

Q&A with Dr Ana Sánchez-Arce by olliemfl

Hi Ana, firstly a massive thank you for agreeing to answer some questions about Volver. Just from reading the *Motherlands* chapter from your book I know how deeply you have researched Pedro Almodóvar and I'm so thankful for your time.

I'm certain that teachers and students alike will be grateful for your insight! For those who aren't familiar with your work I wonder if you could start by providing a little background to your interest in Almodóvar?

Many thanks to you for taking an interest in my work, and for helping disseminate Spanish culture. I was always immersed in Spanish culture, having been born near Barcelona to a family from southern Spain. Paradoxically, I became more interested in Almodóvar when I moved to the UK. My housemate was doing a degree in Spanish at university and she and I watched Almodóvar's films together. I realised then that Almodóvar's existing reputation for apoliticism and postmodernism was not all there was to his work. His films talk to Spanish politics and history in an oblique way mostly although it is only in the last 15-20 years that they have become more overtly critical. My parents were born just after the Spanish Civil War, and silence has always been a big part of how they (and in turn my siblings and I) were brought up. The trauma of the war and subsequent dictatorship made repression the best defence against an authoritarian state and those who share their beliefs. I was never taught about the Spanish Civil War at school, or the dictatorship. So, I taught myself about all these things and my book on Almodóvar was my way to process all this information about my personal and national history.

What would you consider essential to know about Pedro Almodóvar before watching Volver? In which ways can the film be considered autobiographical?

This is a shrewd question. Almodóvar puts out the same story over and over again, which is mostly true, but also a way of influencing how people interpret his films. You could call this his 'autobiographical legend'. He emphasises that he is from La Mancha, where Volver takes place, and that he moved to Madrid at a young age to be an artist/filmmaker and to work for the national telephone company.

To an extent, the characters of Volver have made the same journey from the village to the capital. The film is excellent at dissecting what is great about rural communities even though people cannot find work there any more since farm work has been mechanised. To be honest, people always lived badly in the country unless they had their own land. I know because that is the reason my parents moved to Catalonia in the 1960s. Almodóvar, however, was well educated and got a good job, whereas the characters in Volver reflect the fates of the majority of those who moved to big cities in search for work; endless toil and little money to show for it. Something that is also telling about Volver is the fact that men are mostly in the background.

The community represented is composed of women, with men being peripheral or dangerous. This is something that reflects Almodóvar's childhood preferences and experiences. He felt at home among the strong women in his village, who gossiped with his mother and ran the households. He hardly ever talks about his father or male relatives, so that is a silenced aspect of his biography. One wonders what may be behind this silence, and the lack of fathers (which in Volver is turned into a series of dead fathers, fathers who are sexual predators).

The figure of the patriarch is particularly under scrutiny in this film, and of course as a gay man growing up in a machista society at the time when being gay was illegal, the patriarch (the ideal of toxic masculinity) was not just a threat to women but also to any who did not fit the ideal of heterosexual masculinity.



Does the title of the film have any significance?

Definitely. The title means many things and demonstrates the complexity of the story. Volver, to come back or to return home, is what the characters who left their hometown do and what the title song is about. It is the cry of those who left and spent their lives away from their communities (either as economic migrants or exiles). It is also a wink to the fake ghost story, as the mother comes back to life after pretending to be dead to evade authorities. These are the more literal meanings of the word, but there are other, figurative ways to look at it. The film explores trauma and the repetition of violence across generations. These are seen to be cyclical and thus come back periodically. Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) behaves in certain ways because of the abuse she suffered as a teenager. Her explosive character has much to do with her trauma and this, in turn, affects her daughter Paula. Thus, the actions of one man, Raimunda's father, reverberate or come back to haunt the family for decades, even after he is dead.

There is also a sense that women cannot be free of these threats because of how the abuse is nearly repeated as Paco tries to sexually assault his adopted daughter, Paula. The silence around the initial violence enables this violence to continue for Raimunda, and to be extended to Paula. Thus, I link it to the trauma and censorship surrounding the Spanish Civil War and subsequent dictatorship, which enabled the continuation of violence, repression/silence and prevented healing.

Volver keeps coming back to this collective trauma, but not in an obvious way. It is important that the sisters are seen cleaning their parents' tomb (respect, memorialisation) despite what they think of them. Raimunda's father's crimes, like Franco's, were swept aside and family history was buried with him. Paco, Raimunda's husband who shares Franco's first name, is not so lucky. His crime is instantly punished, and he is hidden and buried unceremoniously. This shows both continuity (patriarchal entitlement to women's bodies, the legacy of the dictatorship) and change.

