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PEDRO ALMODÓVAR PAIN AND GLORY

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'*Lo siento.*' I'd happily wager this is the phrase that recurs most frequently across Pedro Almodóvar's 40-year filmography. Spanish for 'I'm sorry.' Almodóvar's characters are a kind who commiserate with and console one another. But '*lo siento,*' stemming from the Latin root, *sensum*, and suggesting both sensation and sentiment, literally translates to '*I feel it,*' which describes, rather precisely, something fundamental about the Spanish filmmaker's world - that it's a world assembled on feelings, and on Almodóvar's ability to extract a profusion of them from his audience too.

'*Lo siento*' is the heartbeat of Almodóvar's films; his guiding principle as a filmmaker. *I feel it. I sense it. I feel you.* Each of Almodóvar's feature films is a bold exchange of feelings - between the director and his subject, between the characters on screen, and between the audience and the film. In a career that has embraced drug addicts, trans people, gay men, wild women, and other outsider bodies, Almodóvar has never judged his characters or their actions. His generosity and compassion towards them and their foibles knows no bounds. Even his most riotous or morally challenging films - *Dark Habits* (1983), *Matador* (1986) or *Talk to Her* (2002), for example - are urgently sympathetic experiences that make the skin tingle and the heart explode at often-unexpected, unpredictable moments.

We know an Almodóvar film when we see it. His 1980 debut feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, boldly declared his arrival at the vanguard of La Movida Madrileña, Spain's countercultural renaissance. In the years following the 1975 death of far-right dictator General Francisco Franco, Spanish culture was re-energised. Artists transgressed the nation's conservative past to make the world over in their own image. Almodóvar moved to Madrid in 1967 and his distinct sensibility found expression in the city's experimental theatre and gay cabaret scenes. Camp, sexy, blackly comic, and chaotic, his early films bottled and exploded the energy of this world. *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *Dark Habits* and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*

(1984), established a style and tone that embraced Spain's new freedom, frequently disrupting social and sexual taboos, and bulldozing the boundaries of so-called good taste.

Almodóvar's visual language was just as audacious. From the start, he favoured a bright primary colour palette. Red, the tint of desire, passion, and blood, dominates; costumes and interiors are soaked in it, reflecting the lusty drama frequently playing out between his characters. Almodóvar's characters are bold creations too. His women are fierce mothers, sisters, friends, and lovers, often on the verge of a nervous breakdown, pushed to the brink by disappointing men and women, and the intensity of their romantic obsessions. Always strong, their tenacity is a respectful reflection of the strength of the women in the La Mancha village in which Almodóvar was raised. His men, gay and straight, eschew conventional Latin machismo; aware of their masculine poses, they are altogether more fragile, unstable creatures, often lonely and needing care.

But we also know an Almodóvar film because we *feel* it. His films have a distinctive emotional register and texture - heart swelling and melodramatic, but never sentimental; sensual and dynamically physical; deeply human, and in recent years, increasingly melancholy. Feelings, in an Almodóvar film, are always big, and translated as such through performance and mise-en-scène, with the utmost sincerity. In *Law of Desire* (1987), when Tina (Carmen Maura) says, "I'll cry until I run out of tears," we don't laugh at this abundance of emotion - we believe her, because Maura's performance and the film's visual design and style elements have conspired to make us feel this sentiment alongside her. In *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), Leo (Marisa Paredes) may loathe the affected, sentimental romance novels she writes under the pseudonym Amanda Gris, but she loves her neglectful husband Paco to the point of despair, and with the pain and sorrow she describes as real feelings. Even if we know Leo deserves better, we can't deny the intensity of what moves her.

