



Volver

Director: Pedro Almodóvar

Country: Spain

Date: 2006

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

. With its overwhelming richness, its colour and warmth, Pedro Almodóvar's new movie is set to capture your heart. *Volver* seemed guilelessly wonderful when I first saw it earlier this year in Cannes. Now it looks even better. The picture's ingenuities and contrivances just seem to float out of the screen, like psychedelic moodshapes. I found myself floating right along with them.

His last two films, *Bad Education* and *Talk To Her*, were impressive, though I never quite felt the unconditional rapture of the true Almodóvar believer. This new film, being more modest in its scope, and somehow less obviously extravagant, achieves more with its rhetorical flourishes and narrative display. There is something so playful and gorgeous about it, and certainly something gorgeous about Penélope Cruz: although the film is notable in that romantic love is quite irrelevant. Cruz's beauty appears in an altogether different love-context: that of a mother's passionate love for her daughter.

Volver, (in English, *Coming Home* or *Coming Back*), is a gripping melodrama inspired by the trash TV that is a soundtrack to its characters' lives. Penélope Cruz is Raimunda, a hard-working woman with a teenage daughter, Paula (Yohana Cobo), and a feckless, layabout husband. With her sister Sole (Lola Dueñas) she tends to the graves of her parents, and visits her ailing Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave), who is heartrendingly in the final stages of dementia. Raimunda's family life shatters with one terrible act of violence, and there is a secret about her late mother Irene (Carmen Maura) that surfaces when Irene returns from beyond the grave to make contact with her astonished daughters.



So *Volver* is a ghost story. Or is it? As the movie drifts along the periphery of the supernatural, I went into a trance, which Almodóvar induces with a master's confidence. All the movie's secrets are rolled out in a narrative design that is exuberant and elegant. Its cinematography and art direction, by José Luis Alcaíne and Salvador Parra, give everything an intensity that, like previous Almodóvar films, has the feel of a Douglas Sirk film. Almodóvar has something of Sirk's passionate empathy with women, mixed with a gay sensibility - though the film is unlike Sirk's in that men are entirely marginal. In its vividness and intense, almost neurotic sensitivity to colour, particularly the colour red, it also looks like a Hitchcock thriller.

There is a wonderful overhead shot of Raimunda washing up a bloodstained knife in the kitchen sink. On the left of the screen, we see the implement of violence in the plastic bowl above the soiled plates, and on the right there is the glistening crown of Raimunda's glorious raven hair and her magnificent cleavage - the size of which her mother is later wonderingly to remark upon, and in which nestles an enamel miniature of the crucified Christ. The image goes beyond camp, and certainly beyond desire, into a feminised world in which work, survival and family love are paramount. A neighbour asks about

the bloodstain on her neck, and quick-thinking Raimunda says it is merely "women's trouble": a laugh line that relieves the tension, but is also nothing more nor less than the truth.



When Cruz struts with unselfconscious sexiness through the streets, carrying a rounded, wiggling behind that might almost be prosthetic, she resembles the young Sophia Loren. She moves, however, without the soundtrack of wolf-whistles that earlier ages might have composed for her. There are a couple of men in the picture who are in love with Raimunda, but they are tentative and almost reticent in their adoration.

Her real relationship is with her daughter, her sister, her mother and with her garrulous women-friends and neighbours - all chattering, laughing and, at a funeral, mumbling prayers like a swarm of pious, black-clad bees. But of course, Cruz is intensely engaged with one man: Almodóvar himself, who manages to draw out her presence like a ductile material and spread it all over his movie. Only Cruz could have carried off those hoop earrings, as big as soup-plates, and on anyone else her black top with the flowery design might have looked as if it came from Primark. On her it looks sensational, and its floral motif is carried over into the final credit sequence.

It is this context of beauty, richly sensual without being sexual, that makes the gestures of tragicomedy and passion so affecting. When Raimunda says to her miraculously returned mother: "I don't know how I have lived all these years without you ..." it is absurd, and comic, but also intensely poignant. And as often in the past, Almodóvar makes a song a central moment in the film. Raimunda has abandoned her dreary day jobs to take over an absent friend's restaurant and cater for a visiting movie crew. Here, she impulsively decides to sing to the assembled company a showstopping lament about

the return of past lives and loves - an irresistibly generous and emotional event.



No other director has as much swoon factor as Pedro Almodóvar: the texture of his movie-making is quite unique. *Volver* could have gone on for another hour or two: there seemed so much more to say. What a triumph for this great European director who just seems to get better and better.

From: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/aug/25/drama.pedroalmodovar>