

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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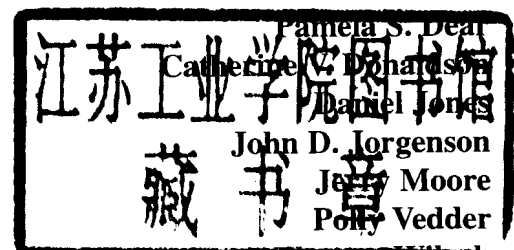
Volume 114

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
Deborah A. Schmitt
Timothy J. White
EDITORS

Tim Akers



John D. Jorgenson
Jerry Moore
Polly Vedder
Thomas Wiloch
Kathleen Wilson
ASSOCIATE EDITORS



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Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers-authors of considerable public interest--about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups within the United States.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains about 500 individual excerpts taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material in *CLC* provide them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the author’s name in the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **Portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries--entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems--are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.
- The **Excerpted Criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each excerpt.
- Whenever possible, a recent, previously unpublished **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by Gale Research in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News*, *Black Writers*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *DISCovering Authors*, *Drama Criticism*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, *Hispanic Writers*, *Native North American Literature*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

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- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
- An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the titles of long poems are printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paper-bound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and is typically published with every fifth volume of *CLC*. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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²Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 223-26.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors hope that readers will find *CLC* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Gale Research, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48333-3535.

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Pedro Almodóvar

1949(?)-

Spanish filmmaker.

The following entry provides an overview of Almodóvar's career through 1995.

INTRODUCTION

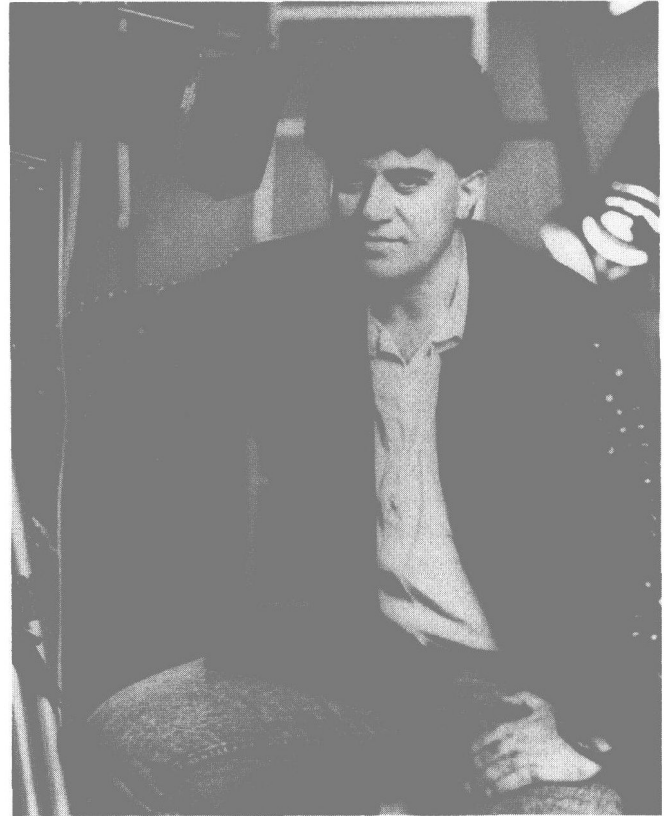
Pedro Almodóvar's work flourished in the post-Franco culture of Spain in the late 1970s and 1980s. His films celebrate the era of individuality and acceptance that infused the Spanish cultural arts after the end of Franco's repressive totalitarian regime. In addition, Almodóvar's work is understood by some critics as a revision of the history of Spain under Franco. The characters in Almodóvar's films, commonly homosexuals, transsexuals, or bisexuals, are not relegated to the subculture. Instead, Almodóvar uses these characters to represent the postmodern revolt against the repressive boundaries of Spain's history. Almodóvar's work has garnered him a reputation as an international auteur.

