

Pedro Almodóvar as Auteur

Auteur theory asks us to consider the whole body of a director's work and look for particular traits – thematic, visual etc. - in order to consider the director as an auteur. The theory is based on the concept of the director as the central creative force in the making of a film, with the finished work being identifiable as the product of that particular director. As we have said, it may be that the director has an interest in certain themes or has a distinctive visual style that is easily identifiable. However, auteur theory is often seen as flawed as critics question whether a finished film, as the product of a collaborative process, can ever be the vision of a single individual.

A director such as Hitchcock is often referred to as an auteur. Hitchcock regularly deals with suspense and often positions the audience so that they have more narrative information than the characters, with the anticipation developed during these sequences firmly securing the audience's attention. In addition to these devices Hitchcock's films often feature similar character types with similar patterns of behaviour.

Almodóvar has been directing films for over 30 years, during which time he has directed over 18 titles. You may be familiar with some of his titles, or it may be that Broken Embraces is the first Almodóvar film you've seen. In either case there are a number of ways of approaching Broken Embraces in terms of auteur theory.

Use the following questions as a starting point for investigating auteur theory in relation to Broken Embraces and the work of Pedro Almodóvar.

Working Relationships

The cast in Broken Embraces is familiar to anyone that has seen any of Almodóvar's other films - a number of the cast in this film were also in Volver, for example.

- 1) Compare the cast list for a number of his films to see where the patterns lie. How can we account for this reliance on the same set of actors?
- 2) Almodóvar regularly casts Penélope Cruz in his films however she is also well known as a Hollywood star.
 - a) Think about the role Cruz (Lena) plays in Broken Embraces. How would you describe this character? Is this similar or different to other roles she has played whilst directed by Almodóvar?
 - b) Now think about other occasions when you have seen Penélope Cruz on screen. What roles does she play outside of Almodóvar's films? Are there notable differences or similarities in the parts she plays?

Genre and Convention

Almodóvar often develops narratives that revolve around the lives of women. The ways in which these narratives play out is, more often than not, directly connected to the conventions of melodrama.

The broad defining features of melodrama include:

- 1) The audience can easily follow what is happening, and importantly, how everyone feels about the events that happened to the main characters.
- 2) Typically, lead protagonists respond emotionally to events and often experience a great deal of suffering during the course of the narrative.

3) Information about past events is often brought into the open to develop the audience's understanding of the characters.

4) Information about characters and storyline is often communicated through mise-en-scène rather than dialogue.

Questions

1) Can you find evidence in Broken Embraces to illustrate these conventions?

2) When a director is working in a particular genre, the audience would expect to see at least some familiar conventions played out. Do you think that reliance on genre is compatible with the concept of auteur, or does sticking to established codes and conventions reduce a director's creative vision?

Extension Task

Using all of your notes so far, and your answers in this section, discuss the following statement:

Almodóvar's work is that of skilled genre director, rather than that of an auteur.