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Almodóvar on Almodóvar

Edited by Frédéric Strauss

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faber and faber

Sense and Sensation

I was left with two overriding memories of the many hours I spent with Pedro Almodóvar. The first was that of having been captivated by the impassioned and rational story of a life dedicated to film. The second was of my hope of having helped in the telling of another story, that of the emotion each film of his extraordinary career engenders.

For my part, that story began on Monday 15 June 1987 when I first saw *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* at the Trois Luxembourg Cinema, rue Monsieur-le-Prince in Paris. My first glimpse into Almodóvar's universe. Carmen Maura's raw expressiveness, Chus Lampreave's discreet yet hilarious presence, Veronica Forqué's staccato, musical delivery, all bowled me over. And left me speechless. I had been writing for Cahiers du Cinéma for only a few months and, eager to affirm my standing as a serious critic, found myself mistrusting my own emotions as if my very objectivity were under threat. What's more, Pedro Almodóvar was already well known. His sulphurous reputation as the leading light of the Madrid movida, a quasi-mythical and unbridled movement of liberation, epicentre of the new Spain of the early 1980s, went before him. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, completed three years earlier, was the first of his films to be commercially distributed in France. Doubtless, nothing aroused my suspicions more than a director who not only possessed such attractive, if admittedly flashy, credentials, but could also touch my emotions. I was clearly in danger of being manipulated. It was therefore with some reserve that I communicated in a brief review to the readers of the Cahiers my affection for *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* I showed the same enthusiasm in March 1988 for *Law of Desire*, a film which contained several scenes which had moved me so much I subsequently watched them again and again.

Almodóvar the manipulator? The idea is not inaccurate, not if it describes the work of a director who fashions everything, from the smallest prop to the performances of the actors, as his desire dictates. The rigour and coherence of his work is such that hardly ever during these interviews did my questions take Almodóvar by surprise.

His total control over his work, however, does not denote a desire to manipulate an audience, an audience which the film-maker himself says he cannot conceive of except in the abstract, an audience he even risked losing with the slow and discursive *High Heels* and most of all with the fast and

furious *Kika*. His goal, through a consciously elaborated *mise en scène*, is intensity: a saturation of colour and passion which releases pure, visual, physical and visceral emotion. Though profoundly crafted, this emotion is, in the final analysis, neither artificial nor intellectual, but delivers itself rawly on to the screen, leaving the audience the choice either of accepting or rejecting it.

This movement from sense to sensation imprinted its logic on these conversations with Almodóvar. They were conducted in the knowledge that to succeed in hammering out the sense of an image, the ideas and intentions it contains, could never justify its real value, that it would be impossible for us to exhaust its sensation. How can I explain why seeing the little girl in *Law of Desire* singing 'Ne me quitte pas' in playback was for me so heart-rending? Why I found Loles León's dance in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, Miguel Bosé's drag act in *High Heels* and the title sequence of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* so totally exhilarating? Why in *Dark Habits* Julieta Serrano's scream and the sight of Carmen Maura as a nun standing next to a huge tiger should awaken in me similar feelings? To explain all this by aesthetic analysis would never do full justice to a creativity fuelled by a formal power which thwarts all formal analysis.

Visual pleasure is only one aspect of the sensual stimulation Almodóvar's films embody. They are films of the flesh, of immaterial feelings made flesh by the actors, the first of these feelings being desire. The most elegant form becomes an echo chamber of emotions. To this end all contrivances and variations are possible. If the frozen images of the famous title sequence of *Women on the Verge* . . . touch me to the quick, the reason lies in the staggering song performed by the Mexican Lola Beltrán which accompanies them. It is in the grain of the voice and, occasionally, in the texture of the skin.

To describe what I experience witnessing certain scenes and certain shots in Almodóvar's films would entail describing my innermost emotions and impressions. That was the limit of our conversations. More than once, it became clear our dialogue could not progress unless one of us – and it was more often Pedro than I – referred directly to his private life. This was certainly not our intention and we would quickly move on to another subject. Certain answers and certain questions – and there were no doubt other reasons for this too – have been held in abeyance. Almost by default, I consider this communicates one of the essential aspects of Almodóvar's films. They are films in which the most intense, yet for all that, chaste emotions are spectacularly displayed; emotions both untrammelled and unforced, significant and unsignified, explicit and unexplained, emotions which the director offers without forcing them on us, thereby preserving

their quintessential violence as well as their playfulness. That is perhaps the secret of these films' vibrant energy. They know how to retain their innocence; they delight in strong, simple images, full of complete and primordial feelings (love, pain) which, bathed in primary colours, also know how to be simply beautiful. Yet these films are also mature, as one must be to trust one's own emotions and accept being touched by their images.

Before the idea for this book came to mind, I discovered these qualities in Almodóvar himself, when we first met in 1990 at the Berlin Film Festival (where he was promoting *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*) and later on the set of *High Heels*. Just as naturally as in his films, there exists within Almodóvar two spirits. The one is frank, innocently candid, passionate and rebellious – this he uses to get under the characters' skins in order to play them or to tell their stories to the cast during rehearsals; the other is serene, judicious, stubborn, exacting and constantly at work. Again, sense and sensation, intelligence and expressiveness. In a way, it was through the film-maker himself I came to understand what I liked in his films. However, this does not solve the problem Almodóvar admits he himself is confronted with at the end of this book; namely, that he has become – or has remained – more famous than his own films, stealing the limelight from those actors and technicians who helped make them.

