



Parallel Mothers

Director: Pedro Almodóvar

Country: Spain

Date: 2021

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

Not parallel actually: that would mean they don't touch. Here we have convergent mothers; intersecting mothers whose lives come together with a spark that ignites this moving melodrama, which audaciously draws a line between love, sex, the passionate courage of single mothers, the meaning of Lorca's Doña Rosita the Spinster and the unhealed wound of Spain's fascist past. Pedro Almodóvar's new movie has the warmth and the grandiloquent flair of a picture from Hollywood's golden age (something starring Bette Davis and Joan Fontaine maybe, with music by Max Steiner) and the whiplash twists and addictive sugar rush bumps of daytime soap.

As ever with Almodóvar, there are gorgeously designed interiors with fierce, thick blocks of Mondrian colour, huge closeups of the female leads and overhead shots of food preparation. It's impossible to watch this film without just feeling grateful that its director is still so fluent, so creative, still making us a gift of these films. There is a lot going on here, and perhaps the emotions and thoughts spill over the edges of its narrative form. But it would be obtuse not to let yourself travel downstream on this film's emotional surge.



One mother is Janis, played by Penélope Cruz, a stylish photographer in her late 30s whose agent is the worldly Elena (Almodóvar's totemic regular Rossy de Palma). The other mother is Ana (Milena Smit), a serious-looking teenager whose family background is troubled. These heavily pregnant women share a hospital room and bond over their decision to go it alone. The father of Janis's child is Arturo (Israel Elejalde), an anthropologist working with the historical unit formed under Spain's historical memory law, tracing people murdered by Francoists during the civil war and buried in unmarked mass graves; Janis believes that her great-grandfather was one such victim.

The two women's newborns are whisked away for observational reasons at the same time. But when Janis gets her baby home, events conspire to plant a seed of doubt in her mind: she orders a DNA test online, which means a swab test weirdly similar to the one Arturo carries out on the recovered bodies at the gravesite. The disquieting results mean that Janis has to get back in touch with Ana and re-establish their remarkable relationship.



The facts of the narrative make it sound contrived and implausible. Yet the sheer poetic conviction means that there is no problem believing that the personal is the political and that history, the future and the present are as one. Baby-swap dramas are nothing new: there was Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Like Father, Like Son* from 2013, and the famous case from the 1930s of a British woman, Margaret Wheeler, who famously appealed to George Bernard Shaw for help when she suspected her baby had been muddled up with someone else's at the hospital.

But *Parallel Mothers* is superior to any of them in the way it springs tragedy on audiences expecting comedy. And the film allows you to ponder not just the mother-child bond – strong enough to confront fascism – but the way everyone has to let their children be influenced by strangers; the unintended upbringing of being out in the world. What an emotional experience.

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