Biographical Information

Almodóvar was born in 1949 (some sources say 1951) in a small village, Calzada de Calatrava, and spent most of his youth attending parochial schools. Almodóvar always felt out of place in the small town and at the age of seventeen he moved to Madrid. He worked for the next ten years as a typist for the telephone company. During this time he also acted with an independent theater troupe, sang in a rock band, wrote articles and X-rated comics for an avant-garde newspaper, and composed the memoirs of the fictitious pornography queen, Pati Difusa. Almodóvar never attended film school, but by the mid-1970s he was shooting experimental 8- and 16-millimeter shorts. He completed his first full-length feature, *Pepi, Lucy, Bom y otros chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Lucy, Bom and a Whole Lot of Other Girls*, 1980) for only thirty thousand dollars. Two years later he followed with *Laberinto de pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passion*, 1982) which attained cult status in Spain. Almodóvar's fourth feature, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, 1984) brought him popularity in the United States. His reputation has grown steadily throughout his career in both Spain and internationally. His films are played at film festivals throughout the world and have won several international awards.

Major Works

Almodóvar's films primarily focus on the lives and feelings



of women. They are usually told from the woman's perspective, but include a host of well-developed ensemble characters. His cinematic world is filled with intense imagery and outrageous situations that are made to seem ordinary. His films embrace life and individual freedom, and his main theme is the celebration, exploration, and sometimes frustration of human desires. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* focuses on life in the housing projects of Madrid. The film's protagonist is Gloria, an overworked mother who takes amphetamines to help her face her responsibilities as a housewife and her job as a cleaning woman. Her family includes her taxi driver husband who neglects her, two sons—one a drug dealer, the other a homosexual—and a mother-in-law who longs to return to her village. Gloria is frustrated and unsatisfied in her life and takes action to change her circumstances by bludgeoning her husband with a ham bone and selling her youngest son to a homosexual dentist. *Matador* (1986) is a study in psychosexual brutality which follows the story of an ex-matador and a lady lawyer who can only experience sexual fulfillment in conjunction with killing. *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988) is about overcom-

ing machismo. Pepa is a Spanish television and radio actress who attempts to contact her ex-lover Ivan to tell him she is pregnant. Ivan is a cad who uses women and abandons them, but Pepa sees reconciliation, murder, or suicide as her only options. She attempts to win him back, but in the final confrontation Pepa decides to give up on Ivan and become a single mother. *Kika* (1993) tells the story of an independent heroine who is raped and then further abused by the broadcast of her victimization on television.

Critical Reception

Reviewers often point out the autobiographical nature of Almodóvar's films, including his focus on sexuality, family relationships, and life in Madrid versus life in a small town. Critics discuss Almodóvar's complicated relationship with Francoism. Marvin D'Lugo asserts, "While Almodóvar has long insisted that his cinema is without any connection to Franco and Francoism, textual evidence suggests the contrary. An essential axis of meaning in much of his filmic work lies precisely in the ways the ideas and icons of Francoist cinema—those related to religion, the family, and sexual repression—are set up as foils to stimulate the audience to embrace a new post-Francoist cultural aesthetic." Other reviewers assert that in his attempt to ignore Francoist Spain, Almodóvar turned to Hollywood melodrama for a reference point in his films. Kathleen M. Vernon states, "American film has provided him with a vehicle for articulating his distance from the themes and style of a recent Spanish film tradition obsessed with the country's tragic past." Critics assert that Almodóvar pays homage to the Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 40s both through his use of clips from several films and his use of melodramatic techniques. Critics also discuss Almodóvar's unconventional use of humor in his films, comparing his work to such directors as John Waters, Russ Meyer, and Luis Buñuel. Some reviewers are disturbed by the erotic themes and images in Almodóvar's films, but many critics look beyond the sensational aspects of the director's work. Peter Evans says, "Almodóvar's devotion to scandal and outrage never detracts from a serious project to explore the after-effects of repression through the combined strategies of pop and high art."

