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Parallel Mothers (15)

Dir: Pedro Almodóvar

Starring: Penélope Cruz, Milena Smit

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Synopsis: Two women of different generations meet in a maternity ward in Madrid and discover that their lives will become intertwined in ways they haven't imagined. In parallel, a village community makes plans to honour a generation of men lost to the fascist violence of the Spanish Civil War.



Once again, Pedro Almodóvar has made a film not at all about his mother, but about the cultural relevance of motherhood in general and Spanish motherhood in particular. Over the course of his career the director has found multiple muses to perform the multiple faces of motherhood: duty, joy, ambivalence, disappointment, pride and redemption. In her 2018 book, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, Jacqueline Rose argues that mothers are called on to perform the “unrealisable” task of repairing “everything that is wrong with the world”. Almodóvar’s mothers are never quite up to the task but they asked again and again, to try just one more time.

In *Parallel Mothers*, we watch two women coming to motherhood at the same time: Penélope Cruz's Janis and Milena Smit's Ana. Sharing a room in the labour ward, we witness two births side-by-side and are set up for a paralleling of experiences of motherhood. The title implies horizontality, but the film is in fact deeply concerned with vertical through-lines of generation, lineage and inheritance. Cruz has worked with Almodóvar on 8 films; Elena Smit appears in only the second feature of her career. The characters also meet across a generational divide. The teenage Ana waits for her life to begin in the aftermath of trauma; Janis - reaching 40 and named for Joplin, who the younger Anna has never heard of - wants to anticipate a new beginning. Both women give weighty performances; both are utterly convincing, even in the face of narrative farce, but Cruz in particular is dazzling, conveying pleasure and despair, breakdown and even a hint of relief as her attachments shift.

Janis is immersed in her photography career but committed to the futures and pasts of family life, her duty not only to her daughter but to her mother and grandmother. Her mission - which initiates her collision with archaeologist Arturo (Israel Elejalde), soon to be her lover - is to get permission to dig up a mass grave in her hometown, and with it the bodies of men ‘disappeared’ by fascists during the Spanish civil war. (this is the subject of the 2018 documentary *The Silence of Others*, co-produced by Almodóvar). The violence is left to the imagination here but this story of burial and recovery turns out to be the framing device of the whole film. Janis and Arturo's affair makes the point clear: no story of Spanish motherhood can ignore Spain's recent dark past.

Along with narrative twists and turns comes a slow attention to the beauty of the everyday – a plate of food, a photo frame. José Luis Alcáin's cinematography sizzles with the colours and flavours of Madrid. Domestic space bears the burden of the characters. Maternal absence and presence weigh on every room. In one supremely stylised frame, the two women stand in a kitchen preparing food; back-to-back, they are about to suffer the film's fraught emotional climax.

Almodóvar is beloved for his attention to women and their impossible tussles among the personal, political and professional. But in *Parallel Mothers* there is a fixation on the idea that biology is destiny. The motif of the DNA test tube connects to storylines, one about birth, the other about death. But this image of genetic equivalence signals to me a surprising ambivalence about queerness, which has often de-centred biological ties in favour of other forms of kinship. Lesbianism is used as an erotic twist to stage curiosities around sameness and difference (just as ethnic difference becomes an unspoken punchline). A flash-forward at the end gestures to the possibilities of non-traditional families, but the longevity of erotic desire remains beyond reach. In highlighting generational legacies of love and loss, the film risks a kind of biological essentialism that as a queer viewer I found jarring. By fixating on genetics as motivation, Almodóvar has missed a chance to explore the myriad ways mothers arrive at motherhood - in all its love and cruelty.

Clare Bradbury-Rance

Another View

Two heavily pregnant women – fortysomething photographer Janice (Penélope Cruz) and teenager Ana (Milena Smit) – share a room in a maternity hospital. The brief moment of kinship, forged through shared confidences, sweat and pain as they puff through labour in tandem, will bond them in ways they could never imagine. Meanwhile, Janice is dealing with the legacy of the Spanish civil war, which scarred her family and that of many of her compatriots. In other hands, this dual

focus, which pulls us backwards and forwards, rooted in the past and driven to the future, might seem unwieldy. But Pedro Almodóvar makes a light-footed dance of it, negotiating story threads that extend over decades and tie up in the present day.

This latest picture shares with his last full-length feature, *Pain and Glory* (2019), the message that secrets are best unearthed and confronted if there is any hope of moving forward. But unlike that film's sumptuous sadness, and despite putting its characters through considerable suffering, *Parallel Mothers* is a story that is carried on an unexpected swell of optimism. Everything from the joyous colour palette – a cocktail of tangerine and turquoise, watermelon and lemon sorbet – to the Hitchcockian bustle of the score, gives a sense of promise and propulsion. But most of all, it's Cruz who sets the tone, with a performance that radiates warmth and is refreshingly forgiving of her character's flaws. She has never been better.

Wendy Ide, The Observer

Our next screening

Friday October 28th, 7.30pm

Petite Maman (U)

Céline Sciamma, follows up her beautiful period romantic drama *Portrait of A Lady on Fire* with this delightful piece about children. She has made a reputation for herself in a number of films looking at the challenges young people face growing up - *Tomboy* (about a girl who pretends to be a boy, to fit in with children in her neighbourhood) and *Girlhood* (the story of a gang of teenage girls in the banlieus of northern Paris) particularly stand out - and in *Petite Maman*, she finds new and fertile ground to explore in a tale of 8 year old Nelly coming to terms with the death of her beloved grandmother. The film received instant critical acclaim on its release.