

work: 'When I write the script, I try to be as pure and as irrational as possible, and things emerge which have nothing to do with my daily life.' See p. 162.

14. It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that, like Lorca, Almodóvar is from the south of Spain and doubtless shares much of his predecessor's background in relation to the notions about fate and death so ingrained in the culture of that part of the country.

## Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, premièred in Madrid on March 23, 198, is Almodóvar's best known and, in commercial terms, most successful film. It has also received widespread critical acclaim. In 1988, for example, it was named best foreign film by both the New York Film Critics' Circle and the American National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, and in 1989 gained an Oscar nomination in the same category. Within Spain itself it received numerous accolades: the Goya award in 1989; the best picture award from the Asociación de Escritores Cinemato-gráficos de Andalucía in the same year; and it was also chosen as best film by Spanish television critics and viewers. In addition, Carmen Maura has won many awards for her performance as Pepa, including the Goya, while Almodóvar himself received a Goya for best director.<sup>1</sup> Here there appear once more many of the actors from Almodóvar's previous films — Carmen Maura herself, Antonio Banderas, Julieta Serrano, Chus Lampreave — creating a team spirit which contributes greatly to the overall brilliance of the acting. On the other hand, *Women on the Verge* . . . was also to create a much publicized rupture between Almodóvar and Carmen Maura, infuriated by his treatment of her at the Oscar ceremony. She has not appeared in a subsequent film of his.

As far as its origins are concerned, *Women on the Verge*... began as an idea which Almodóvar had long had for a film based on a monologue spoken by a woman alone and in a single setting, similar in that respect to Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*. Subsequently, other possibilities suggested themselves, in particular the events of the previous forty-eight hours which had contributed and led to the woman's present predicament. Later still, in the process of writing, the notion of the single woman abandoned in her room became more complex, introducing other women and the world outside, and the telephone, central to the original idea, and on which the woman awaits a call from her lover, was replaced by an answerphone, which does not require her to stay at home and on which her lover's voice can actually be heard.<sup>2</sup>

In *Women on the Verge*... the influence of Almodóvar's other films is also, of course, important. He has himself suggested that the character of Pepa derives from that of Tina in *Law of Desire*, but there are also links with Pepi in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*... Bom in this film has also in a sense become Candela in *Women on the Verge*... and there are other anticipations of her in the character of Riza Niro in *Labyrinth of Passion*. Paulina, the female lawyer, recalls, despite her differences, María Cardenal in *Matador*, while Carlos and Lucía have their parallels in Angel and Berta, the son and mother in the same film.<sup>3</sup> It would, of course, be surprising if a director's earlier work did not feed into subsequent projects, but Almodóvar has also drawn attention to other, foreign influences, in particular the American director, Billy Wilder, observing not only that *Women on the Verge*... is his most Wilder-like film but that there is a marked similarity between Carmen Maura's Pepa and Shirley MacLaine's role in *The Apartment*.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the fact

its most serious moments, there is an irreverent and subversive humour in *Women on the Verge*... that is entirely Almodóvar's and that distinguishes him from any other director.

The titles appear against a collage of shots of elegant women. 'A Film by Pedro Almodóvar', for example, is set against a background divided into three sections: top left, the lower half of a woman's smiling face; bottom centre, a woman's right eye; top right a woman's left eye. The title of the film itself appears over the left-hand side of a woman's face, while later on an arrangement of women's eyes is accompanied by scissors, thereby underlining the idea of collage and cut-outs. In a sense the notion of women cut up, dissected and anatomized brings to mind the opening sequence of *Matador* in which women are literally chopped into pieces, but the comparison is one which merely serves to highlight the difference between the two films. The cut-outs here are stylish, elegant, witty, suggestive of an altogether lighter tone in the context of which the potentially serious implications of the film's title dissolve into something rather more ironic. In addition, the elegance and artificiality of this opening serves as an introduction to the world of television and film in which the main character, Pepa and her lover, Iván, work. Looked at in another way, the cut-outs suggest the idea of fragmentation; bits and pieces. In this respect they point to lives confused and disrupted, one of the film's main themes, but in a formal sense they also suggest the separate and sometimes bewildering incidents of the opening twenty minutes, the individual bits of the puzzle or the jigsaw that eventually begin to come together in a meaningful and satisfying way.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the song which accompanies the titles — 'Oh, Unhappy Woman' — has a

somewhat sentimental, romantic quality, the kind of seriousness evoked by the film's title, which, in the context of the film itself, becomes ironic, promising one thing but delivering another, and revealing in the process Almodóvar's love of walking a tightrope composed of opposites.