*PRINCIPAL WORKS

†*Pepi, Lucy, Bom y otros chicas del montón* [*Pepi, Lucy, Bom and a Whole Lot of Other Girls*] (screenplay) 1980

‡*Laberinto de pasión* [*Labyrinth of Passion*] (screenplay) 1982

***Entre tinieblas* [*Dark Habits*] (screenplay) 1983

††¿*Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* [*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*] (screenplay) 1984

Matador (screenplay) 1986

La ley del deseo [*The Law of Desire*] (screenplay) 1986

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios [*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*] (screenplay) 1988

Atame! [*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*] (screenplay) 1990

Tacones lejanos [*High Heels*] (screenplay) 1991

Kika (screenplay) (1993)

Almodóvar on Almodóvar (nonfiction) 1995

La flor de mi secreto [*The Flower of My Secret*] (screenplay) (1995)

Carne tremula [*Live Flesh*; based on the novel by Ruth Rendell] (screenplay) 1997

*Almodóvar directed all the films listed here.

†The English translation of this title varies. It is also referred to as *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*, *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Ordinary Girls*, *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls Like That*, and *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls All Like Mom*.

‡This film is also known as *Laberinto de pasiones* [*Labyrinth of Passions*].

**This film is sometimes referred to as *Sisters of Darkness*.

††Punctuation of this title varies.

CRITICISM

Pedro Almodóvar with Marsha Kinder (interview date Fall 1987)

SOURCE: "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar," in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XLI, No. 1, Fall, 1987, pp. 33-44.

[In the following interview, which was conducted on May 25, 1987, Almodóvar discusses his approach to filmmaking, the major themes of his films, and the place of his work in the context of Spanish film.]

Following the enthusiastic critical reception of Pedro Almodóvar's *La Ley del Deseo* (*The Law of Desire*) at this year's Berlin Film Festival, Spain's oldest and largest-circulation film journal, *Fotogramas & Video*, ran an editorial saying:

The recent Berlin Festival has demonstrated an important fact for Spanish cinema: the interest that our cinema can arouse abroad, not only at the level of interchange or cultural curiosity, but as an exportable and commercially valid product. . . . Spanish

cinema is trying to leave the national “ghetto” and join a movement that proclaims the necessity and urgency of a “European cinema” which transcends nationalities without renouncing their specificity.

Although this editorial mentions several films at the festival to support its point, it focuses most specifically on “the enormous and overwhelming success of *La Ley del Deseo* . . . , a film that is eminently ‘Spanish’ but comprehensible to any person,” and which confirms that “when one makes a cinema that has something to say, these things can have appeal everywhere.”

Fotogramas fails to acknowledge the irony that this film being singled out as a model of “universal” appeal is an outrageous melodrama featuring homosexual and transsexual protagonists in a sado-masochistic triangle involving incest, murder, and suicide and including several sexually explicit homoerotic love scenes. It’s a film that in most national contexts would be marginal, to say the least. And yet in March, when it was screened in New York, concurrent with but not as part of the Ministry of Culture’s Third Annual Spanish Film Week (which included an equally extreme Almodóvar melodrama called *Matador*), *La Ley del Deseo* again received critical raves in the *Village Voice* and in the *New Yorker* where Pauline Kael devoted a full page to the film—an achievement that was duly reported as “news” in Spain’s most prestigious daily, *El País*.

At the very moment when Spanish cinema may be facing its most serious economic crisis, Almodóvar’s films are achieving modest success both at home and abroad. Since the death of Franco in 1975 and despite the earnest efforts of the Socialist government which came to power in 1982, Spanish films have not only failed to find adequate distribution in foreign markets, but they have steadily been losing their home audience. Spanish spectators are either staying home in droves with their VCRs or flocking to see the latest imports which increasingly dominate Spanish movie houses with their block booking. The number of total spectators who attended movies in Spain decreased from 331 million in 1970 to 101 million in 1985, and by 1985 Spanish films held only 17.5% of that diminishing home market, as opposed to 30% in 1970. Within this discouraging context, Almodóvar’s early features did surprisingly well in Spain and *Matador* was an outstanding success—the third-largest-grossing Spanish film in 1986. The final figures are not yet in on *La Ley del Deseo*, but they promise to be even better. It’s the first Almodóvar film to be immediately sold worldwide—virtually everywhere but in Japan.