What we are feeling most often in *un film de Almodóvar* is the unruly, propulsive thrum of desire; its impact and its consequences. It vibrates in the film's colours, the costumes, and the swell of music. It drives the story forward. It produces conflict and provides release. Desire is messy, consuming, and irrational for Almodóvar's characters, whether it's desire for love, sex, intimacy, happiness, or revenge. Desire has a compulsive, unrestrained power - it shapes and defines them, arousing them to make art, to spark chaos, and even to kill. Desire breaks their hearts, testing how they will put themselves back together; if they will survive. The production company that Almodóvar began with his brother, Agustín, is called El Deseo (Desire) - each of his films since 1986 has been stamped with this mark in its opening credits. Almodóvar knows that desire is the central organising principle of life; and in his cinematic universe, the law of desire is, and always will be, the only law that matters.

When Almodóvar first met Antonio Banderas in Madrid in the early 1980s he told the young theatre actor that he should be in movies because he had a "romantic face." Now that face, considerably older, but no less appealing, has become a substitute for Almodóvar's own. They made their first film together,

Labyrinth of Passion, when Banderas was just 22. Almodóvar's 21st film, *Pain and Glory*, is their eighth collaboration; their first film together since *The Skin I Live In* (2011). Now 59, Banderas plays a version of 70-year-old Almodóvar - Salvador Mallo, who, like Guido Anselmi in Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) and Joe Gideon in Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979) before him, is confronting a creative crisis and the emotional wreckage of his past.

Pain and Glory, arguably Almodóvar's most deeply felt and personal film, purifies the director's sensory, sensual mode. A late career masterpiece from a master craftsman, it is richly, tenderly alive with feelings - in its production design, in Alberto Iglesias's luscious score, in the sensitivity of each performance - and yet its emotions are carefully controlled, for maximum impact. "The best actor is the one who avoids crying," Salvador advises, explaining that to evade the sentimental one needs to "control the emotion" - instructions that have informed Almodóvar's own career too. The final in a loose trilogy about filmmakers that began with *Law of Desire* and *Bad Education* (2004), *Pain and Glory* is the culmination of the passions and sensations that have always driven Almodóvar.

Salvador's creative crisis originates, in part, in his body. He's living with chronic pain and an ageing body. Early in *Pain and Glory*, an inventive sequence of anatomical animations by the Argentinian graphic designer Juan Gatti provides a comprehensive catalogue of what ails Salvador - insomnia, asthma, tinnitus, and debilitating back pain, among numerous other conditions. His "specialty," as he calls them, are headaches of all kinds. Add to this, numerous "pains of the soul," anxiety, panic attacks, and depression, plus the psychic agonies that emerge through Salvador's fraught relationships with other people. He has various ideas in limbo on his desktop, but hasn't made a film for many years; filmmaking a physical activity his body can't handle in its debilitated state. And he's lonely; the artwork in his home, he notes at one point, his only constant company. "Without film, my life is meaningless," he discloses, despondently, to his long-suffering assistant, Mercedes (Nora Navas).

Salvador is sinking in sadness. In *Pain and Glory's* opening scene, Almodóvar frames him underwater, introducing us to his ageing protagonist suspended in the melancholy blue of the swimming pool, as if seated with arms outstretched in surrender. As the camera traces the long line of a scar down his back, we understand that Salvador's submergence is physical therapy; a relief from pain. Water offers multiple forms of release; it becomes a conduit for memory and for reconciling emotional wounds too. It carries Salvador back into his past where he revives a glorious image of his mother, Jacinta (Penélope Cruz), alongside other village women, washing and drying clothing and sheets at the river. A very young Salvador watches - as so many Almodóvar males have watched their mothers before him - with total adoration.

Later, heroin helps to numb Salvador's pains and widen the doors of his memory even further. An upcoming series of anniversary screenings of one of his early successes, *Sabor (Taste)*, sends him looking for that film's lead actor, Alberto Crespo (Asier Etxeandia), who he fell out with at the end of production. The men haven't seen or spoken to each other in 32 years. Salvador, as he candidly and severely recounts,

was unhappy with Alberto's performance, believing the actor's heroin use gave his character the wrong energy. Still "chasing the dragon," Alberto provides the raw materials for both Salvador's pain management and creative unblocking. Salvador asks to try the drug he has previously loathed, out of "curiosity"; Alberto says yes, while questioning if the director is undertaking some kind of research. His suspicions are not entirely wrong.