The film itself begins with a sequence in which Pepa, asleep, dreams of Iván. He is seen holding a microphone as he casually strolls past a number of women of different professions and from different countries, addressing them as he does so: 'My life is meaningless without you. Will you marry me. . . I can't live without you. I love you, want you, need you. . . You are the geisha in my life. . . I'm all yours. I accept you as you are, darling.' The words are, of course, from a script, for Iván does voice-overs and dubbing for films, and there is a striking difference between the potentially serious meaning of the words and their emptiness in the context in which they are spoken.<sup>6</sup> In this sequence Iván is, literally, a strolling actor playing a part and saying things he does not mean. But Pepa's dream, of course, immediately relates the notion of Iván as actor to her own relationship with him. In that too he has uttered words that had no real meaning, drawn in all probability from who knows how many well-thumbed scripts. The link between role-play and reality, fiction and life, is thus established very early in the film.

This theme is then developed in two separate sequences involving, first, Iván, and then Pepa. In the first of these Iván is seen in the studio in the process of dubbing a western, *Johnny Guitar*, starring Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden. In this sequence the male character accuses the woman of betraying him: 'How many men have you had to forget?' The woman's replies are not heard here but are filled in, in the second sequence,

by Pepa, who proceeds to deny the male character's accusations:

- He: How many men have you had to forget?  
 She: As many as the women you can remember.  
 He: Don't go.  
 She: I haven't moved.  
 He: Say something nice.  
 She: What do you want me to say?  
 He: Lie. 'You've been waiting for me'. Say it.  
 She: I waited for you all these years.  
 He: Say you'd have died without me.  
 She: I'd have died without you.  
 He: Say you love me as I love you.  
 She: I love you as you love me.  
 He: Thank you, thank you very much.

In the scene as a whole the real-life relationship of Pepa and Iván is, of course, ironically reversed, for it is he, the betrayer, who plays the man betrayed, and she, the deceived woman, who plays the deceiver. The reversal of roles, especially in Iván's case, draws attention to his facility as an actor, for he plays the innocent with complete conviction. As far as Pepa is concerned, the words she speaks in the role, which requires her to lie — 'I'd have died without you.' — are absolutely true in relation to her feelings for Iván. Almodóvar offers us here, then, a sequence from his own film in which the characters Pepa and Iván are themselves playing parts in another film which are the opposite of what they, the characters, are in reality. Indeed, no sooner does he finish 'acting' than Iván reverts to his true colours by leaving a message on Pepa's answerphone to the effect that he is leaving her, but even in this real-life situation his lines smack of pretence and of a performance that is

not genuine, his real motives concealed beneath a glib façade:

Pepa . . . Put all my stuff in a suitcase. I'm leaving on a trip tomorrow. I'll pick it up and say goodbye . . . I don't deserve all your kindness. . . .

The interplay of fiction and reality thus constitutes a key idea in the film, as is the case, indeed, in *Matador* and many of the other films studied here. In *Women on the Verge* . . . , moreover, it is not merely a case of 'the games that lovers play', for the women in question, increasingly caught up in the complexities of their love lives, become not only puppet-like characters manipulated by events in an action that is ever more frantic and frenetic, but, in the sense that the film itself draws on the long tradition of comedy and farce, actors in their own story.