His mastery of communication, which first led him into becoming a creature of the stage singing with McNamara, coupled with the joyous sense of celebration, of sheer entertainment in all its forms that his films delight in, have made him the most lionized, not to say media-friendly of contemporary directors. Fertile ground indeed for the seeds of provocation and excess. Until *High Heels*, his biography as contained in press releases read as follows: 'Pedro Almodóvar was born in La Mancha in the 1950s. It was the age of the Cold War, of mambo, of Balenciaga, of the Korean War, of the Hungarian revolution, of the death of Stalin etc. But none of these events had any affect on Cazalda de Calatrava, the small town where he was born. Almodóvar cast his eye around him and did not like what he saw. He felt like an astronaut at the court of King Arthur.' The facts are true, but already they are being manipulated by their subject in a style hardly typical of such sober publications. In the press book for *Kika*, Almodóvar's likes and dislikes were listed: 'He detests famous drug addicts who having ruined both their health and their careers with all kinds of drug abuse, go into detox and then start writing books on the subject . . . He hates epaulettes and uniforms of all kinds including those for sport . . . He hates the idea someone may write his biography either before or after his death. This is one of the reasons he would like never to die. However, if he should die, he cannot bear the idea of

not being present at his own funeral. Surgical operations: removal of appendix, tonsils and a polyp on a vocal chord . . . He takes sleeping pills. His constitution is paradoxical. He suffers both agoraphobia and claustrophobia.' This list, both serious and eccentric, where self-celebration and self-derision are inextricably entwined, represents an ongoing attempt to raise the film-maker to the level of a character, in other words an original being who revels both in futility and sagacity, who is by nature intriguing and, like Andy Warhol (another artist who was even more skilful in manipulating the media), is also deeply phobic.

Such a cult of the original cannot escape caricature. Avoiding the Almodóvar character was therefore also one of the rules of these conversations. This was an easy rule to respect: if Almodóvar looks after his image, he himself rarely plays it, especially when he works – and he works a great deal.

Our journey through his career was planned chronologically and conducted over a year of meetings in Madrid. In spite of its obviousness, this method seemed to me the only one capable of bringing out, through a detailed analysis of each film from original idea to public release, the working method of the film-maker and to give an overview of a career in itself difficult to describe. After his first publicly released feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, shot with no money and little technical know-how, Almodóvar made *Labyrinth of Passion*, a film of greater visual and sound quality but whose narrative was more chaotic. This was followed by *Dark Habits*, whose nuns confused those who saw in Almodóvar merely the director of the modern Spanish generation. With the realism of *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, the abstract precision of *Matador*, the sensual vigour of *Law of Desire*, the brilliant comic ballet of *Woman on the Verge* . . ., the virulent acidity of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, the Hollywood sophistication of *High Heels* and, finally, with the dazzling, explosive puzzle that is *Kika*, Almodóvar, faithful to his obsessions, and not to the image they give of him, has never ceased to wrongfoot both his critics and his admirers.

Such freedom was bound to make a happy mess of our sage chronological approach. As you will see, the films speak to each other, interweave, come and go as their heroes do in the romantic labyrinths erected by their creator. Such meanderings are the weakness which make up the strength of Almodóvar's films; incapable of giving his scripts a rigid structure, of curtailing his imagination, his limitless inventiveness, he allows each story, each character, major or minor, to live to the full; in other words, sometimes anarchically. And when, for *Matador*, he worked for the first and only time with another writer who helped channel his inspiration, Jesus Ferrero, the result was

hardly his best film. It's in diversions and complex entanglements that Almodóvar's *mise en scène* finds its fullest expression. His labyrinths are channels of communication using all forms of expression: advertisements, photo-stories, comic strips, television, music and song. The result is a heterodox aesthetic where classicism, the avant garde, films of all genres find their place; a baroque cinema bringing together in one gesture all the great artistic adventures of the century. That is what makes them so fascinating.

But there is one thing missing from this book – the voice of Almodóvar himself, its colourful, animated intonations bringing to life the smallest anecdote, capable of transforming it almost into an epic. A sensation which gave these conversations all their sense.

Frédéric Strauss

Pepi, Luci, Bom

Super 8

Solitude

Photo-stories

Pop

Andy Warhol

FRÉDÉRIC STRAUSS: *Your first commercially released film in Spain was Pepi, Luci, Bom (Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón). What had you been doing before 1980?*

PEDRO ALMODÓVAR: From 1972 onwards, before making *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, I'd shot a great deal of very short Super 8 movies. In 1978, I also made my first full length film, *Folle ... Folle ... Folleme ... Tim*. I'd moved to Madrid in 1968. But only after three years of living in a city I didn't know (and working for Telefonica, the national telephone company) did I save up enough to buy a Super 8 camera, get together a group of friends and feel ready to take my first steps in movie-making. At the time, the underground scene in Madrid and Barcelona was much richer and more dynamic than it is today – if it's survived at all. Lots of people, grouped together in clubs and associations, were making films and organizing their own Super 8 festivals. Barcelona was much more the centre of this creativity than Madrid. Influenced by American culture and counter-culture, this creativity expressed itself not only through films but also through comic strips, fashion and, most of all, through a certain lifestyle. Oddly enough, it was ten years later in Madrid, at the end of the Seventies, that the movement developed and came into its own. By that time, Catalan separatism had effectively isolated Barcelona from the rest of Spain.

