



Volver (2006)

STUDY GUIDE

Dir. Pedro Almodóvar

Written by Roy Stafford

Curriculum references:

WJEC A2 Film Studies: *Volver* can be studied in relation to the small-scale research project in FS4, Film: Making Meaning 2 and in FS5, World Cinema, alongside focus film All About My Mother or earlier Almodóvar films from the 'new Spanish Cinema' of the 1980s. In FS6, Critical Studies, it could be a focus for work on 'Genre and Authorship'.

AS/A2 Media Studies: *Volver* is a contemporary film suitable for discussion in relation to media language, narrative and genre or as the focus for critical research/independent study.

Introduction

As a media text, the film deals with themes such as gender identities, families, representations of social taboos and narratives of migration and memory. As a genre it mixes elements from comedy, the thriller, fantasy and melodrama.

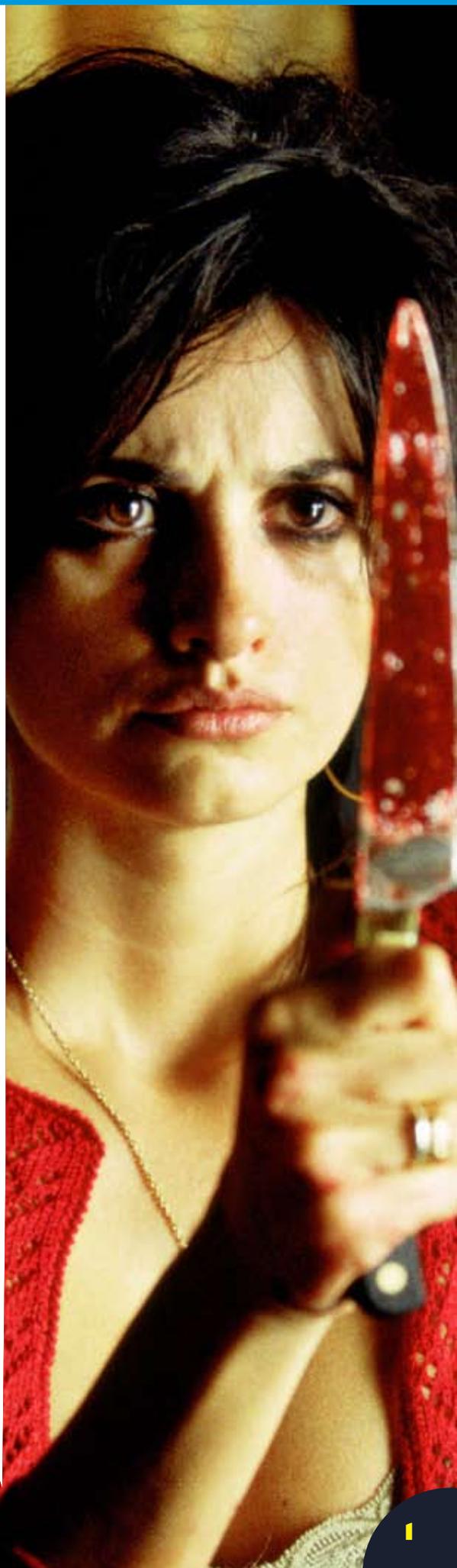
Credits

Volver
Spain 2006

Written and Directed by **Pedro Almodóvar**
Produced by **Agustín Almodóvar and Esther García for El Deseo S.A., Canal+, Ministerio de Cultura, TVE**
Original Music by Alberto Iglesias
'Volver' interpreted by **Estrella Morente**
Cinematography by **José Luis Alcaine**
Editor: **José Salcedo**
Production Design by **Salvador Parra**
Set Decoration by **Mara Matey**
Costume Design by **Sabine Daigeler**
Sound: **Miguel Rejas and José Antonio Bermúdez**
Runtime: **120 mins**
BBFC Certificate: **15**
UK Distribution: **Pathé**

