

Spring 2024
SPAN 539: 20th and 21st Century Spanish Literature and Culture
“Moving Across and Beyond Boundaries in/with/through the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar”

Fridays, 10 am to 12: 50 pm
THH 108
Professor Julian Gutierrez Albilla



(Poster from the British Film Institute)

This graduate seminar will focus, formally, historically, and theoretically, on the complex, rich, and often contradictory cinema of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, one of the world's most critically acclaimed and commercially successful filmmakers. Considered the most modern (or (post)modern) of Spanish filmmakers, Almodóvar began his cinematic career five years after the start of the so-called Spain's post-Franco, democratic period. In this seminar, we will problematize the conventional distinction that has been established between the association of his earlier cinema with a lack of political commitment and his later films with more explicit allusions to national politics and historical memory, by foregrounding, for instance, Almodóvar's reflection of and responses to Spain's

social, cultural, economic, and political transformations since he started making films in the early 1980s. We will also explore the way that Almodóvar's cinema is predicated on integrating the traditional local Spanish culture into a global (post)modern aesthetic, using camp and kitsch, through the incorporation of elements of popular Spanish culture, the recycling of national stereotypes, or the reworking of familiar styles and genres from Hollywood into a kind of artistic pastiche, thereby resulting in a hybrid cinema that cuts across cinematic genres and modes. Hence, departing from a traditional auteurist approach to the study of Almodóvar's cinema, this seminar will explore how Almodóvar's auteurism partakes paradoxically of his appropriation and subversion of popular cinematic genres, such as melodrama.

In other words, this seminar will pay special attention to how some of the formal and thematic concerns and *leitmotifs* in Almodóvar's later films may have originated in and developed from those of his earlier films – without thereby implying a straightforward, linear approach, thus offering us a more theoretically sophisticated interpretation of a repetition that moves away from “compulsive repetition” to the generation of differences within repetition in Almodóvar's cinema. Some of these formal, thematic, and theoretical concerns are: precarious and experimental filmmaking and/or mastery of narrative and cinematic form; the ethics and politics of gender and sexuality; queer and feminine subjectivities; hedonism and/or political commitment; the productive tensions between the urban and the rural; the use of drama and/or comedy; life drive and/or death drive; the poetic integration of literary, cinematic, or performance pieces (i.e. Pina Bausch, Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel, or Tennessee Williams); the macro-political implications of identity and/or micro-politics of desire; the bodily and/or psychic mechanisms underpinning cinematic representation and vision; affect and sensation and/or perception and cognition vis-à-vis the spectatorial engagement with the film medium; or self-reflexivity and self-referentiality and/or commitment to memory and history. To sum up, in this seminar we will reflect on the extent to which Almodóvar's films move across and beyond physical, psychological, temporal, geographical, or conceptual boundaries, to name just a few, thereby establishing productive connections and tensions between our critical and theoretical methodologies and Almodóvar's cinematic practice. Exploring how Almodóvar's cinema may offer a reflection on, push back against, or move beyond our theoretical concepts and perspectives, this seminar will allow students to engage critically with some of the crucial scholarship on the cinema of Almodóvar and, though not exclusively, the fields of Spanish literary and cultural studies, film studies, and critical theory, including feminist, queer, trans theory, and psychoanalysis, as inscribed in, derived from, or problematized in/with/through the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar.

Although films will be arranged chronologically, some issues at stake in earlier sessions will reappear in later sessions, while some explorations in the later sessions will lead us to reconsider our discussions of the earlier ones. This structure resonates with Almodóvar's own creative method, which invites us to creatively read and re-read his films, thus asking us to keep experiencing and understanding his work in different, productive ways. This structure will allow us to underscore the formal, thematic, or theoretical connections and disconnections between the films, thus pointing to organic connections and resisting linearity and chronology. Films we will study include *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980), *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Matador* (1986), *Law of Desire* (1987), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), *High Heels* (1991), *Kika* (1993), *The Flower of My Secret* (1996), *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), *Bad Education* (2004), *Volver* (2006), and *The Skin I Live In* (2012).