During the Seventies I often went to Barcelona to show my Super 8 films at festivals and I became rather well-known as a director of Super 8 movies. People enjoyed watching my films so they went down rather well. However,

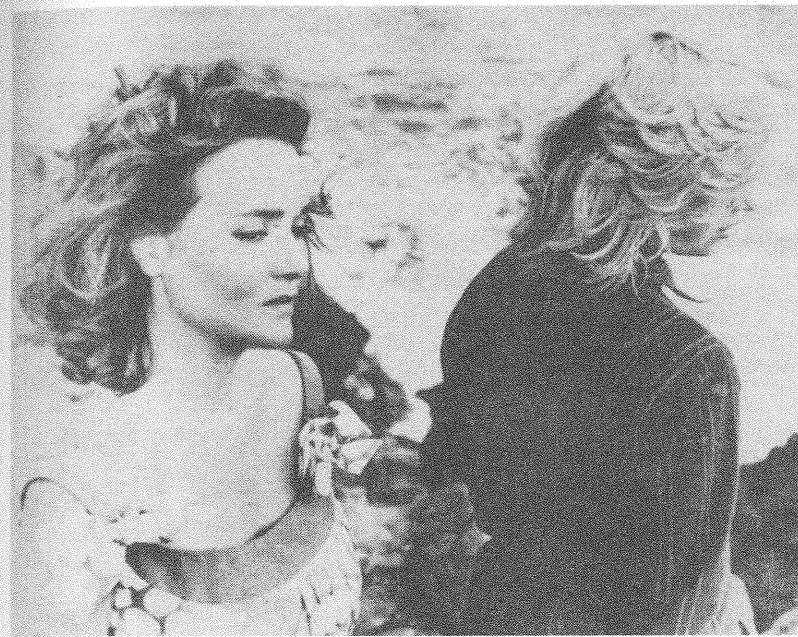
because my films were narratives, Super 8 specialists, directors and theorists, didn't consider me a true practitioner of the art. Super 8 at the time was heavily influenced by underground movements such as Fluxus, one of whose members was Yoko Ono. It was essentially a conceptual cinema, the kind of cinema where nothing happens. I remember one film, for example, which consisted entirely of shots of a country house. It was rather long. My films, on the other hand, always told a story. This had been my strongest desire ever since I'd first picked up a camera. But for the members of the Super 8 movement telling a story was something very old-fashioned, like a film of the 1940s. I ended up feeling left out of a movement I naturally belonged to.

I attempted all genres in my films. Quite a few of them were influenced by the Cecil B. De Mille biblical epics. We shot them in natural light without any professional equipment at all. The shoots always turned into a party. People used to plunder their sister's or mother's wardrobes for costumes. Eventually, I started imitating the programme of a real cinema; I'd make fake newsreels, fake adverts, then the main feature. The programmes were successful because they became a kind of Happening. Since all the films were silent – sound recording for Super 8 is difficult and the results always unsatisfactory – I'd stand next to the projector and do the voice of each character. I'd also provide a running commentary and sometimes criticize the actors' performances. And I'd also sing. I had a little tape recorder and would insert songs in the films. These were live shows and the audiences loved them. The screenings were held at friends' houses but I'd organize them as if they were eagerly awaited world premières. They were a big party. And they became more and more successful. Soon, I was screening my programmes in bars and discos, then in the private film schools which had just been set up in Madrid, in art galleries and finally – and this was the high point of this period – at the Madrid Film Institute.

Had you seen many films before making your own?

Yes, I'd started going to the cinema when I was about ten. Until then, it was rather difficult to see any films at all in the village where I lived. In the Sixties, at Cáceres where I was at school, we'd see American comedies, films by Frank Tashlin, Blake Edwards or Billy Wilder. I very much liked Stanley Donen's *Two for the Road*. I also saw the first films of the French Nouvelle Vague, *Les 400 Coups*, *A Bout de Souffle*, and the great Italian neo-realist films, the first Pasolinis, films by Visconti and Antonioni which will stay with me forever. They touched me profoundly. None of these films spoke about my life, yet I felt strangely close to the world they described. I was bowled over by *L'Avventura*. I'd say to myself 'This film speaks to me.' Which was

rather an exaggeration since I was still a child and had no idea what the bourgeoisie was about. But the film was about *ennui* and, stuck as I was in my provincial backwater, I knew all about that. I felt exactly like Monica Vitti does in the film. I could say, just as she does: 'I don't know what to do. All right, let's go to a nightclub . . . I think I've an idea . . . but I've forgotten it . . .'



L'Avventura: 'This film speaks to me.'

In retrospect, my reaction seems rather kitsch, maybe it has something to do with my gay sensibility, but it was sincere, I felt the same. I also remember Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* and feeling totally nihilistic when I'd finished reading it. By then I'd already rejected religious education. From the start, I knew the priests had nothing to say to me. I recognized myself with equal conviction, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a film the church considered the apotheosis of sin. I'd say to myself: 'I belong to the world of sin, of degeneracy.' I was twelve years old and if someone asked me 'What are you?' I'd reply: 'A nihilist.'



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: 'I recognized myself.'

Did you know what it meant?

A little. The lack of any meaning anywhere. Since my life had no meaning it seemed rather obvious. I felt like an extraterrestrial, close to the Nihilists and very far from God. That was the message I received from films. I saw the great classics ten years later at the Madrid Film Institute at the end of the Sixties. I'd go every day: westerns, which bored me as a child, the great American comedies of the Thirties and Forties. I loved them most of all: Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, Mitchell Leisen. Until then, I didn't even know these directors existed. It was also my first experience of the German expressionists. Their films left me speechless as if I'd seen miracles.

Did you read a lot?