Leading players

Penélope Cruz -	Raimunda
Carmen Maura -	Irene, mother of Raimunda and Sole
Lola Dueñas -	Sole
Blanca Portillo -	Agustina
Yohana Cobo -	Paula, daughter of Raimunda
Chus Lampreave -	Aunt Paula
Antonio de la Torre -	Paco, husband of Raimunda



Pedro Almodóvar



Image: Director Pedro Almodóvar

Pedro Almodóvar was born in a village in La Mancha, the rural heartland of Spain. When his schooling was complete he left for Madrid where he struggled to make enough money to give himself the chance to learn filmmaking. This was the late 1960s and Spain was still a highly repressive fascist state led by General Franco. For over thirty years Spain had been effectively cut off from the social changes in the rest of Western Europe. When Franco died in 1975, Spain moved towards an open democracy and people began to realise the possibilities of freedom. Almodóvar became part of a radical arts movement in Madrid known as La Movida. He began to make experimental films and to produce comic strips and articles for various publications.

Almodóvar's first feature film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, appeared in 1980. It introduced what would become familiar explicit portrayals of relationships, often featuring lesbian, gay and transexual characters, not usually represented on screen and narratives that juxtaposed traditional subject matter (the matador, the convent) with a world of drug taking and sexual abandon. Unlike many other Spanish filmmakers, Almodóvar appeared, at this time, not to be interested in making comments about the previous forty years and the struggle against fascism.

Since 1980 Almodóvar has completed a further fifteen films in a career that can be roughly divided into three periods. In the first, Almodóvar gradually moved from very low budget experimental films to something approaching mainstream features, helped by the formation of his own production company Deseo (Desire), formed with his brother Augustin in 1985. Popular in Madrid, it wasn't until 1988's *Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown* that Almodóvar achieved major success abroad, with the result that his earlier films were then given a limited release in the UK. After 1988, Almodóvar's films all received an international release, gradually becoming more controlled and less extravagant in terms of presentation, but still, by mainstream standards, 'anarchic'. This was the second period. In 1999 the huge international success of *Volver*, pushed Almodóvar to a new level – as perhaps the most important European filmmaker with a loyal audience eagerly anticipating each new film.

More perhaps than most filmmakers, Almodóvar has maintained a clear 'personal vision' throughout his career. His films are partly biographical as in the portrayal of a Jesuit education in *Bad Education*, or as in *Volver*, the move to Madrid from La Mancha. The central characters of most of his films are strong women, drawing partly on memories of childhood with his family and at the cinema, watching Hollywood and European melodramas or 'women's pictures'. Visually, Almodóvar's films are dominated by bold colours and startling designs with attention to music and the arts in general. His films also often include performers – singers, actors, television personalities etc.

Volver

Volver means ‘to return, to come back’ and the film represents a return by Almodóvar in a number of ways:

- a personal return to stories about mothers and women in general after two male-centred films;
- a professional return to work with the major star of the first period of his career, Carmen Maura and to Penélope Cruz, returning from America;
- a ‘return narrative’ with two women going back to the Manchegan village they, like Almodóvar, left for Madrid

In particular, it appears to be a return to *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984). In this early film Maura is a working-class Madrid mother with a highly dysfunctional family caught up in a preposterous plot about Hitler’s diaries. Maura has her mother living with her, always talking about ‘going back’ to her village.

Migrations and Castilla-La Mancha

Spain is a large European country, made up of seventeen ‘autonomous communities’. Castille-La Mancha is one of three autonomous communities surrounding Madrid in the centre of Spain. It is one of the largest in area, but sparsely populated and predominantly agricultural. La Mancha is most famous for the story of *Don Quixote* written by Cervantes at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The most important character in Spanish literature, Don Quixote is a fantasist who takes on the world, imagining himself as a medieval knight seeking justice and ‘tilting at windmills’. Almodóvar references this with several shots of modern wind turbines. La Mancha is also famous for *manchego* cheese and *manchegan* wine, again referenced here in the importance of the food parcels which go back to Madrid.



