



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

All about My Mother

The first of Almodóvar's 13 features to be shown in competition at Cannes, *All about My Mother* not only won him the prize for best director but also proved to be the popular hit of the festival, with the often cynical Cannes audience granting it a lengthy standing ovation. Clocking up over a million admissions in France alone, *All about My Mother* held its own against such mainstream rivals as the Connery/Zeta-Jones *Entrapment* all over Europe, thus fulfilling its director's prediction to the Italian press that the big budgets of Hollywood could only be beaten by something that comes free to Europeans: imagination.

All about My Mother is the final part of what can now be recognised as the loose trilogy of Almodóvar's mature 'blue period' (as opposed to the earlier, more florid 'rose' films). Like the first of the threesome *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), it focuses on one woman's grief, in this case Manuela's at the loss of a beloved son; but like the second, *Live Flesh*, it boasts a complex plot and a gallery of characters whose lives intersect with clockwork precision and to deadly effect. If *All about My Mother* is, then, and 'Almodrama' (as Cuban critic Cabrera Infante calls the new genre), it is one of unusually wide interest: as attractive to film theorists as to *fashionistas* and as remarkable for its masterful cinematic technique as for its new commitment to social critique. And as in the earlier films of the trilogy, cinematographer Affonso Beato (a veteran of the Brazilian *cinema novo* movement) and composer Alberto Iglesias (a long-time collaborator with Julio Medem) help to set a tone at once gravely austere and powerfully sensual.

The opening credits shimmer and dissolve as the camera pans slowly over medical paraphernalia: drips and dials in blue, red and yellow. In a typical combination of economy and stylishness, this colour coding will continue throughout the film. Manuela shelters beneath a primary-hued umbrella on the dark, rainy Madrid night when her son Esteban (Eloy Azorin) is run over seeking an autograph from drama diva Huma Rojo (veteran Marisa Paredes) after a stage performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And the second theatrical section of the film is yet more stylised: escaping to the Barcelona she left when pregnant 18 years earlier, Manuela encounters in swift succession the trans prostitute La Agrado (newcomer Antonia San Juan), pregnant nun Sister Rosa (played by Spain's favourite young actress, Penélope Cruz) and Huma herself, whose production has transferred to the Catalan capital.

The marginal milieu, if not the glamorous production values, is almost parodically reminiscent of Almodóvar's 'rose' manner. And *All about My Mother* is densely self-referential. Cecilia Roth, who has worked in her native Argentina for the last decade, has not starred in an Almodóvar feature since *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982); memories of her as nymphomaniac Sexilia sit oddly with her brave performance here, at once fiercely emotional and unsentimental. Her character Manuela is a nurse who participates in training seminars on counselling relatives of prospective organ donors. This is a sequence repeated near verbatim from *The Flower of My Secret*, but now with the twist that the simulation of death will be repeated for real. Almodóvar

completists will love other tiny gestures to fans: La Agrado's Chanel suit matches Victoria Abril's in *High Heels* (1991); her defiant claim 'I'm authentic' echoes Rossy de Palma's lesbian maid in *Kika* (1993). The dubbed inserts of Bette Davis in *All about Eve* recall the Joan Crawford clips from *Johnny Guitar* in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), while the scenes of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, shot with an eye for the ironies of on- and off-stage life, parallel those of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* in *The Law of Desire* (1987). Self-citation is used as narrative shorthand, increasing the density and intensity of the new work by calling up the rich universe Almodóvar had created over 20 years.

But the condensation and displacement of Almodóvar's earlier oeuvre are matched by a newly analytic use of cinematic resources. The plot may be melodramatic and the ambience theatrical, but Almodóvar has coached his actresses to produce what Spanish critics have called a 'Swedish' performance style in which less is more. Prone to tears, in accordance with the director's belief that 'women weep better', *All about My Mother's* circle of females also confront death, disease and abandonment with a stoic mask of grief all the more moving for its impassivity. And there are some pitiless close-ups of San Juan and Paredes, revealing the traces of time on ravaged faces, however theatrically preserved. Yet there is still space in this hybrid 'screwball drama', as Almodóvar styles it, for nicely judged moments of comedy, as when Sister Rosa claims that 'Prada is perfect for nuns'.