All the time. I must have been nine when I bought my first book. No one told me what I should read so I discovered everything for myself. I started with the obvious. Living as we did in a small village, my mother and my sisters used to order things from Corte Inglés, a mail order catalogue, which for me was a kind of museum full of beautiful photographs. They were my first experience of art. My sisters bought things for the house and I bought books. I had no idea whether they were good or bad, they were simply the books in the catalogue, mostly the bestsellers of the time: Lahos Zilahi's *Devil's Advocate*, Mika Wattari's *The Egyptian*, Morris West, Walter Scott. But there was also *Steppenwolf* by Hermann Hesse and the famous *Bonjour Tristesse* which made me cry out, 'My God, there are people like me! I'm not alone!' I only started reading Spanish literature when I was twenty. I especially liked the late nineteenth-century realists. Rimbaud or Genet were hardly mentioned at school, but I knew they'd interest me and I read them as well as some of the decadent poets. From then on, literature, French literature most of all, became a passion. In 1968, by the time I arrived in Madrid where books were much more readily available, Latin American writers had exploded on to the world. I read them avidly.

You were a very mature twelve year old.

I don't know whether I was mature or not. But I realize that what interests me now already interested me then. I had no need of education to discover such things. They came to me very early.

You were also very lonely.

Terribly lonely! I remember being ten and telling my friends about Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*. It had made a vast impression on me. They looked at me almost with terror. But they were also fascinated because it was something

totally alien to them. I had no one I could speak to at school. We simply weren't interested in the same things. I encountered the things I liked in the most absolute solitude. I only realized when I arrived in Madrid that there were people who shared the same interests.

So until that time you lived in a kind of parallel world?
Absolutely.

It must have worried your parents.

Yes, I remember my mother looking at me, hands on hips, saying: 'Where did you learn that?' She was quite disconcerted.

Was it a struggle to impose your personality?

Children develop great strength in solitude; they can also become very neurotic. Luckily, that wasn't the case with me. I'm sure of that because I was a



Pedro Almodóvar aged five with his sister, Maria Antonia, and his father, Antonio.

very good observer of other people's lives, and a happy one, pleased with what I saw. But always an observer, never a participant.

Your solitude was therefore never of an autistic nature?

No. Luckily, I had a strong character and I must say I found my predicament rather amusing. My childhood was made up of monologues. Often people would listen to them most attentively. Later, when I acted at school and, much later, when I presented my films at screenings, I understood that the solitude I felt on stage was the same as that which I had felt as a child when I spoke of what I liked. It probably explains why I'm so at ease on stage, why I'm so successful at it. I've never suffered from stage fright. I'm as relaxed there as I am in my kitchen.



Almodóvar aged eight with a mandolin: A long-held desire to perform on stage.

When you sang with McNamara, as you did in Labyrinth of Passion, was it the realization of a long-held desire to perform on stage?

Yes, it was. But it was a playful desire, devoid of pretention. Being on stage is a very intense experience. I recommend it to everyone. I don't mean it's important to do something on stage in order for other people to see it but that it's interesting to have a dialogue with an audience rather than with just the one person.

The concerts with McNamara were very provocative.

Yes, they were. They seem even more so today. We live in more conservative times.

When you speak of your childhood you give an impression of great freedom. One would have assumed such a rural upbringing would be very moralist and reactionary?

It was far worse! From the earliest age, I was surrounded in my village by all the things I didn't want to do, the kind of things I would fight against in the future. It was very important for me to understand this early. But this understanding was the result of enormous tension, and to arrive at it was not pleasant. My childhood was neither sad nor happy. I already felt the disapproval as a child I would later feel as an adult. Although my elders didn't know what they disapproved of, their judgement of me had been made. I don't want it to sound dramatic but it was hard. Luckily, I wasn't traumatized by it because I have a very positive personality. I also escaped into books and films and this gave me enormous pleasure. But I did feel rejected and despised. The strength I possess, I found it within myself. Strangely enough, I was always very aware of what was happening around me. I had to be patient and wait several years until the outside world fitted the universe I inhabited.

Did you continue your studies in Madrid?

No. I'd passed the equivalent of the Baccalauréat and I thought I'd go to university and study film at the same time. But I didn't have enough money to go to university and Franco had closed down the film school. I told myself life in all its aspects would be my education. I went to the Film Institute, read, bought myself a Super 8 camera and lived a great deal. I also had a job. That also was part of my apprenticeship. My very presence at Telefonica was rather scandalous: I had long hair and didn't dress like anyone else. I led a kind of double life. From nine to five, I worked as an administrator and in the evenings I was something else entirely. But the years I spent at Telefonica

were very important. I learnt a great deal about the urban bourgeoisie which I could never have learnt otherwise. This discovery had a great influence on my films. Until then, all I knew about was the rural poor.

You waited until 'the outside world fitted the universe you inhabited', but you also contributed in creating this outside world. You became one of the key figures of the Madrid movida.

I didn't create that world. Various creative currents met at the same time. But by arriving in Madrid I also found freedom in spite of Franco's dictatorship. Madrid was a centre of clandestine activity. Such a life was quite normal as far as I was concerned.

You haven't mentioned the actors of the films you saw in your adolescence. Did certain actors, and especially actresses, make an impression?

The actresses who sit in my private pantheon are the great actresses of the Forties and Fifties. In the spontaneity of certain actresses who've worked for me, I see Carole Lombard, the early Shirley Maclaine or Katharine Hepburn. That somewhat idealized image of women was very influential.

There's a photo taken in the Seventies of you and your brother Agustín standing in front of a poster of Marilyn Monroe. But you haven't mentioned her.

