

Essays

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WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN. AN INTERPRETATION

*In the same way that some artists
are destined to undress women, Almodóvar
is destined to dress them up. To dress them in languorous reds [...],
on the music played by guitars and violins [...]. (Alex. Leo Şerban)*

1. Introduction

Metz's foundational essay *The Imaginary Signifier* is an exemplary account of the film-spectator relationship, providing what was to become a model for the use of psychoanalytic theory in film criticism.¹ "[...] La rationalisation d'un goût en une théorie, sous ses diverses formes nombreuses et courantes, obéit à une loi objective qui ne varie guère

dans ses grandes lignes. On pourrait la décrire, en termes lacaniens, comme un léger flottement entre les fonctions de l'imaginaire, du symbolique et du réel [...]"² At the same time, Eco argues that reality is represented in the cinema through a system of cultural codes which are intimately connected to ideology³.

The movie I am about to analyse is a product of Almodovar's clearly recog-

¹ Murphy, Paula. *Psychoanalysis and Film Theory Part 1: „A New Kind of Mirror”*, <http://intertheory.org/psychoanalysis.htm>.

² Metz, Christian. *Le signifiant imaginaire*, Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1984, pp. 18-19.

³ Murphy, Paula, *op.cit.*

nizable cinematic brand. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, stayed in the limelight for quite a while, at the end of the '80s, and was not far from winning an Oscar for Best Foreign Language film. It is a praise of emancipation, colour and life's hoaxes, but it can also be seen as a «filmed stage farce with a hysterical pacing, only occasionally intentionally amusing»⁴. This film is, nonetheless, an ironic glimpse of post-dictatorial Spain, in which desperate and almost squizofrenic characters face their personal tragedy by complicating it even more. This image is by no means surprising, as the director from La Mancha has made no secret of his fondness for such uncontrolled tragicomic figures.

“The context, of course, is a Spain that was finally liberated from almost four decades of dictatorship by the death of Gen. Francisco Franco in 1975. And since then, as society has scrambled for a new identity,

democracy and prosperity have eroded such old standbys as Roman Catholicism, machismo and censorship. We are talking about a country that is simultaneously fleeing its past and chasing its future.”⁵

Frivolity would become the main trap to await the recently-liberated nation. And the latter actually ended up being caught into it, which could be easily noticed in the mentality of the so-called *pasota* generation, a wide-spread phenomenon of the 80s, also known as the *Movida*. Almodóvar himself was part of this alternative movement, which sought to maintain itself beyond the pre-established social order. Visual arts were, of course, the best way for their attitude to be expressed freely. This is why the first period of his filmography is extremely powerful, with strong messages and, more often than not, scenes that viewers may find disturbing.



⁴ Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Women of Pedro Almodóvar*, www.nybooks.com.

⁵ Riding, Alan. *Almodovar Takes the Pulse of Spain in Transition*, www.nytimes.com.

His well-known rebelliousness makes us think that the role Almodóvar played in Spain's opening of mentalities is similar to that played by Woodie Allen in the United States, without even mentioning the innovations both of them have introduced in comedy. Another thing the two directors and playwrights have in common is their rejection of the thorough analysis of their films. "I most want people to forget the clock for the hour and a half they're in the theater"⁶, says Almodóvar after the release of his *Tie me up, tie me down*, at the beginning of the 90s. Nonetheless, his movies do contain images and ideas that are worth being analysed in depth, as they reflect a changing Spain and a non-conventional attitude toward some controversial issues from that time.

2. A Formal Analysis

Women on the Verge is mainly based on Jean Cocteau's *La voix humaine*, dating back to 1930. The play tells the story of a woman talking on the phone with her lover, after he had left her for someone else. The viewer of Cocteau's play can only see the woman, hear her voice and watch her suffering, as she attempts to commit suicide, while the man is incorporeal, being present only through his voice.

The situation does not differ much in Almodóvar's comedy. The man who is responsible for the pain and suffering of

the women in the film is almost entirely absent. He lives through his victims, whose full existence revolves around his actions, while the protagonist even tries to kill herself when he decides to leave her.

