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A punk called Pedro: la movida *in the films of Pedro Almodóvar*

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In 1975, the *Sex Pistols* formed at Malcolm McLaren's shop in London and played their first gig in November. In Spain, that same month, Franco died. These seemingly unrelated circumstances, in fact, conspired to change Spanish popular culture beyond recognition. For most analysts, punk affected music most prominently, but it affected cinema in equal measure; indeed, it is almost impossible to explain the Almodóvar phenomenon without understanding the influence of punk. This essay will first contextualize briefly the phenomenon and then read Almodóvar as one of those urban youths absorbing punk as it came from the USA and Europe and supplementing it with autochthonous elements within that creative atmosphere.

Almodóvar was, in his origins, a punk film-maker who not only chronicled his times and collaborated with fellow scene members, but also adopted the representational strategies of the movement. Although the analysis here will concentrate on his early films *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1979–80) and *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982), even in his recent films we can see that he has not discarded these strategies entirely. How and why did Spanish youth come into contact with and adopt punk?

Franco's illness and other tell-tale signs of the weakening of the regime in the early 1970s (for example Carrero Blanco's assassination in 1973) inspired in Spain an atmosphere of preparation for a new, freer (and hopefully democratic) political future. The myths of the past were ripe for revision and even replacement. The already weakened barriers between Spanish and democratic European cultures were crumbling. This made the mid- and late 1970s a period in which news and cultural movements from outside could easily filter into Spain, while from the inside there was eagerness to adopt them. In the mid-1970s, punk was the subculture arising from youth cultures of the Anglo-Saxon world coming to terms with the conditions of late capitalism. This is the culture which, from the end of World War II, had set the trends that other youth cultures follow; and Spain's youth was no

exception. There was a compelling reason for Spain's youngest generation, which had not been given access to institutional spaces, to adopt punk as a strategy to gain visibility; at that time, punk's strategies were being used effectively in order to attack other establishments, principally those of the UK and USA. As Borja Casani (García de León and Maldonado, 1989, p. 131), the editor of the cult avant-garde magazine of the time, *La Luna de Madrid* stated: 'La *movida* fue la aportación madrileña a la estética del punk' (the *movida* was Madrid's contribution to punk aesthetics).

Before we go any further in exploring the form that punk took in Spain, we must account for the *movida's* specificity, a specificity brought about by the mixture of an imported style with indigenous Spanish culture. At first sight, Spanish punk looks more inclusive of different epochs and styles and more celebratory than its counterparts in other European nations or in the USA. Spain had a lot of catching up to do, as far as adopting the trends and movements that had affected popular culture in the democratic nations after World War II. Perhaps for that reason, the sounds and clothing styles of American rock and roll of the 1950s and the sounds and fashions of 1960s pop were appropriated and mixed in with more 'orthodox' punk products and even autochthonous forms of popular culture.

Local socio-political circumstances shaped the movement in Spain differently. The expectant and less restrictive atmosphere inspired by the transition to democracy gave Spanish punk a less socially aggressive character than its counterparts in the UK and USA. (The increased availability of drugs, resulting from legislative changes affecting drugs, also had an impact on the character of the *movida*.) Socio-economic problems in Spain of the 1970s and early 1980s may have been different from those faced by American or British youth (unemployment for example), but the nihilism characteristic of punk, which mixed itself into the Spanish *desencanto* (apathy) was pervasive. Many young people did not expect democracy to effect any real change (Alas, 1989); after all, many of the democratic politicians were men of the regime's single political party, the *Movimiento*. Intriguingly, *Movida* and *Nueva Ola*, were the names given to Spanish punk; and *movida* is the one which has survived, perhaps because the name is a defiant, slangish pun on the Francoist *Movimiento*. The democratic times ahead would have a *movida* rather than a *Movimiento*.

Given that the punk explosion particularly targeted the music world, it will be illuminating here to survey briefly how the attack was mounted in the Spanish case. In the Spain of the 1970s, the hegemony of left-wing, oppositional political discourse made it the measure of everything else, effectively devaluing or excluding any cultural production that could not be integrated within it. The popular music scene of the opposition was dominated by the *rock con raíces* and singer-songwriters such as the members of the *Nova cançó*. These groups and soloists were advocating through their music social and political change. By virtue of their oppositional stance, they were under the scrutiny of censorship. Another important factor to

take into account is the way Francoism had demonized all forms of rock music, mainly because rock was a form of expression of the urban working-class, as Jesús Ordovás (1989, p. 384) points out. Thus, rock was rarely seen live in concerts, infrequently shown on television, was marginalized by the radio stations and had no backing from record companies.