Smoking heroin drives Salvador deep in and out of dreamy remembrances of his past, which will later form the foundation of a new film. We see his family's move to the village of Paterna when he was nine (played with vibrancy and sensitivity by Asier Flores); his audition for the choir at his Catholic school; his tutelage of Eduardo (César Vicente), a young, handsome labourer helping to paint and tile the new family home, who Salvador teaches to read and write; and his nascent homosexual desire. There are more recent memories to be reckoned with too; of his mother as an older woman (Julieta Serrano), living with him as he cares for her in her final days. The love between mother and son is palpable - their scenes together among *Pain and Glory's* most expressive - but so too are the disappointments. Salvador later admits he hasn't recovered from the pain of losing her; he's still making peace with her resentments towards him, for "simply [by] being who I am."

Salvador is a man coming to terms with himself - his past, his future, his body, his artistic legacy, and his broken heart. His physical pain leads to an emotional excavation that delivers a rebirth. Banderas inhabits Salvador as a man poised between fire and ice, desire and death. His performance - warm, still, intelligent, and exquisitely vulnerable - captures every subtlety of these tensions, perhaps stemming from insights Banderas gained in the wake of his shock 2017 heart attack. Donning a hairstyle that recalls Almodóvar's own, Banderas also wears items from the director's wardrobe. Salvador's chic, art-filled Madrid apartment is decorated with furniture and objects - including a flamboyant Dolce & Gabbana designed Smeg toaster - on loan from Almodóvar's actual home. In *Pain and Glory*, the lines between director and subject are deliberately, and cheekily, blurred.

Pain and Glory is certainly a personal film. Almodóvar digs deep inside - the film's self-reflective, autobiographical elements are clear, especially for long-time viewers of his films. The sequence in which the women wash at the river is one of a number of recollections from Almodóvar's own childhood in La Mancha that he brings to life here. Another, in which young Salvador writes a letter for Eduardo's girlfriend, is also drawn from his own family history: Almodóvar's mother regularly read and wrote letters for neighbours, and a version of this story appears in *The Flower of My Secret*. Most of Almodóvar's films feature shadows of himself, whether in female or male form, as writers, actors, or directors. Clearly, Almodóvar is no stranger to autofiction, but he famously despises biopics. While Almodóvar does suffer chronic back pain (he had surgery before filming *Julieta* (2016)), headaches, and insomnia, he says he hasn't used heroin (cocaine was his drug of choice during the heady 1980s), and unlike Salvador, he has continued working despite his pains.

It's more accurate, I think, to call *Pain and Glory* an autobiography of *sentimiento*, or feeling, than one of fact. Whether it achieves any resonance in relation to Almodóvar's life lies less in this seamless adherence of events and objects, than it does in the echoes this new film contains of Almodóvar's entire creative history. It lays this history, and the director's own emotional geography, bare. What Almodóvar draws from to create this deep sympathy is, as he called it in a [Q&A with the British Film Institute](#), his *familia emocional*, his 'emotional family' - those colours, words, and sounds that form his sensibility, felt deeply throughout his entire career, and which function like expressive connective tissue, joining - and holding - each of his films to the next.

There is the colour red, of course, running like a throbbing vein from one Almodóvar film to the next, and emerging with renewed intensity in *Pain and Glory* within a palette that is more muted overall. Red is a visual reminder that even in times of great pain, the generative glory of desire is ever-present and possible. Salvador might be withdrawing from the world, but red pulses all around him - on his kitchen cabinets and his coffee machine (and the aforementioned toaster), a bold jacket and shirt combination, and later, a turtleneck, that recalls a similar turtleneck worn by Banderas in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989). Red permeates his past too - on tiles and a blanket at a train station, lovingly recalled by Salvador in one of his drug-induced reveries. Unsurprisingly, red is the colour young Salvador is wearing when he is overwhelmed by the summer sun and the sight of Eduardo nude.