This extended range of performance style is matched by Almodóvar's shift of location. Hitherto confined to the old imperial capital of Madrid, his films have ignored the decentralisation of the Spanish state that has been the great achievement of democracy during the period in which the director has worked, a constitutional experiment the UK has only just embarked upon. And Barcelona, the maritime metropolis, has never looked more beautiful than through the lens of the unrepentant son of arid la Mancha. Introduced with a swooning helicopter shot from the Tibidabo hill down to the night lights of the bay, Spain's second city lives up to Almodóvar's claim that it is the 'greatest of film sets'. The distinctive towers of Sagrada Familia (relit specially for the film) swim and buckle as reflected in Manuela's taxi window. La Agrado's home beat is the grimy but multi-racial Raval (formerly known as the Barrio Chino), while Sister Rosa's intolerant mother resides in a glamorous apartment decorated in ornate Catalan art nouveau.

But location and dislocation go hand in hand. The visually striking scene in which cars slowly cruise prostitutes as if in some lower circle of suburban hell is shot not in Barcelona but in Madrid. The soundtrack features the swelling chords of the Argentine *bandoneón*, appropriate for the central character Manuela but highly incongruous in this Catalan context. And the bilingual status of Barcelona is barely acknowledged, with the actors essaying only the barest of greetings in the local language. Indifferent to local politics, still Almodóvar writes a visual love letter to the Catalan capital – one welcomed by the Catalan press, which has often been friendlier to the director than that of his home town.

As mobile as Manuela, shuttling between Barcelona and Madrid, Almodóvar is also as consistent as her, in his focus on love and loss. And this alternation of motion and stasis is played out in his shooting and cutting styles. The director has remarked how reluctant he now is to move the camera without good cause. So such key moments as Esteban's accident are shot with studied

simplicity: the camera merely cants sideways to the ground as from the dying son's point of view we see a sodden Manuela come howling into shot.

Three subtle features, however, contribute substantially to the film's narrative and aesthetic effect. The first is the slow pans along walls, floors and curtains that introduce many sequences. Like Ozu's interpolated shots of flowers or chimneys, unmotivated by plot, Almodóvar's pans suggest that his characters are caught up in a web of accidents that constitutes everyday life and cannot be extricated from the highly coloured locations they inhabit. The second technique is the dissolve. The grid of Esteban's notebook fades into the flashing lights of the theatre where Huma was performing, a reference to the unwitting cause of the youth's death at once tragic and ironic. Or Almodóvar cuts from the black mouth of a waste bin to the ever-receding railway tunnel through which Manuela flees the city. Narrative pace is quickened by bold, elliptical editing: located as we are within Manuela's mind, we see only those essential elements that drive forward her drama of primal loss and ultimate redemption.

The final technique is the two shot. Consistently exploiting the wide screen and scorning television-friendly square composition, Almodóvar's framings privilege the relation between characters. In the prologue mother and son are kept constantly together on screen, whether watching Bette Davis on television or Huma Rojo on stage. Later the central figure of Manuela will generously share the frame with the supporting players: Huma, Rosa, La Agrado, and Niña (Candela Peña), Huma's junkie lover. Superficially similar to *Live Flesh*, which also focused on the relationships between several characters and boasted sharp shooting and cutting, *All about My Mother* is significantly different from its predecessor. For in *All about My Mother* the bond between the characters is not sex, but solidarity.

Paul Julian Smith, *Sight and Sound*, September 1999

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER (TODO SOBRE MI MADRE)

Director: Pedro Almodóvar

©: El Deseo, Renn Productions, France 2 Cinéma

Production Companies: El Deseo, Renn Productions, France 2 Cinéma, Canal+

Producer: Agustín Almodóvar

Associate Producer: Michel Ruben

Production Supervisor: Esther García

Production Manager: Tino Pont

Unit Manager: María Rodríguez

1st Assistant Director: Pedro Lazaga

Script Supervisor: Yuyi Beringola

Casting Director: Sara Bilbatúa

Screenplay: Pedro Almodóvar

Director of Photography: Afonso Beato

Camera Operator: Joaquín Manchado

Special Effects/Digital Post-production: Molinare

Inferno Operator: Aurelio Sánchez-Herrero

Graphic Design: Oscar Mariné, OMB (Madrid)