Once Franco died, *rock con raíces* and singer-songwriters became the popular-music establishment. However, a generation emerged into writing and listening to music in the mid-1970s who related to neither of the above. As Diego A. Manrique (1989, p. 478) put it: 'They were not marked indelibly by Francoism, they wanted an aesthetic break [with the past] and they wanted to enjoy immediately the political advantages of the new situation'.[1]

This meant that they chose not to address or listen to head-on political or social problems and they did not serve as mouthpieces for any of the emerging political associations. *Movida* members had been brought up listening to rock in English, or Spanish rock that revealed an Anglo-Saxon influence, and this was displayed in their compositions. There was a further distancing factor: class. Members of many of these *movida* groups were, in fact, sons and daughters of middle-class and upper-middle-class families (for example, Carlos G. Berlanga from *Kaka de Luxe* and *Alaska y los Pegamoides* – was the son of film-maker Luis G. Berlanga and had benefited from European travel; Santiago Auserón of *Radio Futura* was another, having studied in Paris and the USA).

The new musical establishment viewed this non-political attitude to music as an 'impostura' (not an acceptable attitude to take) (Manrique, 1989, p. 478) and did not encourage them. For this reason, *movida* musicians, at the dawn of democracy, did not benefit from the new resources that were being directed into popular music in general to correct the starvation of funds and venues effected by Francoism. In the face of indifference, the cultures of the new generation of young men and women went underground and unofficial: these Madrid *punks* found other vehicles of expression such as comics and music magazines (*Star*, *Disco-Exprés*s, *Vibraciones*); fanzines and new music venues (bars and clubs such as *La Vía Láctea*, *Pentagrama* and *Rock-Ola*) sprang up, creating a 'scene' where fans and musicians, writers, film-makers and DJs could mix. Soon it was obvious to the media that there were many who identified with these attitudes, and from invisibility, the *movida* became the most popular movement of the late 1970s right up to the mid-1980s.

Enter Pedro Almodóvar

The punk ethos of the *movida* is crucial in accounting for Almodóvar the film-maker. The attitude to cultural representation within *movida* subculture affected much more than sounds and clothes styles. For example, punk encouraged anybody to try to cross the barrier between being a member of

the public and a performer. Punk's philosophy, 'Anarchy is the key; do-it-yourself is the melody' and punk's minimalism (in other words, its denial that artistic competence, let alone excellence, was a prerequisite to access to the stage) meant that groups mushroomed in the early 1980s. Punk language often 'drew on discourses which not only had been previously absent from popular songs, but which had been excluded from the mainstream ... discourse of society as a whole: the area of "pornography" and "obscenity"', observed Laing (1985, p. 75). This strategy was adopted by Spanish punk too. Dick Hebdige's reading of punk (1979) points out another characteristic: old signifiers took on new meanings in the hands of punk, but, by the same token, not even those new meanings were 'permanently sacred'. Barriers between media were crossed, concerts became performance-art spectacles. This signified the beginning of a process that permanently undermined the validity of binary oppositions such as: artist/public, consumer/producer, present/past, authentic (from inside Spain or in Spanish)/non-authentic (from outside or not in Spanish) and political (lyrics that engage with the present situation) /non-political (escapist lyrics).

Almodóvar's involvement with this movement must be understood as more than a simple cinematic showcase for its groups and fashions. It is, in fact, an involvement which stems from a direct allegiance with it. He formed in 1983 *Almodóvar y McNamara*, a band whose performance strategies relied heavily on those of the 1960s New York Pop Style (of figures associated with Andy Warhol) and on those of the mid-1970s punk groups like the *New York Dolls*. As well as using this vehicle, Almodóvar also collaborated in publications which were vehicles of punk ideas such as the monthly music magazine *Vibraciones* and the Comics magazine *Star*. It is well known that, as Juan Arribas observes (1987), *Pepi, Luci, Bom* ... was first envisaged as a story about the punk scene in Madrid for *Star*.