From the very outset the theme of love, serious in itself, is placed in the context of farce, much of the early part of the film focused on the growing chaos in Pepa's life. It begins, for instance, with her sleeping late, discovering Iván is leaving her, finding out she is pregnant by him and phoning the woman she mistakenly thinks he is going off with. These separate but related episodes then lead into a more sustained sequence in Pepa's flat during which she hurls Iván's clothes into a suitcase, absentmindedly throws a lighted match onto the bed, setting it on fire, and douses the fire with a garden-hose, soaking the bedroom in the process. The ingredients of farce are many and complex, but incongruity, misunderstanding and the notion of people under pressure are undoubtedly amongst them and are handled by Almodóvar with total aplomb. There is, for instance, considerable incongruity in the

fact that Pepa, the modern, independent, sophisticated, cool career woman, is placed at the centre of increasing chaos in her personal life. Subjected to that pressure, moreover, she reacts in a sometimes instinctive and spontaneous way — the throwing of the lighted match — which merely increases it by creating further complications, a kind of chain reaction. And this in turn leads to the spectacle of an otherwise rational and dignified human being behaving in ways which are both irrational and undignified, a key element in farce in general. As far as misunderstanding is concerned, Pepa's assumption that the woman she telephones — in effect Lucía, Iván's lover of twenty years ago — is the woman he plans to go away with, is a simple error which has enormous consequences, bringing into the story a woman with a history of mental imbalance who later in the film sets out to shoot Iván.

The ingredients mentioned above, crucial as they are, are nevertheless the bare bones around which other important elements are woven. From the outset, for instance, much humour is derived not merely from the fact that Pepa believes Lucía to be the other woman in Iván's life, but also from the way in which Lucía is presented. She is first seen as a woman who, although she is probably around fifty, constantly attempts to appear young, painting her face, donning wigs, dressing in brightly coloured clothes: 'Time stands still when I wear those clothes.' The spectacle is, of course, bizarre, and no more so than when, a little later, she unwittingly passes Pepa on the stairs to Iván's flat, arrayed in a kind of leopard-skin dress with matching hat which might well suit a younger and more glamorous woman but which on Lucía looks more like a lampshade. Again, when Pepa leaves a note for Iván and Lucía attempts to read it, she is obliged, because of

her age, to hold the note at arm's length in order to focus on it properly. The serious business of love and rivalry is thus rendered absurd by the context in which it is placed and by Almodóvar's wonderful sense of the ridiculous. It becomes even more hilarious, of course, when it is subsequently revealed that Lucía has only recently been released from a mental institution: in short, the woman Pepa believes to be her rival for Iván's love is totally deranged.

Two other sequences may be singled out to illustrate Almodóvar's delightful and subversive humour. The first concerns the taxi in which Pepa pursues Lucía, urging the taxi driver to 'follow that taxi.' Using as his starting point a cliché from Hollywood films, Almodóvar proceeds to send it up in every conceivable way. The taxi driver himself, with his yellow hat and bright green shirt, is the total opposite of his macho American counterpart, while the taxi itself, furnished with leopard-skin seat covers and offering to customers all manner of amenities, from magazines to mambo music, is more department store than vehicle. In short, the traditional melodramatic car chase of American films is transformed into a farce in which the pursuers are an eccentric taxi driver and a passenger distraught by love, and the pursued a mentally unbalanced older woman. The second sequence also involves subversion: on this occasion, of advertisements on television. At home Pepa watches an advert in which she plays the part of a mother who uses 'Omo' to wash her clothes. She reveals herself to be the mother of the notorious 'Crossroads Killer' who, after a murder, invariably comes home with a terribly blood-stained shirt. As she places the shirt in the washing machine, the police arrive in hot pursuit of the killer and seeking the incriminating shirt. When the mother produces the shirt, it is, of

course, whiter than white, and the police depart completely frustrated. In this sequence Almodóvar has simply taken the stock situation of washing-powder adverts — children dirtying and staining clothes — and replaced it with something which fits the situation perfectly but is quite unexpected. Moreover, he caps the whole thing with a totally outrageous joke as the mother triumphantly addresses us: 'Ecce Omo.' This and the taxi sequence illustrate Almodóvar's love of placing within the narrative of his films individual comic episodes which are in themselves absolute gems, jewels in an already glittering piece.<sup>7</sup>

The events described so far, focusing for the most part on the growing disruption of Pepa's life, constitute the first third of the film. The remaining two thirds involve much greater complications and can be divided structurally into three broad sections: two extended sequences located in Pepa's flat, and a final car chase. The first of the two sequences introduces into Pepa's already complicated life three other characters: a young woman friend, Candela; and a young man, Carlos and his girl-friend Marisa. In the early part of the sequence much of the humour derives from the fact that a familiar situation is given an unexpected twist. There is nothing unusual or comic, for example, in two young people arriving to view a flat. What makes their arrival comic is the fact that Carlos is Iván's son and is therefore astonished to see his father's photograph on another woman's bedside table. Moreover, the introductions, which, in another situation, would be uninteresting become, in this context, quite hilarious:

Carlos: This is Marisa.

