in Almodóvar's career, in which the maestro treads water between the unselfconscious pleasures of the 80s and the more critical climate of the 90s, there can be no doubt as to the importance of that career as a whole. For as Almodóvar's films clearly reveal, far from being belated, the Spain that offers a mocking reflection of the UK's political and economic decline reveals no sign of the regressions signalled by Major's cynical appeal to "traditional values", or indeed Clinton's disingenuous call for "security". In spite of domestic horror stories, still less do we find in Spain the turn to neo-fascism exemplified by Italy. Indeed, Madrid may well be ahead of London or New York in the sexual arena.

In his love of sex and gender fluidity, his hostility to fixed positions of all kinds, Almodóvar anticipated by a full decade the critique of identity politics now commonplace in Anglo-American feminist and queer theory. Once we are weaned from the reassuring comforts of the dichotomies of gay/straight, female/male, his cinema offers us English-speakers the promise of a nightmare and a dream for the 90s. The nightmare is a future of powerlessness in which (as in Spain) feminists and gays prove unable to organise and unwilling to found a sense of community on the experiences they have in common. The dream is a future of fluidity in which (as in Spain, perhaps, once more) sexual practices are not constrained by fixed allegiances and each of us negotiates our own price in the libidinal economy. The financial metaphor is apt. For as Almodóvar's constant concern for the bottom line has shown, economic clout is essential if any dissonant voice wishes to make itself heard in an increasingly globalised entertainment industry.

Kika ends with its plucky heroine, having sped in her car from the scene of multiple murders, picking up a handsome young stranger at random from the side of the road. The scene is shot against a glorious blaze of sunflowers. Relentlessly optimistic even in extremis, Almodóvar may also, like his heroine in this sequence, have lost his sense of direction for the time being. It seems very likely, however, that the future journey will be well worth making, the cinematic and sexual adventure characteristically unpredictable. In the meantime, *Kika* remains gloriously flashy fun and Almodóvar's combination of uncompromising modernity and unabashed visual pleasure could teach the more timid and tasteful UK film industry a thing or two.

'Kika' will be released in the UK in 1994