Another element which is borrowed from Cocteau's play is the telephone. But in the film, the phone is much more than a mere presence: it becomes a fetish and a leitmotif. The reason for this is more practical than expected: Almodóvar, before starting his work in cinema, had been employed, for twelve years, at the national Telephone Company. The natural consequence of this was that he ended up really hating everything that had to do with it. "«Yo creo que en realidad me ha salido una película contra el teléfono»(Almodóvar)."⁷

The above-mentioned protagonist is named Pepa and she is a voice-dubbing actress. Her boyfriend, also an actor, and a womanizer, left her a goodbye-message on the answering machine and kindly asked her to get his thing ready in a suitcase. The very same day, Pepa finds out that she is pregnant, therefore is confident that as soon as Ivan finds out about the baby he will change his mind about the whole story. But the problem is that despite her desperate efforts to find him, she continuously fails to. What follows is a series of events unfolding with a delicious sense of humour and at a breakneck speed

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Actually, I think what has come out is an anti-phone movie.* Calvo, Alejandro. *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios. Lágrimas con sabor a gazpacho*, www.miradas.net.

which maintains the viewer hypnotised up to the end.

Carmen Maura's masterly performance gives life to Pepa's character. Carmen Maura, with her "severe and slightly androgynous looks"⁸ is an omnipresent figure in Almodóvar's first films. Another memorable figure, due in part to her cubist traits and famous nose, is Rossy de Palma, who plays the persuasive role of an insufferable virgin fiancée.

But coming back to the plot, we should mention a few more elements. There are two other women in Ivan's life, besides Pepa. One of them comes from his past and is the mother of his only child. He left her 20 years before and she had to be put in a mental hospital. Surprisingly, she recovered her sanity while watching a movie where Ivan was dubbing the voice of an actor, and she is now chasing him with a couple of guns, in order to kill him, so that no other woman can have him. The other woman in Ivan's life is his present girlfriend, which is a typical almodovarian character. She is a caricature of the feminist movement, by being a former activist who renounced her principles when she fell in love with Ivan. She is both masculine and hysterical.

What follows is a surrealist complication of an extremely dynamic urban comedy. In a nutshell, Pepa tries to kill herself with a bunch of sleep-inducing pills thrown in the tomato soup, the virgin fiancée eats

the soup, falls in a deep sleep and loses her virginity in a dream, while her husband-to-be Carlos (Antonio Banderas) falls in love with Pepa's friend who is hiding from the police. As if it weren't enough, Pepa finds out that Carlos is Ivan's son, whose existence had been kept secret from her all that time.

In the middle of this chaos, the director artfully slips two commercials, by which he gives a wink to the viewer. He aims to parody the pitiful results of those responsible for the low quality of advertising in his country. His effort is similar to that made by the Romanian new-wave director Nae Caranfil, in his film *Filantropica* (2003), where he laments the absolute lack of imagination and professionalism of the Romanian advertisers.

If we are to analyse the settings of the movie, we can easily notice the resemblance it bears to the stage effects specific to theater, as the action unfolds almost entirely in a flat. Nonetheless, it is everything but monotonous, with its gaudy colours and phones ringing or flying through the window glass, to name but a few of Almodovar's tricks to maintain the viewer in a hypnotic state.

The ending is a happy one, as required by this cinematic genre. The film gained unprecedented success and a worldwide fame. In Spain, it broke all records with a number of viewers exceeding 3,3 million, at a time when the VHS and videotape rentals reached their peak⁹. If we are to draw a

⁸ Şerban, Alex. Leo. *Almodívele – Omagiu femeii*, www.liternet.ro.

⁹ Rull, Carles. *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, www.20minutos.es/cine.

comparison, through the entire 2008, the record-breaking movie in Romania, as to the number of cinemagoers, brought 90000 people to the cinema rooms.

3. A Feminist Approach

"It's easier to learn mechanics than male psychology.

