



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 15 July 2022

Parallel Mothers

Spain | 2021 | 123 min | Cert 15

Director: Pedro Almodóvar

Screenplay: Pedro Almodóvar

Starring: Penélope Cruz, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón, Milena Smit, Israel Elejalde, Julieta Serrano, Rossy de Palma, Margot Abascal, Florès Cardo

Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film. They contain discussion of plot and character details.



'In life we couldn't be together, at least at the end we will be.'

A big computer monitor lights the face of an engrossed Janis (Penélope Cruz). On the screen, a news article titled 'The true heroines were the widows of the prisoners of Francoism'. The piece, which focused on the generational trauma carried by the descendants of those bereft by the Franco dictatorship, was originally published in early 2021, a mere few months prior to the first public screening of Pedro Almodóvar's newest effort, *Parallel Mothers*.

Over eight decades have passed since the Spanish Civil War. Yet, to this day, the country still battles to guarantee reparations for its victims. For measure, it was just last year that the Spanish Socialist party passed the Law of Democratic Memory, a governmental measure aimed to address the legacy of Francoism. The law ensures the allocation of public funds to unearth remains buried in unmarked graves, in an attempt to recover the bodies of those denied the basic human right to a proper funeral, their families for generations made to carry the impossibly heavy burden of this prolonged grief.

This idea of honour and remembrance runs through the core of *Parallel Mothers*, which marks a drastic shift within the work of Almodóvar. The Spanish director, whose films remained purposefully distant from direct political ponderings on the Franco dictatorship, now tackles the complexities of the country's open wounds head-on, building a pained rumination on how history is never truly in the past until its nefarious ripples are collectively addressed by a nation willing to guarantee such horrors are never to happen again.

The mothers referenced in the title are just as much the widows, daughters and granddaughters of those lost to the dictatorship as they are the film's central characters, Janis and Ana (Milena Smit), two women who meet as they prepare to give birth to unplanned daughters. 'I don't regret it,' says Janis. 'I do', Ana candidly replies.

It was also a character going through an unplanned pregnancy that marked the beginning of the fruitful working relationship between auteur Almodóvar and muse Penélope Cruz: sex worker Isabel in the 1997 drama *Live Flesh*. Their creative partnership reaches a gratifying full circle with *Parallel Mothers*, Cruz's performance as Janis not only a career-best but also a comprehensive embodiment of the Almodóvar woman, a steadfast force whose life is doomed to reach higher and higher levels of tragedy.

Janis is a photographer, as her great-grandfather decades before her. 'By chance, before the war, he took photos of all of those who later died with him', she tells archaeologist Arturo (Israel Elejalde) as the two discuss the possibility of digging the grave where Janis' predecessor laid since his assassination. A few months later, white curtains sway urgently against Janis' window, the sun filling her bedroom as she lays under Arturo, the two consumed by the passion fuelled by the intersection of carnal desire and shared ideologies.

And this is where we get back to the hospital room and to Ana and Janis. The former, a bare-faced teenager oozing desperation; the latter, a calm and well-prepared mother-to-be. Together, they find comfort in helping and being helped by one another and; as their little girls enter the world, the hormone-induced ecstasy bonds the two women for life.

When they meet again, Cecilia, Janis' daughter is a fast-growing toddler and Janis holds a crushing secret. Ana no longer sports the anxiety-ridden face of a teenager, her long brown hair now turned into a blonde spiked pixie. It is clear she is not the same woman she was at the maternity ward, and, soon, Janis finds out why: Anita, Ana's daughter, died suddenly of a crib death - one day, her brain simply forgot how to breathe.

Brought together once more, the women now root themselves in one another, Janis inviting Ana in as an au-pair, the two caring for little Cecilia under the guiding eyes of Janis' ancestors, whose pictures hang all over her memorabilia-filled apartment. And, as a gestation, their relationship mutates and expands, feeding on their bodies to create something with a life of its own. Janis yearns to consume Ana to an extent that is almost anthropophagic, the guttural need to somehow possess - and, to an utter extent, become - Ana, caused by the cataclysmic weight of the secret she beholds.

A poster for *Parallel Mothers* can be spotted in Almodóvar's 2009 romantic thriller *Broken Embraces* [1], an indication of how long the director has brewed the concept of the film. Perhaps, one can wonder, it was the intense exercise in self-study required for the inherently personal predecessor to *Parallel Mothers*, *Pain and Glory* (2019) that granted the filmmaker the emotional confidence to address the dire legacy of Francoism. In any case, Almodóvar's latest further solidifies the director as a storyteller deeply concerned with how the tragedies of the communal guide the tragedies of the person, a question he tackles with refined tact in his latest endeavour.

As the world finds itself riddled with those who wish to forge and forget history in order to further perpetuate its darkest periods, *Parallel Mothers* stands as a vital reminder that, as long as there are people who remember, no one can fully silence the past.

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