Almodóvar’s films have a curious way of resisting marginalization. Never limiting himself to a single protagonist, he chooses an ensemble of homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, dooper, punk, terrorist characters who refuse to be

ghettoized into divisive subcultures because they are figured as part of the “new Spanish mentality”—a fast-paced revolt that relentlessly pursues pleasure rather than power, and a post-modern erasure of all repressive boundaries and taboos associated with Spain’s medieval, fascist, and modernist heritage. Almodóvar claims:

I always try to choose prototypes and characters from modern-day Madrid, who are somehow representative of a certain mentality existing today. . . . I think that since Franco died new generations have been coming to the fore, generations that are unrelated to former ones, that are even unrelated to the “progressive” generations that appeared during the last years of the dictatorship. How do people 20 years old live in Madrid? It’s quite complex. . . . The characters in my films utterly break with the past, which is to say that most of them, for example, are apolitical. Pleasure must be grasped immediately, hedonistically; that is almost the main leitmotif of their lives.

This new mentality was already present in Almodóvar’s first low-budget, underground feature (made in 16mm and blown up to 35), *Pepi, Lucy, Bom y Otros Chicas del Montón* (retitled in English *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls All Like Mom*), where a policeman, who’s married to middle-aged Lucy, rapes their young neighbor Pepi and tries to cover up his crime by planting marijuana on her balcony. Lucy responds by becoming sexually involved with a girl even younger than Pepi, a 16-year-old pleasure lover named Bom, and Pepi writes their love story. The rape is further avenged by Pepi’s friends from a punk rock group who, in order to attract the rapist, disguise themselves as traditional Spanish zarzuela singers.

The new mentality of 20-year-olds was seen even more clearly in Almodóvar’s second splashy feature *Laberinto de Pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passions*), which positively bristles with vibrant color and a wildly comic sexual energy. The tortuously complex plot follows the tangled passions of an ensemble of young Madrileños trying to escape the crippling influences of repressive fathers in order to pursue their own pleasure. Riza Niro (Imanol Arias) is the bisexual son of the deposed “emperor of Tehran.” More interested in sex and cosmetics than in family or politics, he flees his corrupt, cancerous father and lecherous, infertile stepmother, becomes a punk singer in Madrid, and ultimately flies away with the Felliniesque Sexilia (Celia Roth), a nymphomaniac member of a feminist punk band called “Las Ex” and daughter of a world-class sex-loathing gynecologist, whose scientific detachment drives his daughter to promiscuity. Queti, a young laundress who is chronically raped by her dry-cleaning daddy on alternate days, undergoes plastic surgery to become Sexilia’s surrogate on stage and at home where she enters a

budding incestuous relationship with her new doctor daddy. This two-faced incestuous daughter feeds both daddies powerful potions that render one impotent, the other horny. The fleeing lovers Riza and Sexy are hotly pursued by an assortment of jealous punks and Islamic fundamentalists, but none so dogged as the superkeen-scented Sadec, a handsome Tehranian terrorist (played by Antonio Banderas) who also loves Riza in spite of politics. This "musical comedy" (for which Almodóvar himself wrote and performed some of the wildest songs) is still running on weekends as a midnight cult movie in Madrid.

Though I haven't seen Almodóvar's third feature, *Entre Tinieblas* (retitled in English *Sisters of Darkness*), it's reported to be about a community of nuns known as the "Humble Redeemers" who run a home for delinquent girls, where, among other pleasurable pastimes, the sisters keep a pet tiger, write steamy best-sellers, smoke pot, and shoot dope.

¿Qué He Hecho Yo para Merecer Ésto? (What Have I Done to Deserve This?), Almodóvar's first international hit, follows the travails of Gloria (Carmen Maura), a high-rise suburban housewife who toils as a maid to help support her family, which includes: a taxi-driver husband who's obsessed with a suicidal German singer and who gets involved in a plot to forge Hitler's memoirs; two sons—a teenage heroin dealer and a 12-year-old homosexual; and a dotty mother-in-law who yearns for her pet lizard and her home village. Despite these pressures, both the soapish heroine and her narrative still have time for needy neighbors—a cheerful hooker who longs to go to Las Vegas and a haughty mother who abuses her telekinetic child. Ultimately, downtrodden Gloria kills her troublesome husband, her dooper son goes to live with his granny in her home village, and her homosexual prodigal son returns home from the lecherous dentist who "adopted" him just in time to save his despondent mother from suicide.