Red is also the colour of the shirt Alberto wears when he performs *Addiction* - the sensual, stirring confessional text he discovers on Salvador's computer while he sleeps, then turns into a one-man *espectaculo*. Alberto's deep ruby shirt and the vivid red backdrop behind him on stage provide an emotional cue for this monologue about a man and his heroin-addicted lover, Marcelo - actually Salvador and Federico (Leonardo Sbaraglia), the man he passionately loved in the early 1980s - that like *Pain and Glory* it's a story that materialises at the intersection between memory and desire.

Music is a fundamental member of Almodóvar's emotional family. He has always used it, especially popular romantic songs, for tingly, explosive effect. The 1960s Italian pop singer Mina, whose voice fills the background of a key scene in *Matador*, is also heard during one of *Pain and Glory's* most deeply felt sequences. Her gorgeous song, 'Come Sinfonia,' becomes the soundtrack to one of Salvador's most important childhood memories. We hear it as Eduardo sketches his young teacher reading in the sun-soaked courtyard. The song returns, as present day Salvador sits down and writes about this experience and its aftermath. Salvador listens to Mina performing via the magic of the Internet - her voice lacing his past and present together into a poignant symphony.

The matriarch of Almodóvar's *familia emocional* is the great Mexican *ranchera* singer, Chavela Vargas, whose gut-wrenching songs haunt the broken embraces of so many of Almodóvar's films, including *The Flower of My Secret* and *Julieta*. The singer's name is invoked during Alberto's performance, recalling the narrator's travels with Marcelo to keep him distracted from heroin, to the Ivory Coast and Cuba, and

then to Mexico and the greatest night of his life, when they saw Chavela perform. A slim fragment of 'La noche de mi amor' instigates a surge of feeling so formidable that Alberto raises his hand suddenly to kill the music - a stage direction, that nevertheless resonates affectively as something more. Chavela's voice draws Salvador's - and Almodóvar's - past and present closer together, returning that past to Salvador's front door in the form of Federico himself.

Almodóvar's decision to show so much of Alberto performing *Addiction* is a significant one. The theatre functions as a communal space - a site for connection and communication. Through the staging of this personal text, art becomes a reconciliatory act that reconnects Salvador with the world. Whether Salvador was expecting it or not, it's Alberto who sets him on the road to salvation. The point of Salvador's reunion with Alberto isn't their shared heroin use, but the events it sets into motion: namely, Salvador's brief but fervent reunion with Federico and the restoration of his creative drive.

Addiction synthesises *Pain and Glory's* key ideas into a format that allows Alberto to speak for Salvador, in the same way Salvador speaks for Almodóvar. It is the film's unifying sequence, recalling Salvador's love for a man he tried to save from addiction, as well as giving shape and texture to the years in which they were together. "It was 1981, and Madrid was ours," Alberto says, bringing that period vividly, voluptuously, to life. *Addiction* is as much about this epoch of freedom, its pleasures and risks, as it is about Salvador's passion for Marcelo/Federico. Through its performance, *Addiction* also provides circularity to the story that binds these three, ageing men - a story about heroin, about lost time, and the possibility of redemption for each of them. Importantly, it's a story that echoes back through earlier Almodóvar films - to *Talk to Her* and Marco's (Darío Grandinetti) past love for a heroin addict he has never quite got over, and to *All About My Mother* (1999), and Huma's (Marisa Paredes) destructive love for Nina (Candela Peña), who also has a serious problem with the drug.

Addiction brings understanding and healing to Salvador and Alberto's relationship. Alberto is initially fiery with anger towards his old friend, but there is a deep *simpatía* between the men. The gradual restoration of their relationship suggests that each feels a vast sorrow about the past that can only be soothed by the other. While Almodóvar has always been an exceptionally sensitive and generous director of women, what stands out here, as it does in *Talk to Her*, is how carefully he directs these men, namely Banderas and Etxeandia. Alberto may carry 30-plus years of resentment when Salvador comes knocking at his door, but when he later knocks on Salvador's door he's nervously seeking a friend, not a fight. A gentle caress of Salvador's cheek as he dozes, suggests a solid vein of brotherly love between them; a sense of how close they must have been before things soured.

