

Talking about not too much, unfortunately

Talk to Her, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

Joanne Laurier
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Accepting an Academy Award for best original screenplay March 23, Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar courageously spoke out against the US war against Iraq and dedicated his Oscar to its opponents. If only *Talk to Her* had been crafted with the same degree of thought and principle! It would have been a far more profound work, and the pervasive emotionalism of the film so bragged about by the filmmaker and touted by film critics would have been far more purposeful.

“The movie is like a declaration of sadness, of melancholy. I did not know if it was going to be understood. It was a radical decision that I took. I do not know why I did it. It was almost like a reaffirmation of myself,” the filmmaker told the *Guardian Unlimited*. Unfortunately, *Talk to Her* is as simplistic and vaguely narcissistic as these sentiments suggest.

The film is book-ended by two modern dance pieces by German choreographer Pina Bausch. In its opening sequence, two strangers, males, watch the performance of Bausch’s “Café Muller.” One is Marco, a journalist, (Dario Grandinetti), the other Benigno (Javier Cámara). Benigno notices that Marco is crying. In fact, Marco’s ability to cry or be misty eyed throughout the film is central to *Talk to Her*. Says Almodóvar, in an interview with the web site *Phase 9 Movies*, “I would have liked to call it ‘The Man Who Cried.’ [Alas, the title was already taken.] One of the ideas I wanted to convey was a man who cried for emotional reasons linked to a work of art.” Marco’s tears alone, however, are not sufficient to create a moving or meaningful “declaration of sadness.” A little substance would help. People are sad for real reasons.

The dance and its relationship with the two spectators reproduce in miniature the film’s narrative. Again from Almodóvar: “In the opening scene, you see these women who are walking around blind and sleepwalking. From that moment on, I am telling the audience that there are going to be two women with closed eyes who will be facing this world full of obstacles.... There are two men watching this spectacle. One of them cries and the other one is curious about why the other is crying. This is the prologue that starts the film.... We also end the film in the same place as it began. And curiously, the story began in the same place that *All About my Mother* [Almodóvar’s last film] ended.... I wanted to show that all of the success [with that film] had not changed my perception. I present the two female characters as metaphors in *Talk to Her* and then I present the two male characters in the

flesh.”

The film is not fundamentally more complex than the director’s synopsis. Had Almodóvar been less pleased with himself and more outwardly focused, the film’s “world of obstacles” might have better referenced the real world of obstacles. The characters’ difficulties seem more akin to constructs in a mental chess game than genuine experiences, thus imparting to the film a feeling that is disturbingly ahistorical and socially abstract, and ultimately weak and unaffectionate.

Marco meets Lydia (Rosario Flores), the most famous female matador in Spain, and learns that she is fearless when it comes to bulls, but phobic about snakes. His previous love, a young heroin addict, was also terrified by snakes. (Subtle stuff this.) The movie’s snake interlude comes out of the blue. Lydia has just performed a death-defying, bull-kill in the corrida, but when Marco takes her home where a snake is crawling around in her kitchen, her tough, “manly” demeanor is transformed, quite unbelievably, into hysterical writhing.

This exemplifies Almodóvar’s method of inexplicably going off on a tangent. These occasional “pop-ups” in the story line that interrupt the flow of the film are described by Almodóvar as “breakups.” The director openly admits to finding it a challenge to keep the film “going on in a straight line.” He says: “I did not want a film to be a collage of these images.... I did not want the spectator to be brought out of the story whenever one of those set-pieces took place,” said the director. He apparently cannot restrain himself.

Soon after Marco and Lydia fall in love she is gored by a bull and rendered comatose. Benigno, a nurse who tended to his ailing mother for 20 years, is meanwhile enraptured by a ballerina, Alicia (Lionel Watling), who has been comatose for four years. Thinking him gay, Alicia’s father has hired Benigno to minister, very hands-on, to the unconscious girl.

The two men formally meet in the hospital and Benigno encourages Marco to talk to Lydia the way he talks (and much more) to Alicia. The geometrically configured relationship—the physical, active Marco who cannot touch or speak to the comatose Lydia and the pudgy, inactive Benigno who talks incessantly to Alicia—is an unrealistic and annoying contrivance. So much here is simply done for effect.

Flashbacks reveal the details of the Benigno-Alicia and Marco-Lydia relationships. The scene portraying Alicia’s main encounter with Benigno, prior to the traffic accident that left her comatose, is

patently absurd. Benigno, whose apartment overlooks a ballet studio, has been watching Alicia practice, unbeknownst to the ballerina. Craving a more intimate contact with her, he arranges an appointment with her father, a psychiatrist. The therapist's waiting room happens to be in close proximity to the shower in his family quarters. As Alicia steps out of the shower, she runs into Benigno, who has just finished rummaging through her bedroom—also easily accessible from the doctor's office. That a psychiatric practice, likely to be treating at least a few seriously disturbed patients, would be located in the doctor's living space is almost inconceivable.

