

# Film on the verge of a nervous breakdown

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*La mala educación* (*Bad Education*), written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

To his credit, Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar has been an outspoken critic of the US invasion of Iraq and his country's participation in that neo-colonial undertaking. At last year's Academy Award ceremony, he denounced the war and dedicated his Oscar for best original screenplay to its opponents.

As a consistent critic of the former conservative Popular Party government, Almodóvar became a target of the Spanish right wing when he accused the PP of trying to make political capital out of the Madrid bomb last spring. In these instances and others, he has exhibited some degree of courage and principle. The director obviously has a brain.

Why then are his films so weak? *They* rarely give the impression that the artist is dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs. In his films, a self-indulgent erotica dominates convoluted and implausible storylines. There is a marked lack of devotion to making the drama convincing or enlightening. Almodóvar's specialty—as the artist who has single-handedly put modern Spanish cinema on the map—is to make the spectator feel as though he or she has undergone a major artistic and emotional experience, even something daring, something taboo. But despite blazing colors and all manner of eccentricities, the Almodóvar touch has all the properties of fool's gold—his films, in fact, are largely harmless and empty.

This, in very broad strokes, describes the director's previous efforts. Unfortunately, Almodóvar's latest effort, *Bad Education* is even weaker; it exhibits signs of genuine disorientation. Although the film's grievous flaws are not surprising, they are somewhat disconcerting, as the project was developed at a time when the director—at least as a public persona—was apparently undergoing a certain political evolution to the left.

*Bad Education's* plot is tortuous. The following brief description only hints at its twists and turns. In Madrid in 1980, Enrique (Fele Martínez) is a young filmmaker suffering a creative logjam. As he leafs through the

tabloids and clips items for possible script inspiration, an old schoolmate—and first adolescent love—shows up with a film story called “The Visit.” Ignacio (Gael García Bernal) and Enrique were fellow students 16 years ago at a Catholic boarding school. Ignacio's screenplay is based on their experiences at the institution, particularly the sexual assault Ignacio underwent at the hands of Father Manolo.

Ricocheting back and forth between reality and Ignacio's scenario, *Bad Education* shifts from the 1960s to the 1970s and 1980s. The grown-up Ignacio is played by two actors and Bernal as Juan/Ignacio has many faces: ambitious actor, junkie drag-queen, hustler and murderer—all without too much consideration for inner cohesion or psychological logic. Father Manolo, Ignacio's victimizer, reemerges as a real-life businessman to become one of the film's central victims. The former pedophile carries out a murder for the love of an adult male—not the classic trajectory of pedophilia.

The issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is employed as a plot device, a way of segueing into a more deviant landscape. This is confirmed in the movie's production notes where Almodóvar states: “*Bad Education* is not a settling of scores with the priests who ‘bad-educated’ me or with the clergy in general.... The church does not interest me, not even as an adversary.” Why not? Perhaps if he had seriously tackled this topic, the film might have been more watchable.

Plot design and character composition are in large measure subordinated to Almodóvar's tedious brand of exuberant irrationality. Showing off rather than shedding light seems an irresistible impulse for the director. The sex is gratuitous, adding to the film's intermittently overwrought and hysterical tone. These elements apparently endeared *Bad Education* to the critics.

Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* sums it up when he writes: “[T]he movie is unconstrained by any need to appear realistic. Mr. Almodóvar's cinematic world has always been a place ruled by outsize desire and reckless fantasy. It is a universe that many of us imagine we might

inhabit if we kicked off social and psychological constraints and acted out our wildest fantasies.”

Holden and company are reading the film correctly. Almodóvar argues in the production notes that the early 1980s is “the ideal setting for the protagonists, now adults, to be masters of their destinies, their bodies and their desires.”

The filmmaker’s view of that period as merely a time of “drugs and sex and partying”—enjoyed by a post-Franco subculture that dominates his films—is bound up with his refusal to evaluate in any depth the Franco experience and its relevance for contemporary society. Almodóvar boasted to one commentator: “I never speak of Franco. My stories unfold as though he never existed.” *Bad Education* is no exception, even though a considerable portion of the film’s story takes place at a time when the fascist dictator was still in power.

Almodóvar is not interested in the Church, and he’s not interested in Franco either! He pushes these matters to the side, as one would unappetizing items on a dinner plate. That’s fine, he can do what he likes, except that he eliminates himself thereby as a serious commentator on Spanish life. This “lack of interest” is pure laziness, the inability to confront difficult and painful questions. And art based on laziness does not endure.

Where does his credo leave Almodóvar? Caught in the clutches of a hedonism orientated to middle-class identity and sexual politics. Almodóvar claims in the production notes to be more interested in the “historic moment” when Spain was exploding with freedom, “as opposed to the obscurantism and repression of the 60s.”

No doubt, the end of Francoism was a liberating moment for homosexuals in Spain, oppressed by the Church and the old regime. But was Spain liberated? What are the conditions at present for masses of people? One can see in Almodóvar’s evolution the wretched consequences of selfish, petty bourgeois, identity politics.

In any event, refusing to probe Francoism to its roots in Spanish capitalism leaves one entirely unprepared for the re-emergence of fascist tendencies today. The “explosion of freedom” Almodóvar speaks of proved very short-lived. What’s next in Spain? One would never know by viewing his films.

His art suffers dramatically as a result of this approach. Turning a blind eye to history and social life doesn’t make them go away. What can’t come in at the front door appears around at the back. All the social tensions and historical issues that Almodóvar would like to make disappear show up in his work—because he has a certain

sensitivity—only as unconsidered, unconscious and out-of-control elements. This helps account for the film’s semi-hysterical tone, as well as the freakishness of all the major characters.

In a recent interview about *Bad Education*, Almodóvar made some sober remarks: “In Spain, the Catholic Church has always wielded a lot of power. Franco referred to his dictatorship as National Catholicism. The Church has always been in a position of power during the worst moments of Spain’s history.

“At this moment, the Church is becoming a weapon for the extreme right to challenge the socialist [social democratic] government in power in Spain today. They’re very angry because the government has deprived them of a lot of the influence they previously had. There is a political campaign being mounted from the church pulpits against a lot of issues that Spanish people are dealing with, like abortion, gay marriage and gay adoption laws. I feel that is something we have to fight against, because it is dangerous for my country.”

We have to fight against these tendencies...but not in art! Art is for something else, something sacred. Art is about our personal lives only, about sex, about problems of identity, about family. The fate of society, that can’t possibly enter into filmmaking. How stupid, how narrow! How typical of contemporary filmmaking!

If Almodóvar had followed his own advice, and launched this “fight,” *Bad Education* would have been immeasurably strengthened.



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