Themes, genres and styles in Spanish cinema of the late 1970s, like those of music, were ripe for revision. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (1998) indicate that Spanish directors of the mid- to late 1970s, were obsessed predictably with film as political discourse. Those who, during Francoism, had been in the opposition (Saura, Bardem, Camus, Miró), with the coming of democracy, now formed part of the new establishment. They were the darlings of the film critics and the recipients of awards and grants, and they were expected to uncover and debunk the myths created by the Franco regime. Their favoured style, themes and genres became hegemonic. However, as in music, there were newcomers 'not marked indelibly by Francoism' who wanted cinema to make an aesthetic break with the past. They wanted to enjoy translating into images (and seeing) the new situation.

Almodóvar, the film-maker, started translating into a distinct film style a number of the punk strategies of the *movida*. First, this was done in order to access the public scene and, once that was achieved, in order to produce and promote the *movida's* new discourse with a new attitude to performance and representation, which became a challenge to the orthodox idea of

artistic excellence. He also drew on the punk incorporation of themes previously absent from cinema. Finally in this essay, we will see how the 'absence of sacred signifiers' too became part of the Almodovarian discourse.

A new attitude to performance and representation

> ... every performance, however apocalyptic, offered palpable evidence that things could change, indeed were changing: that performance itself was a possibility no authentic punk should discount.
>
> (Hebdige, 1979, p. 110)

As indicated above, *movida* members lacked institutional support. Their work was affected by lack of funds and venues and this generated frustration with the establishment. However, this frustration became productive and pushed them to adopt a 'do-it-yourself' attitude and a reliance on 'comrades in arms' rather than on the establishment. In Almodóvar's case this approach translated itself into using both an indirect route into and unorthodox methods of film-making.

Without time, money or places to learn and lacking the social capital that institutional training provides (Bourdieu, 1989, refers to social capital as those useful relations – social, political, cultural, etc. – built up by a person through family connections or career), Almodóvar started to use super-8 cameras and improvised screening spaces such as parties in university halls of residence and clubs (or at independent art houses like *Alphaville*) for his finished products. His early short films were first watched by a public that, normally, did not deem contemporary Spanish Cinema interesting, because of its political bias. Eventually, his films (and those of other experimental film-makers) gained some institutional space in the (few) showings of new talent at the *Filmoteca* (National Film Library/Archive). Nevertheless, Almodóvar became predominantly self-reliant and this would prove invaluable in order to survive in a culture too often dependent on government hand-outs. Ultimately, we could argue that the 'Do-it-yourself' discipline led to the creation of his production company (El Deseo S.A.) which has granted him unprecedented freedom and has served as an example to many younger directors.

Challenging the orthodoxy of artistic excellence

Punk musicians, designers, or film-makers have consistently acknowledged and flaunted their amateurism, their mercenary attitude to culture and their lack of virtuosity in order to demystify the process of representation. In the case of Almodóvar, as soon as his career started to attract critical attention,

we learnt that he had a day job working for the Spanish Telephone Company (Telefónica). This job was as much flaunted by Almodóvar himself as a defiant banner as it was used against him by critics. For example, on the subject of breaking generic conventions, he declared: 'As I do not have any academic training these things are easier for me than for other directors'. ('Al no tener una formación académica este tipo de cosas me resultan más fáciles que a otros directores', Vidal, 1989, p. 183.) The specialized press in Spain decided to take issue with features which they viewed as detrimental to cinema as art and label Almodóvar's deliberate amateurism as incompetence. Almodóvar's alleged incompetence followed him until his international success in 1988 with *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, after which the magazine *Fotogramas*, granted him the title of film director (Guarner, 1988, p. 10). In fact, this incompetence was, for the most part, cultivated. Although a certain degree of amateurism was imposed by the low-budget, self-financing, self-teaching conditions, this lack was instead capitalized on and turned into a style (trash aesthetics) which challenged hegemonic institutional cinema (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 82).

In the same way as censorship had concentrated the minds of oppositional directors and had given them a set of 'counter-guidelines', the high-production values characteristic of the new hegemonic style signalled for Almodóvar a way 'not to go'. Paul Julian Smith analyses the characteristics of this subsidized cinema and unravels the ideological intentions behind its aesthetics: 'The glossy production values ... are not thus merely the result of an individual director's artistic temperament; they also betray the ideological commitment of the Spanish government to the celebration of a certain cultural heritage' (Smith, 1996, p. 25).