Kika's character owes a little to Giulietta Masina, the working-class woman



Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar, enshrining Marilyn Monroe.

in *Nights of Cabiria*, a little to Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but also a great deal to Monroe's innocence, along with her sensuality and spontaneity. For me, Marilyn was an excellent actress, totally out of the ordinary. Her last film, John Huston's *The Misfits*, is one of the most moving films I've ever seen. What impresses me most about Marilyn – like James Dean, she's become a kind of icon – is not her glamour but her very personal, unschooled acting style. Like Kika, she also possesses a kind of wounded innocence.



The Misfits: 'One of the most moving films I've ever seen.'

I discovered Marilyn when I was about twelve but only fully understood her talent, her exceptional character, later on. The photograph you mentioned was taken when Agustín was helping me make a very conceptual short, the idea for which – a shrine dedicated to Marilyn – I reprised in *Law of Desire*. A picture of Marilyn dominates the shrine. On the steps leading up to it are various books with cover photographs of her. All the pictures of the saints on the altar are pictures of Marilyn lit by candles. There are shrines everywhere in Spain, especially in the villages, and they always put

pictures on the altars which are believed to have a beneficial influence, ease one's solitude and strengthen one's faith in the future. For my mother, the picture would be of Mary of Carmel, and for me, Marilyn. Their function is identical. My rural education was very important in this way. Even though I didn't as a child take part in the world around me, there came a time when, in my own way, I made it my own. Witnessing the outside world was also part of my education.

Getting back to Pepi, Luci, Bom, how did this full-length film come into being after the success of your Super 8 programmes?

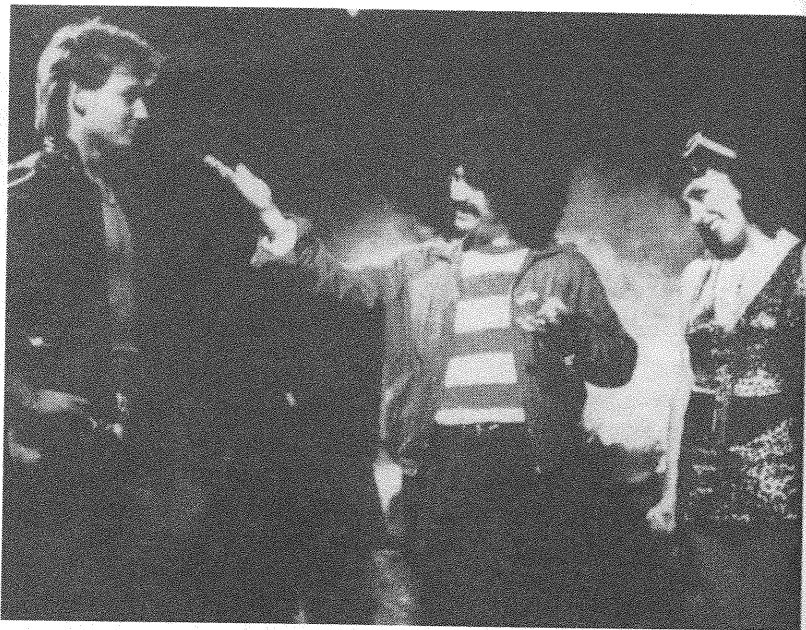
I was still working for the phone company, making movies in the evening and on weekends, when I encountered an independent theatre company, Los Goliardos, who, as well as performing their own shows, were starting to take part in more professional productions. During this last period of shooting Super 8 I therefore had the chance to work with genuinely talented and experienced underground performers such as Carmen Maura, whom I both directed and acted with in Los Goliardos.

I was still very attached to Barcelona where I maintained a close relationship with a group of artists, many of them cartoonists such as Mariscal, who were all associated with *La Vibora (The Viper)*, one of the best Spanish cartoon magazines of the last twenty years. I'd written stories for the cartoons in the magazine and also created a kind of photo-story which had gone down very well. I was asked to do another one. It had to be punky, very aggressive, dirty and funny. That was very fashionable then. I wrote it and called it *General Erections*.

At the same time, I was also acting with Carmen in a play which had something to do with filth: *Dirty Hands* by Jean-Paul Sartre. I had a small part, the communist who is about to commit a crime, while Carmen, who'd already become a famous actress, was the star of the show. Our relationship would have been ideal melodramatic material for an American musical of the Thirties. Carmen was the star and I was the *meritorio*, the new boy, the one who works for next to nothing and who has to prove himself capable of being a true professional. We were therefore at opposite ends of the ladder. Carmen, however, was fascinated by me and we'd spend hours together in her dressing room. I'd watch her preparing for the show, a ritual which always fascinates me. And while she brushed her hair and made up, I'd tell her the stories I was writing and, in those days, I was writing a great deal.

One day, I told her about *General Erections*. She loved the story and told me I should turn it into a film. So I took the photo-story and turned it into a script. The result pleased me. I found it very funny. I thought of shooting it

in Super 8 but Carmen and some friends of hers, members of Los Goliardos, decided it was time to stop working in Super 8 and move up to 16mm. The film was renamed *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* and Carmen decided to find the money. She was helped by Felix Rotaeta, who plays the policeman in the film, and who became a director himself a few years later. Carmen and Felix called all their friends and asked them for money. Some gave five thousand pesetas, others twenty thousand and, thanks to hundreds of friends, we amassed half a million pesetas. That was our budget.



Pepi, Luci, Bom: The general erections scene.

