



Julieta

Director: Pedro Almodovar
Country: Spain
Date: 2016

A review by Mark Kermode for *The Guardian*:

Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar's latest, his most moving and entrancing work since 2006's *Volver*, is a sumptuous and heartbreaking study of the viral nature of guilt, the mystery of memory and the often unendurable power of love. At times, the emotional intrigue plays more like a Hitchcock thriller than a romantic melodrama, with Alberto Iglesias's superb Herrmannesque score (the director cites Toru Takemitsu, Mahler and Alban Berg as influential) heightening the noir elements, darkening the bold splashes of red, blue and white. Three short stories from the Canadian author Alice Munro's 2004 volume *Runaway* provide the source material, but the spirit of Patricia Highsmith looms large as strangers on a train fuel the circling narrative (one character even observes that he is becoming a Highsmith obsessive). I was also startled to find echoes of George Sluizer's Dutch-French 1988 chiller *Spoorloos* in the depiction of a life defined by the disappearance of a loved one, although there is a tenderness here wholly lacking from Sluizer's altogether more unforgiving work.

Emma Suárez is fabulous as Julieta, a beautiful, erudite, middle-aged woman leaving Madrid for Portugal to start a new life with Lorenzo (Talk to Her's Darío Grandinetti). But a chance meeting with a childhood friend of her estranged daughter, Antía, sideswipes Julieta's future plans. Instead of moving forward, she returns to the apartment block where she and Antía once lived, to write the story of their tragic, quasi-mythical odyssey. Transported back to the 80s, we meet the younger Julieta, now played with equal vigour by Adriana Ugarte, one of the film's many talismanic doublings. For this spiky-haired classics teacher (Greek myth flows through these stories), a nocturnal train journey provides a fateful brief encounter with love and death, laying the tracks for all that is to come: her relationship with Galician fisherman Xoan (Daniel Grao), the birth of their beloved daughter, Antía, and the predestined separation from both.



Almodóvar initially planned to use Munro's stories as the basis of an English-language feature, yet bringing the material to Spain puts the writer-director on fertile home ground. As with 1997's *Live Flesh* and 2011's *The Skin I Live In*, *Julieta* may have a literary source but the result is entirely Almodóvar's own. We open on a close-up of the undulating folds of a crimson dress, resembling both a heart and flower, signalling the thicker-than-water themes that will course through the narrative. As *Julieta* moves back and forth through time and space, Sonia Grande's costumes and Antxón Gómez's production design tell their



own story – the stark lines of a room in which the past has been erased contrasting with the noisy clutter of a space filled with memories; the fragmented patterns of a gown matching the jagged edges of a torn photograph that Julieta sticks together to face her past; a blue garment framing a crimson cake that is ritually binned as another lonely birthday passes.

After the exhaustingly camp sociopolitical satire of 2013's *I'm So Excited!*, it's a relief to find Almodóvar returning to the more introspective themes of such

superior work as *All About My Mother* or *The Flower of My Secret*. Yet for all the director's avowed "desires for containment" in a drama that he insists contains no "humour or any mixing of genres", *Julieta* still manages to unite the disparate elements of Almodóvar's unruly career. As the current BFI Southbank retrospective reminds us, he's come a long way from the punky bawdiness of *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. There is a Bergmanesque quality to Almodóvar's focus on Suárez's face in *Julieta* which speaks volumes about his journey from enfant terrible to elder statesman. As portrayed by Ugarte, however, the younger *Julieta* would not have seemed out of place in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* or *High Heels*, a reminder that the ghosts of Almodóvar's back catalogue (highlighted here by the iconic presence of longtime muse Rossy de Palma) are as present as the past lives that haunt our heroine.



Deftly conjoining the two central performances is a breathtakingly simple sequence that encapsulates Almodóvar's genius. As a young Antía dries her devastated mother's hair, Ugarte's face disappears beneath a towel and re-emerges as that of Suárez, *Julieta*'s youthful visage transformed by grief. Whether through coma, depression or dementia, this is a drama littered with characters living an underworld existence, trapped by the great silence that is the true villain of the piece. Having been swept along by Almodóvar's vision, I felt that silence deserved to be broken by tumultuous applause.

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