*For Almodóvar, the film also marks a lot of returns. A return to comedy, for example. It is also the film where Carmen Maura (Almodóvar's most steadfast collaborator in the 1980s) comes back to work with him after a massive fall-out. He is also coming back to the theme of motherhood, and through the use of the mother in *La Mancha*, to his own mother. Almodóvar said that *Volver* was "a foolish and crazy attempt to bring my mother back from the dead, back to life" and an exploration of his childhood." It is not just any mother that comes to life, but a mother who asks for forgiveness and tries to atone for her mistakes.*

How is Spanish society portrayed by Pedro Almodóvar in *Volver* and is his portrayal accurate?

*The question of authenticity is difficult to answer. There is a lot of local colour in the film. Part of its appeal for me is the use of (now quite old-fashioned) turns of phrase and props used. These bring me back to utensils and clothes that my mother's and grandmother's generation would have used. However, I would always caution about looking for accuracy in Almodóvar's films because the behaviours and even the way things look have been manipulated to fit a particular aesthetic. There is a lot of excess, there is also a camp sensibility through which the stories are told, and there is a use of postmodern techniques (such as the fragmentation of the narrative, the way it refers to other films and songs to draw attention to its artificiality, etc) which are there to help us distance ourselves from the idea of reality. It is harder, I think, for non-Spanish viewers, who sometimes may assume that things may just be like that in Spain. The film warns against this in the reference to the windmills. There is a passage in *Don Quixote* where Don Quixote believes that traditional windmills are giants and tries to fight them, but other characters (and readers) know that he is deluded. The wind turbines are contemporary windmills, and we know from then that we are entering a fictional land, a land created in literature. That said, there is plenty of social critique in the film, particularly of how difficult it is to live for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.*



Which would you consider the more prominent aspects of Spanish culture as explored in *Volver*?

There is a strong exploration of traditional Spanish culture. The most important of these aspects is the on-going culture of machismo and deep patriarchal structures that are still prevalent. The exploitation of girls and women is linked to how new media such as reality

television exploits people's misery for profit. There is also an exploration of how those who moved from the countryside to big cities fared, including the loss of community support and structures, and their attempts at replicating them. The scene when Raimunda calls on her neighbours for help is significant, for example. This is excellently linked to the different waves of immigration and cultural diversity in the outskirts of cities like Madrid. As Raimunda and her generation settle, others come after them, taking on even more precarious positions, worse housing and jobs. Raimunda's neighbour Regina, who is a Latin American migrant working illegally as a prostitute and who Raimunda takes advantage of. The move to capitalism (including the large migrations from the country to the cities, and also from poor, mainly agricultural regions to more industrialised ones like Catalonia, the Basque country, and Madrid) is shown not to benefit working class people as much as it was expected.



What do the female characters in the film reveal about Almodóvar's attitude towards women?

Volver is a film that shows three generations of women in one family overcome adversity and continue with their lives despite great challenges. Almodóvar has said many times how he has always found women to make extremely interesting characters, and how he is fascinated by the complicity and camaraderie between them. These are aspects of resistance in a society that oppresses women.

How do the female characters show strength?

The female characters show strength by continuing their daily lives despite adversity and trauma. All the female characters are struggling with something, be it old age (aunt Paula), illness, financial insecurity or trauma. Male characters, particularly Paco, also struggle, but Paco reveals himself to be weak in drowning in self-pity and trying to use sexual assault/control over the women in his life to make himself feel better. The female characters are not perfect (see, for example, Raimunda's lack of patience and quick temper, or Irene's rash decision to kill her husband), but are seen in the film to be willing to tackle their problems. They also demonstrate how brave it is to open up and be vulnerable, to ask for help. Paula does this, going to her mother for help. This is something that Raimunda learns to do throughout the film. The culmination of Raimunda's journey takes place when she opens up to her mother on the bench, and when she decides to ask Regina for help. Raimunda

does for her daughter what she never did for her younger self. There is emphasis on strength as derived from a group, from community whether this is family or neighbours.



How is the traditional Spain represented in Volver?