We shot the film with a crew of almost all first-timers. The cameramen cut off some heads, mine above all during the general erection competition. The shoot was very chaotic and lasted a year and a half, starting in 1979 and ending in 1980. We could only work weekends and when he had money. We constantly had to adapt the schedule to our material circumstances – which changed constantly. One day, when we'd completely run out of money and we weren't even sure we could finish the film, I remember thinking I'd appear on screen myself and tell the audience how the film ended. After all, telling a story was what interested me most.

Pepi, Luci, Bom is formally my most imperfect film but it gives a clear and precise indication of my vocation as a director. It was a fantastic education for me. The way we had to shoot also gave me a certain independence from the narrative rules of film-making. Under such conditions, continuity, for example, is no longer a problem. The lack of funds provides the kind of creative freedom which it's much more difficult and sometimes impossible to attain on a normal shoot. It's a film full of flaws but when a film has only one or two flaws it's merely imperfect; when the flaws are as numerous as they are in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* they constitute a style. I used to say this as a joke when I promoted the film, but I think it's rather true.

The criteria for the original commission of the photo-story, the original source of Pepi, Luci, Bom, seem to permeate the film. It's both provocative and even somewhat vulgar. Later, the language and the way you tackled such scabrous material was much less crude.

Yes, it's true, the vulgarity arose from the terms of the initial commission. The film's origins lie not only in photo-stories, but also in comic strips. I make the influence quite clear by using cards between various scenes which describe the action in a dramatic and condensed manner. As compared to film-based material, the fact that *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was first a comic strip – and a vulgar punky one at that – affected the development of the characters. The characters are very clear archetypes, instantly recognizable and typical of the medium they came from: the modern girl, the nasty cop. There is no need for psychological development.

Do you mean Pepi, Luci, Bom was a kind of stylistic exercise mixing the codes of the comic strip with those of cinema?

Not at all. For me, the style of the film corresponded to the kind of cinema I was spontaneously drawn to both as director and spectator. Although instinctively attracted to the punk attitude which was one of the conditions of the original commission, I was also more naturally influenced by the American underground, Paul Morrissey's first films, and most of all John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*. The films I'd been making were less documentary and sociological than Morrissey's. I was more interested in fiction. But my sensibility was as amoral and playful as his. *Pepi, Luci, Bom* helped express in concrete form my relationship to pop, a style I'd always felt close to – in this case, the hard, corrosive pop of the late Seventies. I tackled the pop of the Sixties in *Labyrinth of Passion*. It's a much lighter, tamer style, exemplified by Richard Lester's first films and Frank Tashlin's comedies featuring the kind of American housewife Doris Day played so well.

Were you aware of these references when you were making these films?

I don't know whether they were clear to me then or whether they became clearer later on. Most of the time, I'm only aware of what I wanted to do after I've finished a film. I discover what I want to do while I'm shooting. No doubt, this was even truer then. One inevitably gains greater awareness with hindsight.

In Pepi, Luci, Bom, Pepi considers making a film with her friends which, like Andy Warhol's movies, would be inspired by their own lives. Was your intention similar to Pepi's, and therefore Warhol's, when you made the film?

My desire was no doubt similar to Pepi's, but different from Warhol's. Actually, Pepi explains this in the film: when you want to shoot a kind of documentary about people you know and present them as characters, the very nature of the project implies a certain manipulation of your friends, of their true personalities. Pepi tells Luci that her natural presence isn't enough to bring out her truth on screen. She must play herself, not just be herself. She tells her cinema rain is fake because real rain doesn't register on screen.

This is exactly what interests me in cinema: cinema speaks of reality, of things which are true, but must become a representation of reality in order to be recognizable. There's a very important difference between me and Morrissey or Warhol. They simply stuck their camera in front of the 'characters' and captured everything that happened. It's very powerful cinema, but I'm not patient enough to wait for something to happen in front of my camera. I love the artifice which is a part of a director's work. And artifice is precisely what communicates a film-maker's intentions. When Morrissey and Warhol were working, their films were violently new compared to the American cinema of that time. They completely rejected what one considered to be the normal rhythm of film, the lighting which creates the atmosphere of a scene. Even if it wasn't their intention, their films are genuine sociological analyses of their country. It's both very interesting and surprising to see how Warhol, who was a master of the art of frivolity and the banal, became one of America's greatest sociologists. His book, *My Philosophy from A to B*, is one of the most serious works ever written about American society.

Did you really meet Warhol the way Patty Diphusa, the character you created for your chronicles in the magazine La Luna and who featured in some photo-stories at the beginning of the Eighties, describes it?

Yes. But it didn't happen quite the way I tell it as Patty. It probably happened in 1983/1984. A Spanish millionaire who, by chance, became the producer of *Dark Habits* and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* had bought several

of Warhol's pictures. They were composed of crosses, guns and a third element, I can't remember what. He exhibited them for the first time in public in his house in Madrid. Warhol came over for the occasion and every night there was a party in his honour. And every night I was invited and introduced to him. It became a bit of a bore because each time I was introduced to him as the Spanish Andy Warhol. By the fifth or sixth time, Warhol asked me why. I told him it was probably because there were a lot of transvestites in my films. He took lots of pictures of me – he was always taking pictures at parties – but what really interested him was meeting the Spanish aristocrats who might commission work from him. He didn't have much luck with them and he didn't paint my portrait either because I wasn't famous enough yet.

Was it an emotional meeting for you?