Almodóvar treats these men with care and tenderness, allowing them to extend the same to one another, and eventually themselves. "Be careful with me," Alberto cautions Salvador when he once again scolds the actor for the perceived deficiencies of his work in *Sabor*. Within this context, Salvador giving *Addiction* to Alberto, who is desperate to work on something meaningful, is an act of true generosity and

friendship. Salvador shares his past with Alberto; and Alberto, seeing a vivid mirror to his own life in Salvador's words, takes great care with it. His sincere, sympathetic performance is a moving act of forgiveness between them and arguably the most profound illustration of 'lo siento' across Almodóvar's entire career.

There is also, in Etxeandia's expressive performance of the monologue, in his facial, vocal, and bodily gestures, more than a little hint of former Almodóvar regular, Carmen Maura. He recalls the emotional notes in her own performance of a monologue in *Law of Desire* - Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice* - as well as Maura's physically demonstrative performance style more generally. Given Almodóvar and Maura's very public estrangement after making eight of his most important early films together, it's tempting to understand *Addiction* as another act of reconciliation - from the director to his first muse.

Addiction reproduces the rhythms of Salvador's broken heart and the enormous pain he felt when trying to steer Federico away from heroin. Marco's observation, in *Talk to Her*, that "there's nothing worse than leaving someone you still love," resonates powerfully in *Pain and Glory*. Salvador did the same - after three years together, he couldn't save Federico, so he had to save himself by moving forward. He continued making films, using his experiences with Federico to fuel his work.

In this way, *Addiction* also provides insight into Salvador's own addiction - to cinema. On a minimalist stage that features a chair and little else, Alberto stands before a luminous, empty white screen and speaks of the summer screenings in Salvador's village, of the films projected on a white wall, against which he remembers he and other boys would urinate. "The cinema of my childhood always smells like piss, and jasmine, and the summer breeze," he recalls. It's a heady, rapturous recollection of smells and bodies and sounds - deeply evocative and visceral.

With the knitting together of these memories of Marcelo/Federico and the village's cinema, *Addiction* entangles the central preoccupations of Salvador's life - art and desire. In Almodóvar's world, one can't exist without the other, and in his films, they are in constant conversation. In a film simply bursting with feelings, what Almodóvar embeds most urgently into Salvador's story is the intensity of his past desires. They push their way back into his life, as if beyond his control, aided by a swell of music or a sudden flush of colour, an edit that brings two bodies hungrily closer together, or another that rapidly captures and holds a character's reaction to a sight that is simultaneously shocking and sublime.

Almodóvar makes Salvador's object of desire flesh again. Federico, long living in Buenos Aires has returned to Madrid on family business. Walking through the old neighbourhood in which he once lived with Salvador, he stumbles across a poster for *Addiction* (a throbbing heart, besieged by needles) and then into a performance, where he realises he is the Marcelo being spoken about on stage. Remembering Alberto from his days working with Salvador on *Sabor*, he knocks on his dressing room door. "Is Salvador

alive?" he asks. The question remains unanswered.

Arriving at Salvador's door, Federico expresses regret for the past and the pain that he caused. But whatever agonies Salvador has felt about the end of their relationship dissolves in the warmth of the men's embrace and the ease of the time they spend catching up on each other's lives. They drink tequila in honour of Chavela and their reunion. There is tenderness between them, and sadness at what has been lost, but not recrimination. As they talk, it's clear that each man's heart is vulnerably open and filled with love for their shared past. When Federico expresses happiness that Salvador thrived after he left him, Salvador pays him the greatest of compliments: "You filled my life like nothing had done before or has since."

