

Talk to Her (Hable con ella) (15)

19th April 2004

Director: **Pedro Almodóvar**

Spain 2002

(Subtitled) Running time: 113 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Javier Cámara** (Benigno), **Darío Grandinetti** (Marco), **Leonor Watling** (Alicia), **Rosario Flores** (Lydia), **Mariola Fuentes** (Nurse Rosa), **Geraldine Chaplin** (Katerina Bilova)

SCRIPT: **Pedro Almodóvar** CINEMATOGRAPHY: **Javier Aguirresarobe** EDITING: **José Salcedo** MUSIC: **Alberto Iglesias**

Benigno and Marco are both lonely men, Marco because his lover, a woman bullfighter, is in a coma, Benigno, a thirty-year old virgin Momma's boy, from habit. Both are in love, too (Benigno, a male nurse at the clinic, slavishly tends Alicia, a comatose accident victim, for a living). It is he who gives Marco, with whom he strikes up a friendship, the eponymous advice: talk, and your heartfelt monologue will be more meaningful and therapeutic than any marital dialogue.

Seeing Almodóvar's latest film was one of the most pleasurable cinema experiences I have had for some time. He has over the years amassed the technical skill and maturity to put across quite complex stories in a deceptively simple language. From the shock tactics and punk aesthetics of *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón* (1980), to the Oscar-winning melodrama of *All About My Mother* (1999), he had already come a long way. Here, finally, was an interweaving of the lives of disparate characters that was not only unabashed in its excess (it always had been), it actually made you care – deeply.

More bullfighting

At first sight *Hable con ella* looks like being another case study in that famously offbeat, not to say queer, book of life according to Pedro. Almodóvar's scenarios have been no strangers to sex, drugs, and heartrending *canción* (a particular brand of overwrought singing which knows no real Anglo-Saxon equivalent). In *Hable con ella* we have bullfighting, a theme he used as an excuse for kinky sex in *Matador*, given a contemporary treatment in the person of 'torera', Lydia (female bullfighters are indeed beginning to compete in a man's profession). Here too we have the apparently off-the-wall and by now notorious scene from the film-within-the-film, *El Amante Minguante*, in which a shrunken hero takes refuge in his lover's vagina for protection. But neither is gratuitous gesture: Lydia is designed to counterpoint Marco's almost feminine sensitivity, and the latter sequence, far from being there to shock, is a metaphor to spare us a far more harrowing, and morally problematic, plot truth. The ability to turn *kitsch* into art is increasingly one of Almodóvar's defining features.

Post-modern?

While he often refers to other artforms in his films (reality TV in *Kika*, Ruth Rendell in *Live Flesh*, *canción* in *High Heels*), since *All About My Mother* the technique has become more assured. Where that film was a paean to female suffering, via *All About*

Eve and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in *Hable con ella* we have two men sharing a tear over a performance by the dancer Pina Bausch. Other references are the Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso, who sings at a party attended by (uncredited) Cecilia Roth and Marisa Paredes (from *Mother*), and Michael Cunningham, whose novel *The Hours* similarly has a tripartite structure where each section deepens and sheds light on the others ('tunnels in caves'). In other words the post-modernist borrowing is rendered invisible by being absorbed into the drama: it is not post-modern any more.

Almodóvar's choice to make a film about the loneliness and longing of men is a courageous one for a very private celebrity, a gamble to follow what might have been the peak of his career, and one which whets our appetite for what is to come.