Alicia's reaction to Benigno shows no trace of attraction. Quite the opposite. But when Alicia is comatose, Benigno boasts: "My relationship with Alicia is better than the relationships of many married couples I know."

The movie's silent movie insert—styled, according to Almodóvar, à la Buñuel—is a trendy but vacuous device to camouflage the moment when Benigno rapes the unconscious Alicia in the hospital. It is a party trick with a surrealist veneer. "I didn't want to show Benigno doing what he did in the clinic ... So I put the silent movie in there to hide what was happening," explains the filmmaker. This violation of a will-less human being, springing from an apparently psychotic obsession, is treated by Almodóvar as a pure expression of love. "I wanted to show that for utopian love only one person is necessary, and that passion can move the relationship forward.... [F]or the eventual miracle of love to happen, it can be enough where just one wants to communicate, he can communicate," says the director, who added that a relationship is not over while one person still loves. This viewpoint is disoriented, and happens to be untrue. The smallest social unit, or "love" unit, is two people.

Another of *Talk to Her's* skewed metaphors involving "love" concerns Lydia's profession—that of matador. The director includes two bullfighting scenes apparently on the assumption that the viewer will not be revolted by a close viewing of the barbaric sport. The gory scenes in the corrida, along with the quirky silent movie, is one of the movie's cinematic tours de force. Almodóvar reserves the most intricate displays of his talents for the moments of violation: the silent movie—the visual substitute for Alicia's rape and the bullfight—an unashamed picture of graphic torture. Bullfighting appears to be another metaphor for relationships (men/women; men/men; individual/world). "[W]hat happens between the bullfighter and the bull is very close. In that case I identify myself very much with the bullfighter," states the filmmaker, without bothering to explain.

The homoerotic vibrations between Marco and Benigno increase in pitch when Benigno is in jail and Marco is living in Benigno's apartment over the ballet school. Here is another type of love that allows one person to do something unspeakable, while the other is able to understand and even justify the act. Benigno kills himself without ever knowing that Alicia has come out of the coma. "You woke her up," says Marco at Benigno's gravesite. As one reviewer put it: "[T]he film has martyred Benigno for raping Alicia back to life." A lot of this is simply silly, the work of a *poseur*, and if the filmmaker thought about it seriously for a moment, he would recognize that. In a bad time for art all sorts of things past

unnoticed or uncriticized. There is not much to *Talk to Her*, and all the claims made for it will not change that fact.

Which is not to say that there is no talent or potential talent on display. *Talk to Her* offers up a few engaging moments during the Bausch choreography and a heartfelt song movingly performed by Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso. Geraldine Chaplin as the ballet school instructor adds a touch of elegance and much-needed reality to the film.

Judging from the final result, most of the filmmaker's efforts go towards achieving a colorful, picturesque look. Film critic Andrew Sarris noted that the Almodóvar's films "would have been inconceivable before the death of the inglorious Franco and the birth of glorious Technicolor. Hence, even when Mr. Almodóvar's ploys have verged on unacceptable silliness, his ravishing color canvases have dazzled the eye with a lyrical exuberance."

The situation in post-Franco Spain is not as rosy as Mr. Sarris infers it is, and Almodóvar, dubbed the "voice of the newly liberated Spain," is not the liberated artist he thinks he is. At its most obvious, *Talk to Her* speaks to the spiritual and physical prison created by alienation and loneliness. At another level, the movie views deeply deviant and psychotic behavior from a disturbingly and unnecessarily empathetic vantage point. But most importantly, Almodóvar glibly, superficially and without opposition presents contemporary Spain as a series of beautiful images, largely devoid of a social context. The view that the end of the Franco regime saw the elimination of the greatest social contradictions and that all that is left to sort out are some sexual, gender and emotional difficulties, is wrong-headed and complacent.

One commentator wrote that Almodóvar's films "are steeled in the post-Franco 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.'"

Does the current situation in Spain—currently being shaken by massive demonstrations against the war in Iraq, which are inevitably bound up with the profound social issues of social inequality, unemployment and poverty—(or anywhere else, for that matter) warrant such smugness? Almodóvar's statement at the Academy Awards ceremony expressed a spirit of seriousness and opposition that is markedly missing in *Talk to Her*.



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