Not especially, because I'm not an idolater. In the last few years, I've had the chance to meet many very important and famous people, some of whom I'd admired for ages. But, oddly enough, when I like an artist, I have no desire to meet him because quite often, when one does, the person one meets is very different from the person one knows through his work. On the other hand, it is possible to be interested in an artist and for his personality to be appealing quite independently from his genius as a creator. For example, I remember meeting Billy Wilder who, I'm sure, would have fascinated me even if he hadn't had such a formidable body of work behind him. I met him two or three times in Los Angeles in 1988 when I was promoting *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. He saw very few people at the time but he agreed to see me because he very much liked my film. He told me he'd asked all his friends to vote for it at the Oscars. He also gave me one piece of advice: never give in to the temptation of working in Hollywood.

Is it a piece of advice you'll follow?

I don't know. For me, a film always depends on its script. So it all depends on the kind of story Hollywood might offer me. But if there's a possibility of working there, it's still a distant one. I'm not against shooting a film in English. I even think it might happen quite soon. But for the moment I wouldn't want to make this English-language film in Hollywood. I'm very clear about that. Often, when I see American films directed by Europeans, such as Stephen Frears' *Hero*, I tell myself it's exactly what one shouldn't do, that those directors fell into every trap lying in wait for them. It's a very dangerous enterprise.

Pepi, Luci, Bom is your only film which, in the end, most firmly rejects the

idea of disparity. Luci is abandoned by her two friends because they cannot accept and cannot bear her very ordinary, not to say reactionary, idea of happiness – a life dominated by a tyrannical husband. Nothing can save Luci. She is disqualified. In retrospect, her exclusion is very surprising. It's the exception which proves the most immutable and most natural rule in your work: your affection for your characters and your desire to give all of them, even the most unsympathetic, such as the selfish mother in High Heels, a chance to be liked by the audience.

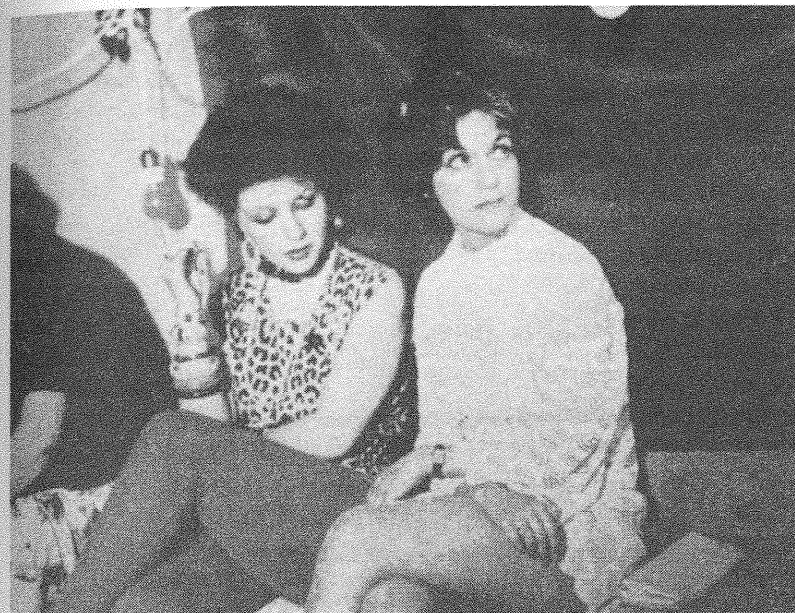
One must also make clear that what one perceives as normality can no doubt include the most perverse things. Bom experiences a great deal more perverse pleasure as a housewife than as a bohemian, a creature of the night. She comes home disappointed, convinced that her true nature belongs in the kitchen and the dining-room. This was the first film where I dealt a little with the particular difficulties of being a couple. As in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, every couple is different and has their own rules. For me, the moral of *Pepi, Luci, Bom* is that modern women are alone. Pepi and Luci abandon Bom who is not alone, while they are deeply so. Free, but alone.

I was very interested in this vague, vagabond-like aspect of the female character. Anything can happen to a solitary person who has no defined aim, who is always on the edge of a crisis. Such a character is the perfect vehicle for telling a story. I don't mean people who are genuinely lost, without any kind of social connections, who through their very abnormality are capable of waiting for anything to happen, but rather someone such as the heroine of William Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach*, a novel I recently strongly considered adapting. She is erratic, not because she doesn't know what to do with her life, but because at a certain point – the point where the writer enters the story – she is searching for something she is only vaguely aware of. For me, the end of *Pepi, Luci, Bom* reflects that feeling.

It's also a little bit about the triumph of feeling over modernity. Bom, who represents the modern Madrid singer, starts to suffer, and that feeling allows her to discover another kind of music, the *bolero*, which is the most emotional type of singing, although it's never really been fashionable and certainly isn't modern.

The female characters in Pepi, Luci, Bom are echoed in nearly all your later films. Their independence, their energy, their seductiveness as well as their emotional confusion are the primary elements of their descendants. On the other hand, the character of the policeman was never developed later. He's a cipher and doesn't seem to have interested you much.