You can know a motorcycle from top to bottom. But a man, never." (Pepa)

According to some classical feminist theories, in this movie we are witnessing the more or less symbolic *assassination* of both the male and his dominant claims. Thus, is put an end to an era when women and their sexuality were constantly objectified.¹⁰ *Women on the Verge* is a piece of work with and about women. Many years later, *Volver* would follow the same pattern, also receiving worldwide recognition and an Oscar nominee.

From the very beginning of the film, we are warned that what we are about to see is deeply connected to the Spanish culture. The song from the opening credits comes from the Spanish folk tradition and is performed by Lola Beltrán. The title of the song – *Soy infeliz (I'm unhappy)* – is quite revealing and anticipates the plot. The credits include a succession of fetish-objects, each and every one representing a key element of female beauty and seductiveness: "a gaudy red sequence of

roses, lipstick, lingerie-catalog torsos and fingernails tearing across the screen"¹¹, which all get us prepared for the scenes where "hearts are broken, stockings torn, suicide attempts botched, windows smashed"¹².

In this comedy of manners, Ivan plays the role of Don Juan. There is a fabulous black and white scene, right at the beginning of the film, in which he walks along all the famous actresses he had to declare his love to, due to his job. That walk is an explicit metaphor of the Don Juan myth, where women are always told what they expect and wish to hear, despite all those words being false and fake. But Almodóvar achieves something magical with this character: he only uses him as an excuse to prove women's force and value. Though he appears as a flawless gentleman and a charismatic conqueror, Ivan reveals his pettiness throughout the whole plot and turns his victims into authentic heroines.

As a matter of fact, all men from this movie prove dull and flat, in one way or another. Thus, Ivan is an undecided liar, his son Carlos is fearful and withdrawn, while the taxi driver is rather effeminate. Strangely, women seem to somehow depend on them and become desperate when they walk out on them. But as soon as the lady characters realize their weakness, they initiate a fierce battle

¹⁰ Mihai, Silviu. Femeile lui Almodovar, www.romlit.ro.

¹¹ Howe, Desson. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, www.washingtonpost.com.

¹² *Ibidem*.

against themselves in order to heal their wounds and recover their independence as individuals. No matter how fragile and vulnerable they may seem in the beginning, their emancipation is constant and irreversible. This whole process is triggered by Pepa's line: "I'm sick and tired of being good."

"But for all its playful postmodernism, this is also a satirical treatise on the crisis of Spanish masculinity in the late 1980s. One of the main reasons why these women have been driven to the verge is that virtually every male character is portrayed as weak.¹³"

If I were to choose a favourite scene, that is the final one, in which Pepa manages to completely dissolve her obsession for Ivan. After she saves him from being killed, Pepa, lying on the floor, barefoot, dirty and with her stockings torn, looks him in the eye and says goodbye. She looks as if she had just ended up a war, though a psychological one, and she has the strength to say no to the man she used to love.

4. Final Remarks

When watching this delicious urban comedy, it is quite impossible – as a

viewer – not to be tempted to interpret the facts ideologically. The alibi in doing so is precisely Almodóvar's past as a cult figure of a revolutionary cultural movement which had a huge impact on the Spanish society at the time. The director himself often expressed himself openly and brutally against Franco's political regime and its deep consequences. If we take one step forward, we can easily identify Ivan with Franco, due to the tyrannical and immoral character both of them share.

The mother of Ivan's child, who spent many years in a mental hospital, could only survive due to her amnesia. When she finally recovers, her only wish is to avenge all her suffering and betrayal. She may be the symbol of the oppressed Spaniards who actually ended up losing their identity during the dictatorship and could only survive by not thinking of it.

«"The presence of religion is no longer oppressive," Almodóvar noted in an interview from 1991. "Spaniards have lost their fear of the police. Society has opened up. There isn't the same machismo as in the past, and personal relations are more equal. We even have a generation that doesn't know who Franco was"»¹⁴.

¹³ Parkinson, David. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, www.empireonline.com/reviews.

¹⁴ Riding, Alan, *op.cit.*

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