While historical accounts or literary adaptations set in the past (Miró's *El crimen de Cuenca* and Camus' *Los santos inocentes* are two obvious examples) demanded naturalistic detail because 'they had to tell the truth', Almodóvar's themes and generic choices make other demands on the *mise-en-scène* and allow him the freedom to flaunt constructedness, playfulness, anachronistic collage techniques and melodramatic excess.

His *mise-en-scène* tends to portray urban exteriors, some of which were of particular significance for the *movida* subculture, but there is no attempt to empty this exterior of elements that are incongruous and anachronistic with the *movida* scenes that are staged in them. For example, *El Rastro*, the Sunday street market of Madrid, was an important showcase for all subcultures, but significantly for the *movida*, because of its unsanctioned and vaguely transgressive status. It was used as a meeting place and some stalls displayed their fanzines, records of emergent punk groups, etc. For this reason it is an apt setting for *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982), especially the opening scene where it becomes Sexilia's 'shopping area' for sex partners. However, the set is not emptied of observers, some of whom look directly into the camera and prevent the suspension of our disbelief.

Many of Almodóvar's urban interiors prominently feature public transport. In *Laberinto,* Sexilia takes a bus home after her first night with Riza, wearing her flamboyant cape and brightly-coloured plastic jewels. Whilst using public transport as a location was probably an economic necessity in these early films, it means, once more, that the director has little control over *mise-en-scène*, since the other passengers appear in the shot. However, these non-*movida* city people, dressed in drab colours and expressionless, provide a background against which Sexilia, in her colourful attire, is distanced from the Spain they conjure up.

We often see interiors and exteriors of clubs (*Rock-Ola*, especially in *Laberinto*) and bars. *Laberinto* includes an exuberant scene in *Bar La Bobia*, a hanging-out venue of the *movida*, in which Roxy (Fabio de Miguel) and a Punkette are drinking 'alcohol por un tubo' (a bucketful of alcohol) and sniffing 'an overdose' of nail varnish. Even shops are used as locations in imaginative and resourceful ways. A lamp shop in *Laberinto* provides the excessive background required for a photo-session. The group *Ellas* want 'to shine like jewels' on the cover of their record; the chandeliers on display provide the brilliance.

Also, while the commitment to verisimilitude, dictated by the political discourse of hegemonic, official cinema, demanded impeccable performances from its actors, Almodóvar used national punk-pop figures – Alaska (*Pepi* ...), Poch, Santiago Auserón, Fabio McNamara, etc. (*Laberinto* ...), McNamara (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*) – who could not act. When professional actors were used, they were often cast against their usual types, in ground-breaking, imaginative ways, as in the case of Carmen Maura, as Pepi. Imanol Arias, Riza in *Laberinto,* was linked to the prestigious 'high art' theatre productions of Miguel Narros rather than to popular culture.

New strategies

Other strategies borrowed from punk found their way into Almodóvar's cinema: the incorporation of themes previously absent from popular cinematic representation and even excluded from mainstream media discourse effectively became a celebration of destabilization; for example the enjoyment by his characters of practices that clearly constitute antisocial behaviour. Punk was successful in making visible, for example, objects associated with pornography and sexual taboos (bondage trousers, chains, dog collars). In a similar manner, themes such as incest and scatology, hitherto largely absent from the mainstream Spanish cinema (although present in underground comics), were made visible by Almodóvar. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* ... sado-masochistic practices form part of the film's narration and dialogue. Luci (Eva Siva) leaves her sadistic and fascist (*facha)* policeman husband to pursue an equally sadistic relationship with the lesbian punk

singer Bom (Alaska). However, on discovering that there is more masochistic pleasure to be gained from her husband, Luci returns to him. Sado-masochism is made visible as a choice in sexuality. So is nymphomania in *Laberinto* ..., where incest is depicted as 'annoying' for the victim rather than 'disturbing'. Both problems are located in the plots simply for their own sake (and their shock potential). *Laberinto* ... also flaunts practices labelled as socially transgressive, especially in the scene where a photo-novel is being shot. A catalogue of deviant behaviour (including sexual masochism) is displayed with no function in the plot other than being a showcase for transgression.