Matador is an exercise in excess, a stylish psychological thriller with extravagant costumes, lush visuals, and the narrative logic of erotic fantasy. It opens with a montage of violence against women, movie images being watched on a VCR by an ex-matador as he masturbates. Having been gored in the ring, Diego Montes (Nacho Martínez) now only teaches bullfighting, but to recapture the ecstasy of the kill, he murders young girls. Angered by the insinuation that he might be a repressed homosexual, Angel (Antonio Banderas), one of Diego's virginal students, tries to rape his next door neighbor Eva, who conveniently (for the Oedipal subtext) just happens to be Diego's young fashion-model mistress. Angel is sexually disturbed, not only by an evil repressive mother who belongs to Opus Dei (an extreme rightwing lay religious organization), but also by a supernatural ability to see the violent and erotic acts of others and

to imagine they are his own. Not only does he see the serial murders of his mentor Diego, but also those of his famous female defense lawyer María Cardenal, a beautiful man-killer, with a secret obsession with matadors, which she picked up while watching Diego being gored. Once Diego and María meet in a movie house during the lust-in-the-dust climax of *Duel in the Sun*, these erotic killers see their destiny and give up all other pursuits. Guiding a group of interested parties—Diego's discarded mistress Eva, the maternal psychiatrist (Carmen Maura) who gives Angel loving support, and the police inspector (Eusebio Poncela) who has eyes for Angel and other young men in tight matador pants—Angel and company try to forestall the final fatal orgasm of Diego and María, but they arrive in time only to witness with envy the blissful smiles of the dead lovers.

La Ley del Deseo is another psychological thriller of excess, but this time about two brothers, Pablo and Tina. Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) is a homosexual screenwriter/director who is in love with a young bisexual named Juan (Miguel Molina) and who rewrites Juan's love letters to make them suit his own standard of absolute passion. One of his soft-core films deeply arouses a young spectator named Antonio (Antonio Banderas), who subsequently has his first homosexual experience with Pablo and immediately is transformed into a possessive lover. When Antonio reads the love letter from Juan that was actually written by Pablo, he becomes insanely jealous and murders his rival. Stunned by grief over Juan's murder, Pablo has a car accident and suffers amnesia. Pablo's brother Tina, formerly Tino (brilliantly played by Carmen Maura), is a transsexual actress who loved and was abandoned by her father and who now hates men. The lesbian model she lives with (ironically played by real-life transsexual Bibi Andersen) has deserted both Tina and her own 10-year-old daughter Ada, who now adopts Tina as her mother and falls in love with Pablo. In order to force Pablo to see him after the murder, Antonio seduces Tina and then holds her hostage, so that he will be granted a final hour of love. Although Pablo goes to the assignation with hatred and dread, his feelings are miraculously transformed into love by the purity of Antonio's passion.

Born in 1949 in the small village of Calzada de Calatrava near Ciudad Real, Almodóvar claims he always felt "like an astronaut in the court of King Arthur" and "knew he was born to take on the big cities." By the time he was eight, this quixotic child was living in La Mancha and then in Cáceres, where he studied with the Salesianos and Franciscans and finished his baccalaureate. In 1967, at 17, he finally made it to Madrid where he immediately became a hippy and then a white-collar worker at the National Telephone Company. After hours, he became a versatile member of Madrid's artistic underground—doing comic strips for underground magazines; acting in the avant-garde theater group *Los Golliardos*; recording and performing live in a

rock band called Almodóvar and McNamara; publishing journalistic articles, parodic memoirs (under the pen name Patty Diphusa), a porno photo-story, and a novella; and making experimental short films, first in 8mm and then in 16. Even after making his first feature in 1980, he still continued writing and singing. But by the time he made *Entre Tinieblas* in 1983, his first film to be sent to a foreign festival and sold outside of Spain, he was launched as an international auteur.

