

Parallel Mothers: Pedro Almodóvar shifts his focus

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Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

Parallel Mothers (*Madres paralelas*) is the latest film from prolific Spanish writer-director Pedro Almodóvar (born 1949). It features Penélope Cruz, Milena Smit, Israel Elejalde and Aitana Sánchez-Gijón.

Photographer Janis Martinez (Cruz), in her early 40s, and Ana Manso (Smit), two decades younger, find themselves alone together in the maternity ward. They deliver babies, both girls, the same day. Janis and Ana are both single mothers. The father of Janis's baby, Arturo (Elejalde), is married to a woman with cancer, and Janis has accepted sole responsibility for raising their daughter. Ana's pregnancy was the result of coerced, unwilling sex at the hands of a schoolmate. One birth was a happy "accident," the other unhappy.

Janis (named after singer Janis Joplin) is the child of bohemian parents, Ana's are quite conservative. The latter's mother is a self-involved actress, Teresa (Sánchez-Gijón), who goes on tour shortly after Ana gives birth ("This could be a turning point in my career").

Janis came to know Arturo, a forensic archaeologist with a non-profit foundation, during a photo shoot. She requested that his organization excavate mass graves in her native village where her great-grandfather and others were buried after being murdered by fascist-Francoist forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

When Arturo, with whom Janis has broken all contact, finally has a chance to see his child, he exclaims quite emphatically, "The baby's not mine." Janis protests, "Why would I lie?" But a maternity test, whose results she keeps to herself, proves that indeed she is not the biological mother.

Meanwhile, Ana, now a waitress in a café and further estranged from her family, comes back into Janis' life. Tragically, her infant daughter has died in her sleep, the victim of cot death. Janis asks Ana to come work for her as a nanny and housekeeper, offering her more money than she currently earns. The two become intimate.

Teresa visits and expresses shock that her daughter is now a "maid." She complains, "That's not why you studied."

Ana cuts her off, "I'm an adult. You go your way and I'll go mine."

When Arturo reappears with the good news that his foundation will carry out the excavation in Janis' rural village, Ana becomes jealous of him and the project: "You're obsessed with that pit." Parroting the line of the Spanish right, she argues that such an operation will only "open old wounds." Instead, people should "look to the future." Janis rejects this angrily, pointing out to the younger woman that there are more than "100,000 missing" from the civil war. She explains, more patiently, that her generation has promised their mothers and grandmothers to carry out the exhumation work.

Janis also reveals a secret that sends Ana spinning off in a confused daze. Their reconciliation proves difficult.

The final sequences of *Parallel Mothers* take place in Janis' home village. She listens to several accounts of the crimes carried out by fascist forces during the first months of the civil war. In one case, described by two women, three Falangists came for their relative. "He spent the night digging his grave." The next night, the fascists came back for him. "He never returned."

The film ends movingly at the mass gravesite, with the bones of the murdered civil war dead on display.

In regard to the bloody Spanish conflict, the WSWWS has explained that at least "200,000 political oppositionists, intellectuals and left-wing workers died in a war that devastated most of Spain." Another 700,000 to 1 million people "passed through nearly 300 concentration camps during the war and in the 1940s. ... Beaten and humiliated on a daily basis, many died of malnutrition and starvation. Another half-million fled Spain as political refugees." Over the next four decades of Franco's rule, "Thousands were arrested, tortured or murdered by the secret police. Strikes, political parties and trade unions were banned, and democratic rights suppressed."

Almodóvar returns to certain familiar themes in *Parallel Mothers*, but also takes up new ones. Reviewing his *Pain and Glory* (2019), we commented that Almodóvar had

begun “making feature films in the mid-1970s and came to international prominence in the 1980s with such works as *Law of Desire* (1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989), and later, *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Talk to Her* (2002).”

“Almodóvar is the most well-known Spanish filmmaker of the post-Franco period,” the WSWS wrote. “His films have valorized sexual and psychological difference and reveled in desire in various forms. An admiring critic writes that in his ‘celebration of fluidity and performance, in his hostility to fixed positions of all kinds, Almodóvar anticipates that critique of identity and essence that was later to become so familiar in academic feminist, minority, and queer theory.’ This passes for high praise indeed in some quarters.”

The writer-director has spent a great deal of time examining and promoting various efforts to create families or communities in opposition to Spain’s traditional, Catholic nuclear family ideal. His films have focused in particular on relationships between women, in different configurations and with varying degrees of emotional extremism. Men, especially fathers, hardly have a presence.

Boxoffice Pro quotes Almodóvar as arguing recently that families “no longer need to have a religious dimension. They are structured through the love and care for their children rather than any sort of duty to the Church.” He is advocating, Almodóvar explains, “for very inclusive families motivated by love. ... The concept of family has progressed a lot in recent years. In this movie, the family I bring together is initially made up of two single mothers, and it expands to include a [straight] man and another child. It is an open family where genders still exist but don’t serve the same function they had in the traditional Catholic sense.”

These are legitimate issues, and given Almodóvar’s social, family and personal history, growing up in stagnant rural Spain in the 1950s under the ultra-repressive Franco regime, understandable ones. However, they have never proved dynamic or substantive enough for the most enduring drama (or comedy). One always had the feeling that were the flamboyance, color, histrionics and deliberately provocative sexual “deviations” to be removed from the Spanish director’s films, there would not be all that much left.

That is a problem here too. Some of the scenes between Janis and Ana are rather sweet. Smit has considerable charm and charisma, as does Sánchez-Gijón. Cruz and her character are perfectly pleasant, but rather bland. In general, the middle portion of the film, dominated by Janis’ “secret,” is rather dull.

In the long run, the dilemmas that seemed most pressing or vital to Almodóvar lost whatever urgency and piquancy they might have had in the 1970s and 1980s. In any case, they

have now largely been superseded by events, including the menacing rise of the extreme right in Spain and the deadly pandemic. It is to the filmmaker’s credit that he has tacitly recognized this.

With *Parallel Mothers*, historical questions make their way into Almodóvar’s work for the first time. At one point, in fact, it was one of his claims to fame that they had not made such an appearance.

A commentator several decades ago argued that Almodóvar’s films were “stepped 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.’” Now, it seems, he has changed his mind.

Almodóvar told *Timeout* that he had always “wanted to make a movie with a more political point of view than I had in the past. All my movies are political—for example, the sense of freedom in my movies. But this is more explicit. I didn’t have any missing people in my own family but it was a subject that I’d always been sensitive to.”

In the interview with *Boxoffice Pro*, the filmmaker pointed to “a tense scene between Janis and Ana, where Janis tells her in a somewhat pedagogic manner, ‘You need to know what type of country you live in, and what type of country your parents and grandparents lived in.’ ... According to some statistics, approximately 140,000 people remain unaccounted for.” Spanish society has a “debt ... with its own people, the victims and their family members.”

He observed to *Timeout* that today in Spain “the extreme right wing are rewriting the past. They’re telling history as it wasn’t. Vox, the extreme right wing party, is saying that it was the Republicans who declared the civil war. That’s just incredible! We need education to know what really happened.”

In a socially telling comment, referring to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the production of *Parallel Mothers*, Almodóvar joked to the same interviewer, “Now it’s not cocaine which goes up our noses but cotton swabs!”

We await with interest his further evolution.



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