This intimate reunion stretches out languorously despite its brevity; because of this pacing, its undercurrent of lust is palpable. This is an Almodóvar film, after all, and in an Almodóvar film desire is also a spectacle, frequently communicated for pure visual pleasure. Why, if not to stimulate desire, would Almodóvar include a brief sequence in which Alberto dances to the bossa nova groove of Grace Jones' version of 'La Vie en rose' prior to a rehearsal of *Addiction*, the camera drawn to the circle of his hips and the sensual movement of his arms and hands? Is it a warm-up routine or a way for him to get into character? What purpose does Alberto's dancing serve other than as an erotic reverie, for us to look on? In Almodóvar's world, generating this *sensación*, this heat, is enough.

That sense of spectacle is also a feature of Salvador and Federico's reunion. In addition to its gentle warmth and affection it is also astonishingly sexy, coming to a close with a passionate, full-mouthed kiss, that Federico initiates, "for old time's sake." If their earlier conversation, with its gap-filling and photos of Federico's sons, barely kept the heat at bay, it ignites here, as the men are permitted the proper goodbye they were denied years earlier. Almodóvar isn't in a hurry - he points his camera directly at them and watches, so that like Salvador, we feel the full force of desire as it returns into his life.

Federico's kiss is a reminder of the passion of youth. With it, Salvador succumbs to the law of desire - the kiss wakes him up, revives him, sets his mind on fire. Desire as the antithesis of death. Immediately, Salvador flushes away his remaining heroin, has Mercedes make an appointment with his pain management specialist, and works towards taking back control of his life. But Federico's return - and the flood of feeling that is connected with him - is only the beginning of Salvador's rebirth. While waiting to see his specialist, Mercedes shows Salvador an invitation to a gallery, which features a reproduction of a painting of a young boy, dressed in red, and reading. Salvador recognises himself in this image, lovingly created by Eduardo 50 years earlier.

Salvador is pushed further back into his childhood and his first inklings of desire as an experience akin to sunstroke - intoxicating and overwhelming. Desire literally knocks him off his feet. Recalled with little

dialogue, the sequence depicts Salvador reading as Eduardo sketches him, then Eduardo washing himself, and Salvador fainting when the young man turns to face him, naked. The scene is a spectacle of sensation - all sensual edits of Eduardo's body and wondrous close-ups of Salvador's responsive face, which trap feeling in the frame to the point of eruption. Salvador is a boy, and nothing inappropriate transpires, but Almodóvar places us very much alongside him as the sight of Eduardo's body overcomes him, and his own body then has a physical reaction to feelings he doesn't yet have the words to name.

Eroticism and creation are united as Salvador's memory of this event sends him with some urgency to his computer. He opens a new document, which he entitles, 'El Primer Deseo' ('The First Desire'), the letters filling both the computer's screen and the film's frame. The formative experience links storytelling and desire, born here in the same instance. Past desire guides Salvador's present day creativity. In a tender, moving letter addressed to Salvador, written on the back of his painting, Eduardo notes that, "Every time I write I think of your hand guiding me." Like the young Salvador's hand guiding Eduardo's pencil, the force of this memory now guides Salvador's fingers across his keyboard, and later onto his camera.

Salvador's first desire isn't just what stirs in him, wordlessly, before Eduardo's naked body, but his primal desire for storytelling itself. Like Almodóvar, Salvador's main source for his storytelling has always been some part of his own history and the people who have played a role in it. In *Addiction*, Alberto recounts how Salvador's travels abroad with Federico inspired the stories he would tell in his films, giving him "the colours that would illuminate them," just as Salvador's childhood shapes the contours of *Pain and Glory's* remarkably healing closing scene. In the final moments of *Addiction*, Alberto stands squarely in the centre of the blank, white screen - his body becoming the image, the story itself. "The cinema saved me," Alberto/Salvador concludes, and for both men, art saves them once again.

The history of Almodóvar's films is a history of feelings. At one particularly tender moment between them, when Salvador finds Alberto seated at his computer and asks what the actor is doing, Alberto responds: "Reading you." Throughout a career in which he has made his audiences feel many different things towards many different types of people, in *Pain and Glory* Almodóvar is asking us to feel what it feels like to be him - pain and all. And it's simply glorious.