Traditional country life Spain is represented in the film as a culture that is being lost (see aunt Paula's death) as people move to big cities. It is, however, not totally erased and we could speak more of change and adaptation to new spaces and circumstances. One could look at quaint customs such as the cleaning of graves or the wake prior to a funeral, which still happen in many parts of Spain (though not always in the ways shown in the film). I am more interested, however, in how these traditional beliefs and ways of living are translated to contemporary Spain. For example, how does Paula the born-digital teenager absorb and navigate these customs? How do the characters adapt what may be of use (community spirit, putting family first) to life in a capitalist society that puts the individual first?

How important is family both in regard to the plot of the film and Almodóvar's life?

Family, with all its positive and negative aspects (the obligations and the ready-made support, the disagreements and unconditional love, the hidden violence of many kinds and the kindness that may sit within it) is central to Volver. It is also a metaphor for the wider family of the nation. I cannot speak for Almodóvar in terms of how central family is to his life. However, he has spoken many times of how central his relationship with his mother has been throughout his life. He also works with his brother, Agustín Almodóvar, to run the production company, El Deseo S.A. Almodóvar draws on his childhood and adolescent experiences to create new stories and fictional worlds. He also seems to draw on his family for this, for example by sometimes using his sisters' clothes.

How is maternity explored via the characters of Raimunda and Irene?

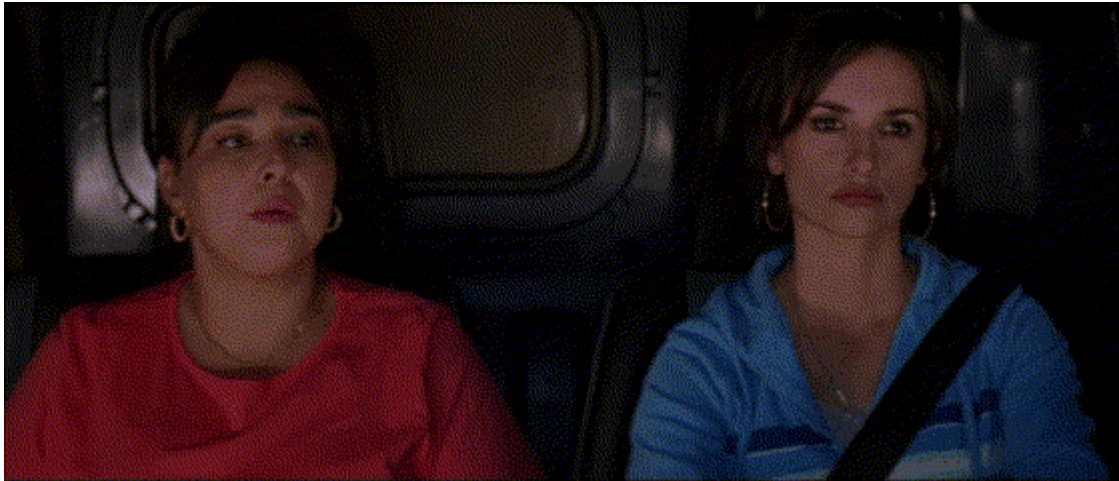
*Irene is the mother who cannot protect her daughter, the mother who is blind to the patriarchal structures until it is too late, but also the mother willing to defend her children even by committing murder. This is a very different mother from the stereotypes that previous Spanish literature and films had shown us, such as the mother in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, the castrating mother who is feared and rules the home according to patriarchal*

principles in stead of the father. Raimunda sees Irene as this traditional mother until Irene confesses her ignorance and crimes after she discovered what had been happening. Raimunda is acting as the mother she wishes she had had, protecting Paula. Yet Raimunda is dealing with her own trauma and this prevents her from engaging fully with Paula's psychological needs, even though she provides and does everything she should. The film looks at mothers as imperfect but shows a more contemporary idea of motherhood, trying to move away from restrictive traditional stereotypes.



I've always thought that Regina's role is more complex than just an accomplice to Raimunda. What can we learn about Spain from Regina?

*Regina is an underdeveloped character which points to the diversity of Spanish society and the consequences of adopting a capitalist model. Capitalism depends on reducing costs and maximising profits, so Spain (and other countries) has drawn on cheaper labour from children in the past, and women who got paid less for equal work. As Spanish citizens start refusing to take on certain jobs because they are tough or badly paid, migrants have filled this gap. Regina is also a sex-worker, further commenting on the commodification of women's bodies. I find it very interesting that you say that Regina is an accomplice of Raimunda. She clearly is, but she has also been misled by Raimunda, who has taken advantage of Regina's trust in her. One could say that Raimunda is replicating Spain's structures of oppression by placing Regina in this position. There should be a postcolonial reading of *Volver* along these lines (watch this space!).*



How does Almodóvar portray the Spanish pueblo and the city?

