

Live Flesh, directed by Pedro Almodovar, based on the novel by Ruth Rendell

He is pleased with his work

David Walsh
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The fact that Spanish director Pedro Almodovar (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*; *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*) thinks so highly of himself and his work does not, in and of itself, place a black mark against his latest film, *Live Flesh* (in Spanish, *Carne Trémula*; literally, trembling flesh), but it certainly bodes ill.

“Like all my other films, *Live Flesh* is not easy to classify in terms of genre,” the director blithely writes toward the conclusion of his press notes. “All I know is that it is the most disquieting film I have made until now, and the one that has caused me most unease. It is not a thriller, nor a cop film, though there are policemen and gunshots, with guilty men who are innocent. It is not a twilight western, although I would like to shoot one some day. It isn’t an erotic film either, although there are various explicit sex scenes, natural and didactic, and the story takes place in the field of bare carnal desire. Judging by the first reactions, it seems that I have made a very sexy film. Without doubt, the protagonists have an overwhelming presence and an undoubted physical attraction.

“*Live Flesh* is an intense drama, baroque and sensual (totally independent from the Ruth Rendell novel that inspires it) that partakes both of the thriller and the classic tragedies.”

Almodovar’s film is about a number of relationships that have their origin in a tragic incident. One night in Madrid in 1990 Victor, a young man in his twenties and the son of a prostitute, goes to visit Elena, with whom he thought he had a date. She doesn’t remember him. Elena, the daughter of an Italian diplomat and a drug addict, has other things on her mind. An argument ensues. She points her father’s handgun at Victor; he grabs it. Two policemen—David and Sancho—burst in, with their revolvers drawn. The inevitable happens. A gun goes off, David is shot in the spine and Victor goes to prison for six years.

While in jail, Victor vows revenge. Upon his release he initiates relationships with Clara—the unhappy wife of the

sullen, alcoholic Sancho—and ultimately Elena herself, who has given up drugs, married David (now a paraplegic) and dedicated herself to charitable good works. Victor—the only character honest with himself and others—proves to have somewhat of a redemptive power. The other characters are all drawn to him, in some fashion or other. In the end, Clara and Sancho kill each other out of jealousy and despair, and Elena drops David for the hot-blooded Victor.

The film begins and ends with a birth. The first, Victor’s own, takes place on a Madrid city bus in 1970, as the radio carries the announcement that the Franco dictatorship has declared a state of emergency and suspended democratic rights. In the final scene of *Live Flesh*, Elena is going into labor with Victor’s child. A life of freedom and happiness apparently stretches out in front of them.

Let us listen to Almodovar again:

“Though the anxiety at the imminent birth is the same, 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: just for that reason, Victor’s son is born in a much better country than his father.”

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?

One commentator writes that Almodovar’s films, which have enjoyed considerable international success over the past decade, “are steeled 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.”

This not very attractive assessment, which suggests degrees of both shallowness and willful ignorance, is not likely to be contradicted by a viewing of *Live Flesh*. The director asserts that his most recent film deals “with Death, Chance, Destiny and Guilt.” This is rather grand. Almodovar is certainly not the only one guilty these days of making such sweeping and unsubstantiated pronouncements. Many individuals who write about film and the arts today suffer from this tendency. One says, for example, that such and such a film is a “meditation upon Love and Memory,” and virtually no one is brave or naive enough to pipe up with, “Yes, but what does the film actually say about Love and Memory?”

It is not clear to me what *Live Flesh* has to say about death, chance and destiny except that they exist, they are complex and they exert influence. And what the film says about guilt is not particularly creditable. Almodovar suggests that Elena’s relationship with David and her donations of time and money to charity are the results merely of a guilty conscience, and that it is an act of self-liberation when she dumps him and presumably starts spending money on herself. Perhaps. Some people do make themselves unhappy by needlessly sacrificing their own feelings and needs. But what Almodovar rejects sounds suspiciously like personal responsibility and what he advocates, suspiciously like selfishness.

For all Almodovar’s fairly glib talk about chance, the film seems to advance, in fact, a rather self-serving determinism. All the various strands of the story conform to a single pattern: out of blood and horror—of dictatorship, childbirth, jealousy and domestic violence, etc.—something much finer inevitably emerges. Such a conception may have validity, within definite limits, as a historical truism, but it would certainly be harmful as a guide to social or personal life. Blood and horror can also prove to be the prelude to more blood and horror, depending upon what human beings do about the circumstances they confront. For the filmmaker, frankly, this theme seems to serve, more than anything else, as a kind of explanation and justification for his own success. He was born under a fascist dictatorship and life was rotten; Spain is now a parliamentary democracy, Almodovar—a famous film director—is feted everywhere and, all in all, things are going rather well.

In his notes Almodovar invokes the films of the renowned Spanish film director and Surrealist, Luis Buñuel (1900-83), alongside whose name he would obviously like to have his mentioned. Others have compared his work to that of German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-82) and the German-born Douglas Sirk (1900-87), active in Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s. No matter what one

determines the ultimate contributions of these artists to be, such comparisons seem misguided.

It is safe to say, first of all, that none of the filmmakers mentioned would have been guilty of the sort of self-satisfaction Almodovar displays in the lengthy passage cited at the beginning of this article.

The director invokes Buñuel, and ostentatiously includes clips from the latter’s film, *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), in *Live Flesh*. But Almodovar merely appropriates Surrealism’s tendency to juxtapose grotesque phenomena, ignoring the movement’s deeper impulses and demands, and turns that into a kind of party trick. David’s paralysis, Elena’s parentage, Victor’s various idiosyncrasies—his Bible reading, his smattering of Bulgarian picked up in prison, etc.—do not add up to anything more than an effort to impress.

And what of the lazy notion, hinted at by the film and so popular in much of contemporary culture, that desire, entirely unpredictable and chaotic, rules the world? It would seem to me that artists with some grasp of the way society operates, including those mentioned above, seek to demonstrate precisely that desire too, in its most general contours, obeys certain social and psychological laws.

In short, various claims can be made on paper for or by Almodovar, but his film does not live up to them. *Live Flesh*, as a whole, lacks intensity and substantial sections of the film are simply dull. By and large, the eroticism goes nowhere. This is a film about a poor man, a rich woman and a couple of policemen, but nothing substantial is made of any of the social relationships. Almodovar chalks up the formlessness of his story to the workings of chance. A more objective observer might suggest it results from a refusal to work through the problems presented by his society and by his art.



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