The absence of sacred signifiers

The *movida* parodied its own components, and the texts it produced, as well as those of previous discourses. This self-appropriation or parody takes the form of an absence of 'permanently sacred signifiers'. As Hebdige observes, 'the forbidden is permitted, but by the same token, nothing, not even these forbidden signifiers (bondage, safety pins, chains, hair-dye, etc.) is sacred and fixed' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 115). The whole of Almodóvar's production illustrates this practice, but especially in his first two films. This is one of the reasons why sectors of the media and the academic establishment, with a more earnest attitude to cultural production, have consistently condemned Almodóvar. Paul Julian Smith (1994, p. 2) summarizes the attacks levelled:

> Thus Almodóvar is known as a 'woman's director' ... who has consistently placed woman centre frame in his cinema; yet he has been frequently accused of misogyny, of humiliating and fetishizing those same women. Secondly, he is often cited as the embodiment of post-Franco Spain, the representative of the new nation; yet his films studiously avoid debates such as those on regional independence ... . Finally he is known (outside Spain at least) as a gay-identified man, who appeals to queer-coded registers of kitsch or camp; yet, his filmic career can be read as a progressive disavowal of homosexuality, whether masculine or feminine.

This refusal to acknowledge 'sacred signifiers' or 'sacred values' connects with the *movida* intention not to address political or social political problems head-on, not to serve as a mouthpiece for any political discourse (and this includes gender politics, feminism, sexual politics, etc.). What was described as 'apoliticism' (wrongly as Smith explains, 1994, p. 2) is a distrust of right and left shared by most *movida* artists, which is induced by *desencanto* (apathy) and nihilism. It is significant that in *La flor de mi secreto* (1995) and *Carne trémula* (1997) Almodóvar has performed yet another 'defilement' of the expectations created by his earlier refusal to face politics. In the earlier film, a student demonstration against the Socialists is depicted.

However, characters deliver openly political lines at the end of the latter film. While many critics saw this concesion to political discourse as a new phase in Almodóvar, we should also think of the punk in him. Nothing, not even the expectations he has created in his public and the critics, is sacred or fixed.

Note

1. '[N]o estaban marcados decisivamente por el franquismo, asumían una ruptura estética y querían disfrutar inmediatamente de las ventajas políticas de la nueva situación.'

Filmography

ALMODÓVAR, P. 1979–80: *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón.*
—— 1982: *Laberinto de Pasiones.*
—— 1983: *Entre tinieblas.*
—— 1984: *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*
—— 1995: *La flor de mi secreto.*
—— 1997: *Carne trémula.*
CAMUS, M. 1984: *Los santos inocentes.*
MIRO, P. 1979: *El crimen de Cuenca.*

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Femme foetal: the triple terror of the young Basque woman in Pasajes

RYAN PROUT

> What it's about for these women is refusing to have a sense of humour and refusing to adapt to life as they find it. Simply put, they don't understand why the fuck their lives aren't better than they are.
>
> (Daniel Calparsoro, in Heredero, 1998, p. 158)[1]

Made in 1996, *Pasajes* is the second in a trio of films set in the post-industrial landscape of the Basque Country. Together with Daniel Calparsoro's debut feature, *Salto al vacío* (1995) and his later film, *A Ciegas* (1997), *Pasajes* forms a triptych distinguished by an aesthetic of geographical disorientation, moral emptiness, and urban existentialism. *Pasajes* takes viewers into materially marginal spaces – corridors, lifts, subways, pedestrian walkways and the perimeters of depressed housing developments – which are populated by a makeshift family of young marginal characters who eke out an existence at the outer limits of capitalism's purview. Technically unemployed, they are far from idle. Rag-pickers adapted to a virtual environment, they are 'Millennial rogues who are forced to live by their wits in the face of an environment of economic collapse and material want' (El Deseo, 1996, p. 6).[2]

Manu and Butano, an aspiring impresario and boxer, live with Gabi and Gema, lesbian lovers and burglars, in the unintentionally minimalist accommodations of what seems to be an abandoned warehouse. Having received a tip-off from a colleague, Gabi and Gema raid the apartment of a Japanese architect. Gabi leaves behind her signature weapon – the fire extinguisher with which she stuns her victims. The obsessive police officer whose sole object in life is to apprehend Gabi says simply 'It's *her*' ('Es ella') when the extinguisher is discovered at the scene of the crime. In a quip attributed to