The geography of the region – the wind and the heat on the dry, high plateaux, the sense of isolation – has helped to create a sense of rural Castille as ‘cut off’, ‘out of time’ and perhaps prone to superstition. Almodóvar exploits this allusion to insanity, following other famous Spanish filmmakers. Luis Buñuel’s *Viridiana* (Spain/Mexico 1961) uses a form of surrealism to satirise the church in a similar Castillian community, when the arrival of a beautiful young woman has a devastating effect on a local community. Almodóvar adopts a similar approach in presenting images that are at the same time ‘natural’, but also ‘fantastical’ (e.g. the opening scene in the village cemetery). In *The Spirit of the Beehive* (director Victor Erice 1973), set in another Castillian village in 1940, a little girl becomes so absorbed in a screening of *Frankenstein* in the village hall that it begins to affect her sense of reality.

Many films deal with the process of migration – leaving one place to live in another, for positive (a better life) or negative (to escape a terrible life) reasons. The movement of people from the village in La

Mancha to Madrid is central to *Volver*. Although we learn that it is only 180 kilometres from the Madrid suburb to the village, it seems further – in time as well as geography. The hard work that Raimunda must put in to keep her family together links her in Almodóvar's eyes to the strong women he remembered from his childhood, both around him in his family and on the cinema screen. Penélope Cruz's performance is deliberately modelled on Italian stars from the 1950s and 1960s, principally Anna Magnani and Sophia Loren.

Melodrama and Neo-realism

Almodóvar has developed a unique personal style that is now highly sophisticated. It draws heavily on ideas about **melodrama**, a genre that is no longer popular as such, but which has attracted a great deal of recent critical attention. 'Melodrama' comes from *melos* (music) + *drame* (action). It has a long and complex history in theatre and in the cinema, where at different times it has meant quite different things. Almodóvar generally refers to two specific uses of melodrama – in the Hollywood 'women's picture' of the 1940s and in the Italian neo-realist films and their relationship to melodrama. The women's pictures usually featured a major female star such as Bette Davis or Barbara Stanwyck in a role which required her to resolve the 'problem' of being a woman in a 'man's world'. She would have to juggle the roles of being wife, mother, lover and having a career or a cause to pursue. The films succeeded for a largely female audience because they could relate to the aspirations of the lead character and vicariously enjoy the glamour and the strength of the performance by a major star (even though the character was inevitably punished by male society for daring to challenge social roles). The films used both music and aspects of *mise en scène* (costume design, interior design etc.) and camerawork to express the strong emotions inherent in their narratives – thus their claim to melodrama. Though the genre as such has disappeared, there are still films that draw on similar ideas, updated for contemporary society. Julia Roberts' performance as *Erin Brockovich* (2000) is one example. Almodóvar makes a reference in the *Volver* Press Pack to *Mildred Pierce* (US 1945), the film which won an Oscar for Joan Crawford as a woman who tries to bring up her daughters after divorce, setting up her own business but becoming embroiled in murder when she takes a lover.



In Italy after the Second World War in 1945, filmmaking was very difficult with little money available and studio facilities destroyed. A style of filmmaking developed that used location shooting and stories taken directly from the everyday lives of ordinary people. This was **neo-realism**. Although the two might seem opposed, there was a strong relationship between neo-realism and melodrama, which had been an important genre in earlier Italian cinema, as well as theatre and opera. The main difference in the post-

war films was that the characters were often working class (earlier Italian melodramas had sometimes featured glamorous settings in what were known as 'white telephone' films). Almodóvar was particularly interested in *Bellissima* (Italy 1951, director Luchino Visconti) which featured one of the female stars of neo-realism, Anna Magnani. *Bellissima* is the film that Raimunda's mother, Irene, is watching towards the end of *Volver*. When it came to casting Penélope Cruz as Raimunda and deciding how she should be dressed (costume, hairstyle, makeup etc.), Almodóvar turned towards the screen image of two other Italian stars of the 1950s and 1960s, Sophia Loren and Claudia Cardinale. They represented for him a vision of South Mediterranean womanhood, voluptuous and powerful. Sophia Loren could be both glamorous and convincing in working class roles as a Neapolitan housewife in *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963, director Vittorio de Sica) or as a mother protecting her teenage daughter in the aftermath of war in *Two Women* (1961, director Vittorio de Sica). Cruz watched some of these performances and they helped her to achieve the difficult feat of being sexy and desirable, but also cold and determined, friendly but devious etc. Almodóvar in his promotion of the film also stressed both Penélope Cruz's beauty and his desire to present her in a particular way:

