



broken embraces

(Los abrazos rotos)

Autumn
Season
2009

Director and Writer: Pedro Almodovar

Cast: Penelope Cruz, Lluís Homar, Blanca Portillo, Jose Luis Gomez, Tamar Novas, Ruben Ochandiano

Synopsis

A man writes, lives and loves in darkness. Fourteen years before, he was in a brutal car crash on the island of Lanzarote. In the accident, he not only lost his sight, he also lost Lena, the love of his life. This man uses two names: Harry Caine, a playful pseudonym with which he signs his literary works, stories and scripts, and Mateo Blanco, his real name, with which he lives and signs the film he directs. After the accident, Mateo Blanco reduces himself to his pseudonym, Harry Caine. If he cannot direct films he can only survive with the idea that Mateo Blanco died on Lanzarote with his beloved Lena. In the present day, Harry Caine lives thanks to the scripts he writes and to the help he gets from his faithful former production manager, Judit Garcia, and from Diego, her son, his secretary, typist and guide. Since he decided to live and tell stories, Harry is an active, attractive blind man who has developed all his other senses in order to enjoy life, on a basis of irony and self-induced amnesia. He has erased from his biography any trace of his first identity, Mateo Blanco. One night Diego has an accident and Harry takes care of him (his mother, Judit, is out of Madrid and they decide not to tell her anything so as not to alarm her). During the first nights of his convalescence, Diego asks him about the time when he answered to the name of Mateo Blanco, after a moment of astonishment Harry cannot refuse and he tells Diego what happened fourteen years before with the idea of entertaining him, just as a father tells his little child a story so that he will fall asleep. The story of Mateo, Lena, Judit and Ernesto Martel is a story of 'amour fou', dominated by fatality, jealousy, the abuse of power, treachery and a guilt complex.

Review: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian:

The sensual pleasures of Pedro Almodóvar's lush new meta-melodrama are the more intense for being fleeting. After the movie is over and the trance has lifted, it is difficult to recall just what was so entrancing or even what the film was about. Like Oscar Wilde's famous cigarette, it is a perfect type of pleasure, which leaves one not unsatisfied exactly but with a feeling that its substance has vanished into the air like smoke.

In the way of so many Almodóvar films, *Broken Embraces* is built on a system of dual narrative with father/son and gay/straight opposites. Lluís Homar plays a blind screenwriter in present-day Madrid with the assumed name "Harry Caine"; while still sighted, he was once a distinguished movie director working under his real name, Mateo Blanco. He hears news of the death of Ernesto Martel, a controversial Chilean financier who bankrolled his last movie as a director, and flashbacks take us to this heady period in the 1990s when in return for the plutocrat's lavish funding, Mateo cast Martel's mistress in the lead role, and had a passionate affair with her. This is the bewitching Lena, short of course for Magdalena, played by Penelope Cruz, whose beauty here reaches a swooningly hyper-real state, a camp mirage of Hollywood loveliness, especially in the scene in which she tries on various costumes and styles in the dressing room mirror, experimenting with a platinum-blond Marilyn look. "Don't smile ..." gasps the ecstatic director, "... the wig is false enough!"

Meanwhile Martel, played with tailored elegance by José Luis Gómez, orders his moody son to spy on the couple with his video camera under the pretence of preparing a "making of" documentary. This is Ray, a sulky gay man played by Rubén Ochandiano, looking in the 90s like someone David Walliams might portray in a TV comedy called *Little Spain*. These flashbacks disclose dark secrets. Why is Mateo blind? And what happened to Lena herself?

The sheer, gorgeous style of *Broken Embraces* is what is so seductive; with his cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, Almodóvar conjures a vivid, rich palette of colours, which have the texture of something by Alfred Hitchcock or Douglas Sirk, but his handling of the material is so confident and distinctive that it goes beyond pastiche. And with his editor, José Salcedo, he moves back and forth between the past and the present with a miraculous fluidity, and



these seamless transitions are what induce the film's pleasurable dizzy, woozy quality, a subtle molestation of the audience's inner ear.

Pundits have complained that *Broken Embraces* just retreads the director's old ideas; I see it more as variations on a theme – familiar, but still engrossing. If the "mature" period of Almodóvar's career is levelling out, it is still producing intensely intelligent and watchable films, although observers are entitled to notice that Almodóvar is keen to stress the sexual attractiveness and prowess of older men. *Broken Embraces* is a film in which the director demonstrates a continuing, virtuoso fluency in a cinematic language that he himself invented. It's an embrace I want to submit to.