[Kinder:] *What do you think is the primary appeal of your films, especially of **La Ley del Deseo** which has had such international success, whereas most Spanish films have had such difficulty in getting international distribution?*

[Almodóvar:] Well, I've been striving for this over the last three years, and I think this is the fruit of my previous work. People know me more now, and it's easier for me to sell a film. On the other hand, I think my films are very contemporary. They represent more than others, I suppose, the new Spain, this kind of new mentality that appears in Spain after Franco dies. Above all, after 1977 till now. Stories about the new Spain have appeared in the mass media of every country. Everybody has heard that now everything is different in Spain, that it has changed a lot, but it is not so easy to find this change in the Spanish cinema. I think in my films they see how Spain has changed, above all, because now it is possible to do this kind of film here. Not that a film like *The Law of Desire* would be impossible to make in places like Germany, London or the United States.

I believe that the new Spanish mentality is less dramatic—although I demonstrate the contrary in my films. We have consciously left behind many prejudices, and we have humanized our problems. We have lost the fear of earthly power (the police) and of celestial power (the church), and we have also lost our provincial certainty that we are superior to the rest of the world—that typical Latin prepotency . . . We have become more skeptical, without losing the joy of living. We don't have confidence in the future, but we are constructing a past for ourselves because we don't like the one we had.

—Pedro Almodóvar

Yes, but it would be impossible to have such a film get half of its financing from the ministry of culture in any of those countries! How would you define "the new Spanish mentality"?

I believe that the new Spanish mentality is less dramatic—although I demonstrate the contrary in my films. We have consciously left behind many prejudices, and we have humanized our problems. We have lost the fear of earthly power (the police) and of celestial power (the church), and we have also lost our provincial certainty that we are superior to the rest of the world—that typical Latin prepotency. And we have recuperated the inclination toward sensuality, something typically Mediterranean. We have become more skeptical, without losing the joy of living. We don't have confidence in the future, but we are constructing a past for ourselves because we don't like the one we had.

*Do you think that the appeal of your films also has something to do with their unique tone? I know that Pauline Kael in her very enthusiastic review of **La Ley del Deseo** stressed the uniqueness of the tone without really describing what it is.*

Well, I would like to think this is one of the reasons because this is the main difference of my films. Whether they are good or bad, my films are absolutely different from other Spanish films and even from the other foreign cinema. I mean you can talk about a lot of influences, everybody has them. But if you see all of my films, I'm sure you can differentiate them from the others, you can recognize them. I would like to think this is the main reason for their international appeal.

How would you define that tone?

It's hard for me to talk about it because I never try to verbalize about my films, but it's true there is a different tone, even in general. This is something I'm obsessed with when I'm working with the actors. They have to say my lines in a different way. Even for me this is something that's very difficult to explain to them because you have to catch it and you have to feel it. When I'm shooting, I'm obsessed with creating an atmosphere that explains exactly what is my tone. The atmosphere that I create when I'm shooting, this is the tone of my films. To take one example, I used to mix all the genres. You can say my films are melodramas, tragicomedies, comedies or whatever because I used to put everything together and even change genre within the same sequence and very quickly. But the main difference is the private morality. I think one auteur is different from another because he has his own morality. When I say morality, I don't mean ethics, it's just a private point of view. I mean you can see a film by Luis Buñuel and you know exactly that it belongs to Buñuel because it's just the way of thinking.

It seems to me that what lies at the center of your unique tone is what you were describing before, that fluidity with which you move so quickly from one genre to another, or from one feeling or tone to another, so that when a line is

delivered, it's very funny and borders on parody and we spectators are just ready to laugh, but at the same time it's erotic and moves us emotionally. In this way, you always demonstrate that you're in control, that you're manipulating the spectator response.

Yes, it takes more care than other styles of acting and shooting. You have to be very careful to control the tone because it can easily run away with you and go too far. Just as you say, in my films everything is just at the border of parody. It's not only parody. It's also the borderline of the ridiculous and of the grotesque. But it's easy to fall over the line.