Pepa: Nice to meet you.

Marisa: I'm his fiancée.

Pepa: I'm his father's lover.

As well as this, the traditional conducted tour in the course of which the prospective buyer is informed of the attractive features of the house is wickedly subverted here when Pepa explains away the charred bed:

Excuse the mess. Life has been hectic lately.<sup>8</sup>

And finally, another witty touch is introduced when Carlos proceeds to repair the telephone so that Pepa can receive incoming calls from his father.

The pace of the sequence, so far controlled and restrained and marked by a good deal of verbal humour, erupts into sudden frenetic movement when Candela attempts to throw herself from the terrace wall to the street below and the others rush to haul her to safety. The quiet and delicate ironies of the early part of the sequence become in a flash the desperation and the indignities of farce: Candela's anguished cries as she hangs by her fingertips; the urgent advice of her friends as they try to stop her falling; the indignity of her predicament as, skirt up over her bottom, she is hauled to safety. The secret of farce is, of course, that it must be played seriously, as is the case here, the movements, gestures, faces and voices of the actors expressing the fear, panic and relief of the situation. Almodóvar understands all this perfectly well, and he knows too how to cap a scene with a wonderfully appropriate, seriously intentioned but beautifully comic line. As everyone collapses, and a sense of relief takes over, Pepa instructs Carlos: 'Fetch my tranquilizers from the kitchen.'

Candela's explanation of her suicide attempt again places love in the context of farce, and to that extent interweaves her experience with that of Pepa. Having

lost her heart to a handsome young man some three months previously, she has since discovered that he and his friends are Shi'ite terrorists and suspects that, having harboured them in her flat, she will be accused of involvement in their plot to hijack a plane. Genuinely moving on the one hand, Candela's feelings of sorrow and desperation become absurd precisely because the ordinariness of an unexceptional young woman's love is placed against the background of dangerous, international events. In the sense that she, like Pepa, is used and abused by a man, Almodóvar has been accused of misogyny. The truth of the matter is surely that, if the women in *Women on the Verge* . . . are victims of men, they are also presented as warm, attractive, feeling, sympathetic individuals, infinitely superior to the cold and calculating men who take advantage of them. In making the situation comic, Almodóvar approaches them not only as women but as human beings, exploiting weaknesses and vulnerabilities that are as true of men as of women. As far as the plot is concerned, Candela's predicament introduces a further complication, for if she is accused of complicity in terrorism, she will need a defence lawyer. Having sought out Paulina Morales to this end, Pepa quickly discovers that she is in fact the other woman with whom Iván is planning a vacation.

The two extended sequences in the flat are separated by Pepa's attempts to get rid of Iván's suitcase and his efforts to recover it — events which at one point are quite brilliantly orchestrated by Almodóvar into what is virtually the language of silent film. Just prior to this, though, he introduces one of those poignant cameos mentioned earlier, this time in the form of the female hall porter in Pepa's apartment block. Urged by Iván to lie to Pepa on his behalf, the woman (exquisitely played

by Chus Lampreave) reveals herself to be a Jehovah's Witness to whom lies are anathema. The delicious humour of the situation lies in the fact that the plans of the cunning, calculating Iván are completely frustrated by a hall porter who is, incongruously, the complete opposite of the gossiping, untrustworthy types that such people are reputed to be. It is a comic note which sets the tone for the farcical sequence which now ensues.