*At first it seems that the pueblo and the city are very strongly represented as opposing each other, as sparse vs bustling, with a reduced colour palette vs colourful exteriors and interiors. This is there, of course, but there is also a subtle undermining of these stark distinctions. As people moved from the country to the city, cities changed. Their expansion to accommodate these new, poor inhabitants is seen in Raimunda's and Sole's neighbourhoods, which are different from the city centre. In these peripheral neighbourhoods, small one-story houses (normally built by the people arriving in the city, without planning or sanitation in place until much later on) mix with more recently built high-rises to accommodate them. The architecture reflects migrants' attempts to replicate the community structures of the pueblo and also how supposedly better housing (the high rises) created isolation. The pueblo is seen as being left behind as a space that cannot offer a life to young people. Yet at the same time some of them suffer from nostalgia, thinking of the food and family left behind. It is easy to idealise the pueblo when one does no longer live there. The city is seen as a place of opportunity, but this is also shown to be a bit of a mirage. Raimunda's backbreaking job and struggle to make ends meet is significant. A good companion piece to *Volver* would be Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?!*, also starring Carmen Maura.*



Does the easterly wind have any significance over than reinforcing the superstitious nature of the Spanish pueblo?

*The easterly wind is a great addition to the film, reflecting the reality of La Mancha's harsh weather and providing a surrealist touch to the film by taking its effects to an extreme. Of course, it can be read as superstition if the film is interpreted as realist. However, it is a wonderful metaphor for the unbridled passions and silenced events that the film reveals. The wind takes us again to the windmills in Don Quixote, and the blend of realism and fantasy. It also alludes to another great genre that has had an incredible influence in Almodóvar's work, melodrama. There is a film by Douglas Sirk, *Written on the Wind* (1956) where the wind is the expression of the characters' pent-up emotions. I would say that *Volver* offers a Spanish version of this.*

At the end of the film Irene watches television whilst caring for Agustina. The black and white scene she seems to enjoy watching is given prominence. Why did Almodóvar select this scene for Irene to watch?

*This scene makes an intertextual allusion to Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951) explicit. *Bellissima* is a neo-realist film about a mother's obsession with making her young daughter into a film star and the neglect of the daughter. This is a theme that runs through *Volver* as Irene helps Raimunda enter a singing contest. The focus on girls and women's beauty is seen as a way of complying with patriarchal expectations that women be beautiful and available for men to (ab)use. The scene in *Bellissima* quoted at the end of *Volver* seems an oasis of peace for the little girl, a bedtime moment with her father away from the mother's frantic schemes. However, a contemporary, post-modern sensibility and the fact that *Volver* is about sexual abuse in the home manage to make the scene more sinister than it perhaps seemed in 1951. Why does the father kiss the little girl on the lips and, more importantly, why does he ask her not to tell her mother? The mother in *Bellissima* is similar to Irene in that she looks after her neighbours for money, administering injections and other care. Irene, however, does this for free and hiding her presence, as a way of atoning for not seeing the abuse her daughter was suffering and for leaving Agustina without a mother. Both mothers in *Bellissima* and *Volver* are blind to their daughters' fate until it is too late. Raimunda is also characterised like the mother in *Bellissima*, but Raimunda manages to break away from this role by placing her daughter at the centre of her life, however imperfectly she does so.*



Does Volver contain a wider message?

Volver is first and foremost a fantastic, imaginative story told in a technically outstanding way. The film encourages reflection on trauma and how this can be passed on through generations and on how this may relate to historical trauma as well as personal trauma. It also sheds light on how Spain has changed since becoming a democratic country in many ways, whilst some things remain stubbornly similar. However, it works beyond the Spanish context as a film about mothers and daughters, sexual violence and healing, families and communities more widely.

Structures/vocabulary to look out for in edition 103:

- Volver a + infinitive - to do again/once again
- Hasta que + subjunctive
- Al + infinitive - on/upon
- Sino - but rather

Grammar to look out for in edition 103:

- Present tense irregulars
- Direct Object Pronouns
- Imperfect tense
- The past perfect