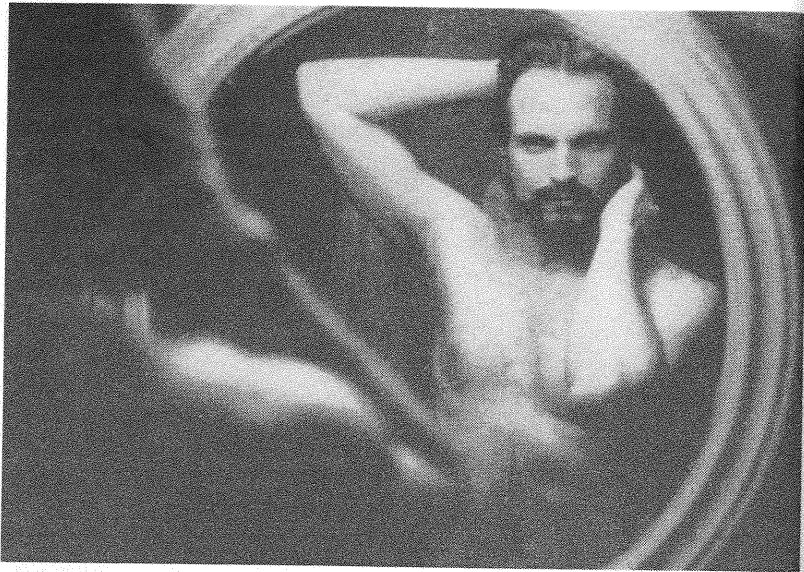
True. I wasn't pleased with him either. Policemen appear in my films only to



Luci (Eva Siva) and Pepi (Carmen Maura): 'Modern women are alone.'

facilitate the development of the story or the female characters. I try to escape from them or cut them out because they're never as good as the characters around them. But since there are always crimes in my films, or things that can be interpreted as crimes, it's very difficult not to include them. I managed to find a better way of dealing with the problem in *High Heels*, where Judge Dominguez, played by Miguel Bosé, is a genuine presence, both mysterious and seductive; the elements, therefore, of a proper character. But it's precisely because he presents various faces, those of Femme Letal and Hugo, because he isn't only a judge, that he became interesting as a character.

This rather thin image of the policeman also suggests – and this seems to me very interesting – that there is no real representation of the law in your films. In Pepi, Luci, Bom the fact that Luci's husband is a policeman is hardly used. In Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, the transgressive behaviour of the character played by Antonio Banderas is never seen in relation to the law. It exists in a world of excess, including an excess of vitality. It needs no rules to define itself against.

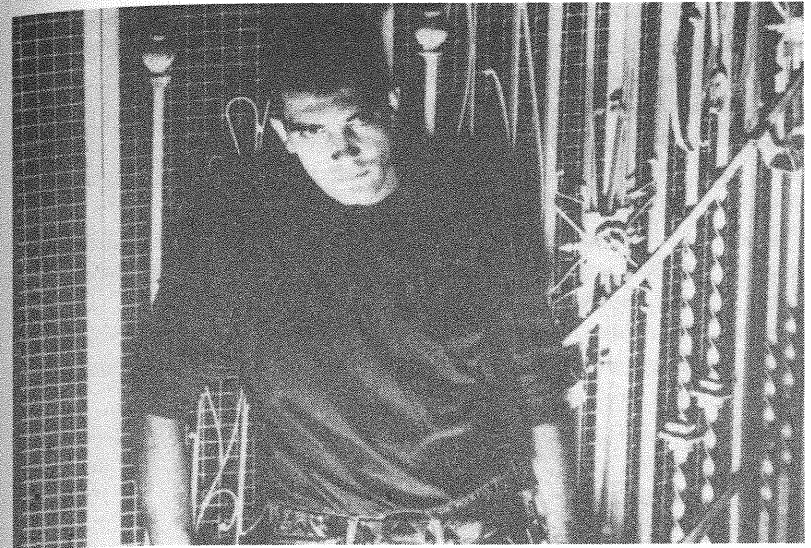


The law: Miguel Bosé in *High Heels*.

There are so many links between transgression and the law that I try to negate the existence of the law. I'm constantly struggling to exclude the law from my films. In the case of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, Antonio Banderas's character isn't particularly transgressive. He's even someone trying desperately to be normal, whose every excess arises from his desire to correspond to his image of what is a socially acceptable person. He apes normality. It's an infantile desire and he's very much a child. Personally, transgression isn't my aim, for it implies the kind of respect and acceptance of the law I'm incapable of. This may explain why my films were never anti-Franco. I simply didn't even recognize his existence. In a way, it's my revenge against Francoism. I want there to be no shadow or memory of him. Transgression is a moral word and my intention is not to break the rules but simply to impose my characters and their behaviour on the audience. It's one of the rights and also one of the powers a film-maker possesses.

I very much liked Alaska, who plays Bom and whom you never used again. Was she originally an actress or a singer?

Alaska was a singer and continued to be one. Nowadays, she has more success in the hotel trade than in music. By that I mean that there is much



The transgressor: Antonio Banderas in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*

less of a spirit of musical adventure in Madrid nowadays than when we made *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. Many performers of the time are now business people, hoteliers. It gives some idea of how this city has changed. Alaska was one of the key figures of the pop movement; what, in the past fifteen years in Spain, became known as the *movida*. But at the time of *Pepi, Luci, Bom* she hadn't yet made a record. She was fourteen and played the guitar. I was the first to make her sing. She never acted again on film. I hadn't found her a particularly gifted actress but her character, her nature, interested me a lot. Most of all she had the guts to agree to being in the film. I like her a lot.

Cristina S. Pascual and Cecilia Roth play small parts in the film. They were to star in two later films, which I find surprising. In my opinion, they aren't your best actresses.

No, they're not. Cecilia was a friend of mine and I gave her a small part because her character was totally in keeping with the role. But, as I said earlier, she had to act this character for the film and she didn't perform it very well. As for Cristina S. Pascual, she always took part in my films for other reasons. Before becoming the heroine of *Dark Habits*, she'd done several small film parts and had managed very well. But *Dark Habits* was produced by her husband, hence her starring role.