Penélope is at the height of her beauty. It's a cliché but in her case it's true. (Those eyes, her neck, her shoulders, her breasts! Penélope has got one of the most spectacular cleavages in world cinema).

. . . It was a pleasure to dress, comb and make up the character and the person. Penélope's body ennobles whatever you put on it. We decided on straight skirts and cardigans because they are classic garments, very feminine and popular in any decade, from the 1950s to 2000 . . . There is just one false element in Raimunda's body, her ass. These characters are always big-assed women and Penélope is too slim. The rest is all heart, emotion, talent, truth, and a face that the camera adores. As I do.

[\(Almodóvar in the Press Pack for *Volver*\)](#)

Many critics have seen *Volver* as a 'return' for Penélope Cruz after a disappointing move to Hollywood. *Volver* serves to remind audiences of her performances in films such as *Jamón, jamón* and *Abre los ojos* as well as Almodóvar's own *Live Flesh* and *All About My Mother*.



Almodóvar, genre and taboos

One of the most interesting aspects of *Volver*, and of Almodóvar's career generally, is how he manages to deal with social taboos. Partly this is concerned with his selection from different genre repertoires in presenting his narratives. This presentation has changed significantly over the twenty-six years in which he has been releasing feature films, but it is still related to the presentation of controversial material. Much of this depends on audience responses. There are many audiences, in Spain and abroad, who find Almodóvar's films funny, enjoyable and positively delightful. Others are shocked by the inclusion of material that does not seem to be treated seriously. There is also the possibility that audiences will react differently to Almodóvar himself and his persona as a gay man with a camp sensibility. (Camp is a term with various meanings, some of which refer to ideas about excessive forms of artistic work or *kitsch* and others to both positive and negative views of gay culture, especially in terms of exaggerated effeminacy.)

Volver presents a narrative that involves murder, incest/sexual abuse, insanity and a fascination with death. And it is advertised as a comedy. The mixture of narrative elements is in fact no different from those of most of Almodóvar's other films and indeed the story is similar to *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*. *Volver* is part comedy, part thriller and all melodrama. It has also been called a fantasy (one Internet Movie Database user complained that he had gone to see the film because it was listed as a fantasy and he was disappointed because he was expecting *Lord of the Rings*).

In his earlier films, Almodóvar would simply juxtapose shocking and mundane scenes. Crucial to his work has been the decision to approach all such scenes with a calm 'matter of factness'. For example, in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, the mother moves calmly from leaving her younger son (who works as a rent boy) with her dentist, who promises to 'adopt' him, to helping out her next door neighbour who is entertaining a client who likes to be watched when having sex. The explanation for the mother's rather distanced behaviour is partly that she is addicted to No-Doze tablets ('uppers'). In the space of a few minutes, Almodóvar has commented on the real social problem of drug addiction amongst working women and satirised public attitudes towards sex and family values, but still managed to present the genuine humanity of the characters. In *Volver* he does something similar, but this time he is aided and abetted by more time and money available for camerawork, *mise en scène* and performance/direction – the whole presentation is, like Hollywood, 'transparent'.

Suggestions for essay titles, discussions or research projects

1. Trace the different ways in which migration from La Mancha to Madrid is used to present the story. Which story devices and visual images emphasise the importance of this familiar social movement?
2. Investigate the plot outlines of *Bellissima* and *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Find images of Anna Magnani and Sophia Loren. What do you think Pedro Almodóvar wanted to use from these kinds of films and the star images of the Italians?



3. A film about returning could be mainly about memories of how things used to be. Do you think Almodóvar manages to attract a younger audience without these memories? If so, how does he do it? What attracts you to the story?