It begins with Pepa emerging from the apartment block carrying the suitcase. As she does so, Iván is in a telephone kiosk nearby, attempting to contact Pepa about the suitcase. She walks past the kiosk, neither of them seeing the other. At the same time, a short distance away, Paulina Morales sits in her car, waiting for Iván to finish the call. As Pepa approaches and throws the suitcase into a skip, Paulina flattens herself on the seat of the car. Pepa, her objective accomplished, returns the way she came, once more passing the telephone kiosk. No sooner has she done so than Iván sees Lucía approaching along the street. Unable to escape, he slides to the floor in a crouching position as Lucía walks past. The humour here lies, firstly, in the fact that, of the four people whose lives are so entangled, three pursue their particular objectives within yards of each other yet in ignorance of each other's presence. Secondly, in the actions of Paulina and Iván, seeking to avoid being seen by Pepa and Lucía respectively, there is that familiar desperation which, in the absence of other forms of escape, leads to absurd and undignified physical postures. And thirdly, apart from the voice of Iván on the telephone, the whole of the sequence is silent, which has the effect of placing greater emphasis on the expressions and movements of the characters and therefore, in the context of the scene, of rendering

them even more hilarious. In effect, Almodóvar has drawn here on the tradition of silent film and in so doing created a classic situation which is yet another demonstration of his comic gifts.<sup>9</sup>

The second extended sequence begins in the flat with the arrival of the police and Lucía, whom the policemen have encountered in the lift. In the early part of the episode one strand of the humour consists of Carlos's and Pepa's frantic attempts to account for Candela's agitation, attributed by them to her disappointment over a dress. A second strand lies in the policemen's frustration when their attempts to question Pepa about the Shi'ite terrorists are constantly thwarted by Lucía's insistence on asking her about Iván. What *Women on the Verge* . . . demonstrates above all is Almodóvar's capacity for unflagging and varied comic invention, for seeing in situations comic possibilities which are often quite unpredictable. Here, for instance, there is a fine irony in the fact that, although Pepa tells the police the truth about Iván and the identity of Carlos and Lucía, they find her story hard to believe; an irony which relates, of course, not only to her story here but to the story of the film as a whole. But the central section of the episode, stemming from the 'spiked' gazpacho, resorts to incongruity for its comic effect. In itself the police interrogation of Pepa and the others is, of course, serious, and is developed as such. Suspecting that someone in the flat knows more about the Shi'ite hijack plan than is being revealed, one of the police officers begins to increase the pressure, pressing Pepa and her friends for a truthful answer. In the sense that we, the audience, know that the gazpacho has been 'spiked', and the policemen do not, our anticipation of its inevitable effect does not for a moment lessen our delight when, at a point of high dramatic tension, in mid-sentence, the police of-

ficer suddenly yawns, sits down, and falls fast asleep. His example is then followed by others, including his colleague and the telephone engineer, until the flat is virtually littered with prone bodies. It is, of course, a spectacle of authority completely undermined and made to look ridiculous. To conclude the sequence, moreover, Almodóvar injects a sudden note of melodrama when Lucía seizes the police officer's gun, informs Pepa that she is mad, throws the gazpacho in her face, and makes her escape, evidently with the intention of shooting Iván. Taken as a whole, this extended sequence, beautifully put together, reveals very clearly Almodóvar's ability to interweave such disparate elements as irony, farce and melodrama.<sup>10</sup>

The stepped-up pace of the end of the sequence leads directly into the final chase, so characteristic of Hollywood films and here skillfully subverted by Almodóvar in every conceivable way. In the first place, in a moment of wonderful incongruity, the elegantly dressed Lucía hijacks a leather-suited motorcyclist, forcing him at gun-point to take her to the airport. Secondly, when Pepa flags down a taxi — more a case of 'Follow that bike' than 'Follow that car' — the taxi driver proves to be the eccentric we have seen before. There are some hilarious touches here, both of situation and of dialogue. When, for example, Pepa wipes her eyes in an attempt to clear them of the effect of the gazpacho, the taxi driver provides her with eye-drops, which he has added to his repertoire of merchandise. At one point his girl friend informs Pepa that she intends to buy a motorbike: 'With a bike who needs a man?' It is a beautifully droll comment on the heavily underlined sexual symbolism of motorcycles so commonly seen in advertising. But Pepa's reply is even better: 'Motor maintenance is easier than psychology. You can really

get to know a bike.' The theme of the frenetic car chase is thus filled with endearing touches, the traditional panic and screeching excitement rendered ludicrous. At the airport itself Lucía is on the point of shooting Iván when Pepa arrives, directs a luggage trolley at her and diverts the shot into the air. Saved by the woman he had abandoned, Iván suggests they should talk, but Pepa rejects him and walks away, implying that she has saved his life out of love but that she no longer loves him. The farcical events of the film as a whole, which in part reflect the chaos of Pepa's life, give way finally to a greater sense of stability and order, announced by Pepa's declaration of independence. It is reflected too in her decision to keep the apartment rather than find another one, while the words of the song which accompany the ending of the film point to her recognition of Iván's treachery and thus to her greater prudence in the future:

It's as if you were on stage . . . faking your pain. . .  
Don't bother to act . . . I've seen that play before  
. . . I was blinded by your passionate kisses . . .  
You lied coldly . . . but the curtain finally came  
down . . . Play-acting, that's what you do best . . .  
A well executed sham. . .

*Women on the Verge*. . ., so utterly different from *Mata-dor*, is in every respect a superb film, revealing to the full Almodóvar's comic talents. In terms of overall structure, it is finely shaped, its individual threads intricately wrought, the seeds of subsequent events sown early and expertly. Within individual sequences, moreover, the variety of comic elements is considerable, ranging from delicate irony, superbly funny dialogue and witty incongruities, to the physical properties of pure farce. In all these respects, *Women on the Verge*. . . is, arguably, the



classic Spanish film comedy, a twentieth-century equivalent of the great comic plays of the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> But in the end its comic qualities would count for little if it had no warmth or heart, a humanity at its centre with which we can identify. The truth of the matter is that Pepa in particular, and Candela, Lucía and Marisa to a lesser extent, emerge as vulnerable, warm, sympathetic human beings whose weaknesses are also ours. They are not therefore cardboard figures whom we laugh at, but women of flesh and blood whom we laugh with precisely because we know them so well. It is the most healthy kind of laughter.

### Notes

1. For a list of awards and prizes, see Nuria Vidal, *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar*, Barcelona: Destino, 1990, pp. 439–441.
2. For Almodóvar's account of the original idea for and the subsequent evolution of the plot of *Women on the Verge*..., see Nuria Vidal, *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar*..., pp. 257–260.
3. On this point see Nuria Vidal, *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar*..., pp. 312–315.
4. In Nuria Vidal, *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar*..., pp. 266–267.
5. Various critics claim that Almodóvar is incapable of structuring his films. Antonio Castro, for example, in 'Tacones lejanos, un retorno a *La ley del deseo*', *Dirigido por*, October 1991, No. 195, suggests that (the translation is my own): '... he has shown repeatedly that he has some excellent ideas, but he is incapable of sustaining them for the duration of his films, for they are

distinguished by their complete absence of structure. . . . That such a charge could be made against *Women on the Verge*..., given the intricacy of its structure and the way in which its separate narrative threads are so cunningly interwoven, is beyond belief.

6. The point has been made in relation to Angel's 'visions' in *Matador* that Almodóvar does not distinguish between dream and reality in terms of their presentation on the screen. Here he does, precisely in order to underscore the artificiality and insincerity of Iván's words.
7. Antonio Castro also makes the point that Almodóvar's films suffer from the insertion of individual episodes, frequent jokes, which 'are badly woven' into the overall structure. As far as *Women on the Verge*... is concerned, these episodes are clearly in the farcical spirit of the film in general.
8. Almodóvar's dialogue is very often beautifully shaped, perfectly matched to a given situation, and delightfully funny. In *Women on the Verge*..., his lines are given their full value by some very fine actors.
9. Antonio Castro suggests that Almodóvar's films are characterized by an over-reliance on words and that he cannot tell a story in visual images alone. This sequence is clearly the answer to that criticism.
10. Misunderstanding of Almodóvar's films seems very often to stem from the failure of critics to understand that he is juggling often disparate elements in the boldest way. In this respect he is, of course, very much his own man and a unique voice in the contemporary Spanish film industry.
11. The intricate plots and comic verse of plays like Tirso de Molina's *Don Gil en las calzas verdes* (*Don Gil in the Green Breeches*) and Calderón's *La dama duende* (*The Phantom Lady*) immediately come to mind.