Editor: José Salcedo

Art Director: Antxón Gómez

Set Decorator: Federico García Cambero

Costumes: José María de Cossío, Sabine Daigeler

Make-up: Juan Pedro Hernández

Hair: Jean Jacques Puchu

Optical Effects: Story Film/Pablo Núñez

Music: Alberto Iglesias

Music Performed by: City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

Conducted by: Mario Klemens

Clarinet Soloist: Enrique Pérez

Trumpet Soloist: Patxi Urtegui

Guitar Soloist: Fernando Egozcue

Drums Soloist: Patrick Goraguer

Electric Bass Soloist: Paco Bastante

Vibraphone Soloist: Alfredo Anaya

Piano Soloist: Alberto Iglesias

Flute Soloist: Manuel Tobar

Sound: Miguel Rejas

Boom Operator: Jaime Fernández

Re-recording Mixers: José Antonio Bermúdez, Diego Garrido

Sound Effects: Luis Castro

Stunt Co-ordinator: Antonio Lemos

Cast

Cecilia Roth (*Manuela*)

Marisa Paredes (*Huma Rojo*)

Candela Peña (*Niña*)

Antonia San Juan (*'La Agrado'*)

Penélope Cruz (*Sister Rosa*)

Rosa María Sardá (*Sister Rosa's mother*)

Fernando Fernán Gómez (*Sister Rosa's father*)

Fernando Guillén

(*doctor in 'El Tranvía Llamado Deseo'*)

Toni Cantó (*Lola, 'la Pionera'*)

Eloy Azorin (*Esteban*)

Carlos Lozano (*Mario*)

Juan José Otegui (*gynaecologist*)

Manuel Morón, José Luis Torrijo, Carmen Balagué, Malena Gutierrez,

Yael Barnatán, Carmen Fortuny, Patxi Freytez, Juan Márquez,

Michel Ruben, Daniel Lanchas, Rosa Manaut, Carlos García Cambero,

Paz Sufrategui, Lola García, Lluís Pascual

Spain/France 1999©

101 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar

Tue 1 Feb 18:20; Fri 25 Feb 20:45

Young Soul Rebels

Wed 2 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Thu 17 Feb 20:45

All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Wed 2 Feb 20:45; Wed 16 Feb 21:00

Beautiful Thing

Thu 3 Feb 20:45; Mon 14 Feb 20:30

The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)

Fri 4 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50

Rent

Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10

Maurice

Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00

The Watermelon Woman

Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20

My Own Private Idaho

Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)

Brokeback Mountain

Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25

Go Fish

Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20

Rope

Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30

Victim

Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00

Desert Hearts

Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)

My Beautiful Laundrette

Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45

A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)

Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50

Mädchen in Uniform

Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00

Moonlight

Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

Jules et Jim (Jules and Jim)

From Fri 4 Feb

Philosophical Screens: Jules et Jim

Thu 10 Feb 20:20

The Representation of Women in Truffaut's Films

Fri 18 Feb 18:20

THE LITERARY TRUFFAUT

Anne and Muriel (Les Deux Anglaises et le continent)

Sat 5 Feb 12:20; Thu 17 Feb 17:50 (+ intro by actor Kika Markham); Tue 22 Feb 20:25

Fahrenheit 451

Sat 5 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 12:40; Sun 27 Feb 18:40

The Story of Adèle H (L'Histoire d'Adèle H)

Wed 9 Feb 20:55; Sat 12 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 18:20

The Green Room (La Chambre verte)

Thu 10 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:40; Wed 23 Feb 20:40

THE HITCHCOCK TRUFFAUT

Shoot the Pianist (Tirez sur le pianiste)

Tue 1 Feb 20:50; Fri 11 Feb 18:30; Sat 26 Feb 13:20

The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)

Fri 4 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 18:00; Sun 27 Feb 12:10

Finally Sunday! (Vivement dimanche!)

Sat 5 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 12:30; Sun 27 Feb 15:00

Mississippi Mermaid (La Sirène du Mississippi)

Sun 6 Feb 12:40; Fri 18 Feb 20:35; Fri 25 Feb 18:00

La Peau douce (Silken Skin)

Sun 6 Feb 18:20; Sat 12 Feb 17:20; Sat 26 Feb 15:30

The Woman Next Door (La Femme d'à côté)

Tue 8 Feb 20:30; Mon 21 Feb 18:10; Thu 24 Feb 20:30

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