# *The Room Next Door*: The latest film from Pedro Almodóvar

**Joanne Laurier**
**13 March 2025**

*The Room Next Door* (*La habitación de al lado*), by veteran Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, his first English-language feature, is based on Sigrid Nunez's 2020 novel *What Are You Going Through*. It concerns the voluntary death of Martha (Tilda Swinton), stricken with incurable cancer, who enlists her friend Ingrid (Julianne Moore) to accompany her during her final days.

Almodóvar has helped put modern Spanish cinema on the map. The director began making short hand-held films, with explicit sexual themes, around the time of the collapse of the fascist Franco regime in 1975. He came to international prominence with such works as *The Law of Desire* (1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989).

The prolific filmmaker followed up with *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002) and *Bad Education* (2004). More recently, he has made *Broken Embraces* (2009), *The Skin I Live In* (2011), *Julieta* (2016), *Pain and Glory* (2019), and *Parallel Mothers* (2021).

In Almodóvar's newest film, Martha (Swinton) has had a successful career as a war correspondent (an homage to famed journalist Martha Gellhorn?) and now lives alone, estranged from her daughter, in New York City. She has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Ingrid (Moore), a former colleague, reluctantly agrees to help Martha die in the manner she has chosen, with a euthanasia pill, in a large rented house north of the city.

Early on in the film, when the doctors are still offering some degree of hope, Martha ironizes grimly, setting an overall tone for the film: "It might sound absurd, but after all the accepting and preparing to face the end, survival feels almost disappointing."

As we learn in the course of the work, as a young woman, Martha became pregnant by Fred (Alex Høgh Andersen), who returned from the Vietnam War with acute PTSD. He tells Martha, "It's not over for me, the war is still inside my head... I can't get free of it... I hallucinate all the time." The pair do not stay together.

Years later, Martha finds out that Fred had married and recently died. We see in a flashback Fred and his wife driving down a country road. He sees a burning house. Eyes bulging, traumatized by the scenes of carnage in Vietnam, he turns to his wife: "Don't you hear the screams?!" and runs into the flaming structure, thinking there may be survivors. In reality, there were no screams, and there are no survivors.

Another flashback shows Martha in war-devastated Iraq with two gay Carmelite missionaries facing the horrors of the conflict with the solace of sex.

As the moment of Martha's death approaches, Ingrid has a conversation with Damian (John Turturro), a former lover of both women. He is coming to a nearby university to deliver a lecture on climate change. His perspective is "desperate":

> Read the science and then see what the world is doing with it… Sooner or later, and I fear it will be sooner, one day all this will be shot to hell. And nothing's going to hasten the end of the planet more than the survival of neo-liberalism and the rise of the far right… I have completely lost faith in people doing the right thing.

Electing death to avoid the agony of illness (Martha), death as the result of PTSD (Fred), placing death above the end of sex and love in wartime (the missionaries in Iraq), preferring individual death or at least a "shrinking … of interest in things" prior to the death of the planet (Damian)… Almodóvar offers up various forms essentially of suicide.

Despite its blazing colors and general elegance, and the

talents of Swinton and Moore, and despite its (unconvincing) effort to render a story about fatal illness and suicide "vibrant" and "uplifting," *The Room Next Door* is at heart a misguided, melancholy film. Given the framework that the filmmaker establishes, Martha's choosing to die with dignity when medicine doesn't hold out any hope is entirely legitimate, but questions need to be asked about the framework itself.

Fatalism and glumness run like currents through the film.

The treatment of the terminally ill is a serious and difficult social issue. As always in America, when the criminal justice system and the mass media get involved, the result has been to sensationalize and trivialize, offer simple solutions to complex problems and, if possible, throw someone in prison.

A 1998 WSWS article posed the question: how should the terminally ill be treated?:

> On the basic question of democratic rights, it must be conceded that the terminally ill, those wracked by pain and with no hope of alleviation or recovery, should have the "right to die," at least in the sense that the state should have no power to compel them to continue in pointless suffering.

However, it continued:

> There are many reasons to be wary when euthanasia is offered as a solution to the problems of the sick and the elderly. The precedents of this century—the Nazis were the most enthusiastic proponents of this practice—are not hopeful. There is enormous potential for abuse and discrimination, for distortion of the decisions of the terminally ill by economic circumstances and social conditions.

The right to die with dignity, is, as the WSWS article noted, citing Trotsky, a "gloomy" right. And a slippery slope.

Does being able to die at one's own hand at the moment one chooses really seem the most pressing issue in America or the world today? At best, this is a lesser question, part of a more general opposition to right-wing religious backwardness and bigotry. To direct his attention toward this issue does not suggest a filmmaker brimming with self-confidence, but one pessimistic about the future.

While Almodóvar concerns himself with voluntary death, the Palestinians are being slaughtered involuntarily with the approval of every imperialist government and millions die from war, poverty and disease.

Despite his obvious talents and ingenuity, Almodóvar seems continuously pushed toward secondary and tertiary matters, with a few exceptions. This must be a historical, objective problem. The Spanish working class was bursting at the seams to make a revolution in the 1930s, but the Stalinist Communist Party and its accomplices strangled that opportunity, opening the door to decades of terrible repression.

Then, in 1975, "bourgeois democracy" was restored, without any serious challenge being made to capitalism. This was again the work of the Stalinists, the social democrats and other "left forces." Today, as in every major country, the fascists that made life hell for the Spanish people are on the ascendancy again.

Almodóvar, the leading Spanish filmmaker of his generation, with a considerable global following, is an intelligent and sensitive figure. He makes reference in his public pronouncements to important artists like Luis Buñuel, Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. But the working class as a social force has meant little, if anything, to him.

Pushed in certain directions and blocked from others by Spain's political history, the director's early films—made in the very shadow of fascism—were imbued with a certain subversive spirit, but one which was mostly a matter of sexual transgressiveness. *The Room Next Door* is not an advance for Almodóvar.