4. How do Almodóvar, his crew and actors achieve a smooth narrative flow in scenes where there is a shift in genres between comedy, thriller and melodrama? Look in detail at either the scenes in which Raimunda attempts to hide and then dispose of her husband's body or at the scenes when Sole is attempting to hide her mother's 'ghost' from Raimunda.

5. Can you separate out the different elements from the repertoires of comedy, thriller and melodrama as they appear in *Volver*?
6. Discuss the different ways in which Almodóvar explores the 'strangeness' of the village in La Mancha. How is it different from Madrid?
7. What is the importance to the overall story of Raimunda's performance of the song '*Volver*' outside the restaurant, with her mother watching?
8. Can you disentangle all the relationships between the women in the film (the key is the explanation that Raimunda gives about the past when she returns to the village at the end of the film)? What do you think will happen in the future, now that all has been revealed?
9. Try to watch one of the films from Almodóvar's early career as a director. (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?* or *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* would be good choices.) Compare *Volver* to the earlier films. Is *Volver* very different in terms of content or style?
10. Is Pedro Almodóvar's sexuality relevant in trying to understand *Volver*? The Hollywood melodramas and women's pictures of the 1940s and 1950s that Almodóvar admires were often made by gay directors such as George Cukor, Mitchell Leisen or Vincente Minnelli. Similarly, Todd Haynes, a contemporary gay director, made *Far From Heaven* (2002) as an exploration of the 1950s melodrama/women's picture. Why might gay men be interested in making films featuring a largely female cast? Are they able to bring something specific to the production? Would a heterosexual man be criticised for the way Penélope Cruz is presented on screen in *Volver*?
11. Research El Deseo, the production company owned by the Almodóvar brothers. All Pedro Almodóvar's films since 1985 have been made by El Deseo. How important is this in terms of the kinds of films that Almodóvar wants to make?
12. Compare the two *Sight & Sound* reviews of *Volver* (see Bibliography). Can they both be accurate? Where do you stand in relation to the film?

Pedro Almodóvar Filmography

1980 *Pepi, Luci, Bom*
1982 *Labyrinth of Passion*
1983 *Dark Habits*
1984 *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*
1986 *Matador*
1987 *Law of Desire*
1988 *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*
1990 *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*
1991 *High Heels*
1993 *Kika*
1995 *The Flower of My Secret*
1997 *Live Flesh*
1999 *All About My Mother*
2002 *Talk to Her*
2004 *Bad Education*
2006 *Volver*

Penélope Cruz Filmography (selected films only)

1992 *Jamón, jamón*, director Bigas Luna
1997 *Abre los ojos*, director Alejandro Amenábar
1997 *Live Flesh*, director Pedro Almodóvar
1998 *The Hi-Lo Country*, director Stephen Frears
1999 *All About My Mother*, director Pedro Almodóvar
2000 *All The Pretty Horses*, director Billy Bob Thornton

Other Films Referenced

Mildred Pierce (US 1945), director Michael Curtiz
Bellissima (Italy 1951), director Luchino Visconti
Two Women (Italy 1961), director Vittorio de Sica
Viridiana (Spain 1962), director Luis Buñuel
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (Italy 1963), director Vittorio de Sica
Spirit of the Beehive (Spain 1973), director Victor Erice

Bibliography

Mark Allinson (2000) *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, London: I. B. Taurus
Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosuna (1998) *Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, Manchester: MUP
Peter Matthews (2006) 'Lost in La Mancha', *Sight & Sound*, September
Paul Julian Smith (2000) *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, London: Verso
Paul Julian Smith (2006) Women, windmills and wedge heels, *Sight & Sound*, June
Rob Stone (2001) *Spanish Cinema*, Harlow: Longman

Website

The official Pedro Almodóvar website:
<http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/almodovar/eng/homeeng.htm>

Guardian/NFT Interview:
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1839123,00.html>

Written by Roy Stafford, a freelance lecturer and writer and editor of in the picture magazine: www.itpmag.demon.co.uk

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