Other film-makers who come to mind as doing something similar with tone are David Lynch . . .

Absolutely, I recognize myself a lot in *Blue Velvet*. I love it.

I love that film, too. It allows you to be both terrified and turned on and at the same time it's also hysterically funny. And then there's Fassbinder.

But the difference is that Fassbinder, as a German, doesn't have much of a sense of humor. In *Blue Velvet* you can find a great sense of humor, but *Blue Velvet* is more morbid than my films because there is always an element of naiveté in what I'm doing. It's strangely antithetical because I'm not so naive. But this kind of purity of actions, feelings and spontaneity, that's not in *Blue Velvet*. *Blue Velvet* is darker, sicker, sick in every way. But, with a lot of humor. Do you think there is humor in Fassbinder's films?

Oh yes, although it's always combined with pain.

German culture is so different from Spanish culture. In our culture there is a great sense of humor but not in the German culture. Also, I believe that our culture is more visceral. Intuition and imagination influence us more than reason. There is more adventure and spontaneity. We don't fear disorder or chaos.

Your use of Hollywood melodrama—especially in ¿Qué He Hecho? where two characters go to see Splendor in the Grass and in Matador where there's a long excerpt from Duel in the Sun—it seems similar to the ways in which Fassbinder used Sirk and even Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard in Veronika Voss, where he picked something already very extreme—and then pushed it even further to that borderline of parody. How do you see the relationship between your work and Hollywood melodrama?

All of the influences on me and all of the film references in my films are very spontaneous and visual. I don't make any tributes. I'm a very naive spectator. I can't learn from the

movies that I love. But if I had to choose one master or model, I would choose Billy Wilder. He represents exactly what I want to do.

Which Billy Wilder? His films are so varied!

Both Billy Wilders. The *Sunset Boulevard* Billy Wilder and *The Apartment* Billy Wilder, the 1-2-3 and *The Lost Weekend*. *The Lost Weekend*, for example, is a big, big drama but you can find a lot of humor in it and a lot of imagination in the way it develops a unique situation. It's a great challenge for a screenwriter. But to return to the question about Hollywood, I just love that big period of the classic American melodrama. I'm not just talking about Sirk but about the kinds of films Bette Davis made. I like these extreme genres where you can talk naturally about strong sentiments without a sense of the ridiculous. This is something that melodrama has. But, of course, all these films like *Splendor in the Grass* and *Duel in the Sun*, which is so outrageous, I mean you have to be very very brave to dare to go to this kind of extreme, you can really be grotesque if you don't know how to do it. This is something that I like. But I use the genre in a different way. My films are not so conventional as that kind of melodrama. Because I don't respect the boundaries of the genre, I mix it with other things. So my films appear to be influenced by Hollywood melodrama, but I put in other elements that belong more to my culture. For example, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* is more like a neorealist film than melodrama. I think it's more like the films of Rossellini, Zavattini, and DeSica—more like Italian neorealism which is also a melodramatic genre. But I put in a lot of humor. That makes the reality even more awful in a way, more extreme. And I also put in a lot of surrealistic elements that completely change the genre. I think that the presence of the nonrational in my films is strong, but I never try to explain it. For example, in *¿Qué He Hecho?* I don't try to explain the girl with the telekinetic powers, the girl like Carrie. I just put her in as part of the life or plot, and this kind of element changes the genre.

There's a moment in ¿Qué He Hecho? that helps me understand what you might mean by calling it a neorealist film. In one scene the older son asks for help with his homework in assigning the labels "realist" and "romantic" to famous authors, and his granny reverses the traditional answers, calling Byron a realist and Balzac a romantic. Isn't this joke a comment on your own style? Isn't this exactly what you're doing in this movie—reversing the traditional meanings of realist and romantic?

That could be, but I had no consciousness of it.

In one of your interviews, you say you admired very much the Spanish neorealism of Marco Ferreri and Fernando Fernán Gómez, films like El Pisito, El Cochecito and La