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Film Discussion Group
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Pain and Glory / Dolor y gloria (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2019)

On Camera

Salvador Mallo: Antonio Banderas: First job for Almodóvar on *Labyrinth of Passion* (82)
Young Salvador: Asier Flores: 10-year-old actor from Madrid, making his screen debut
Alberto, former star: Asier Etxeandia: One of few lead cast members who is new to Almodóvar
Federico, former lover: Leonardo Sbaraglia: Perpetrator of major road rage in *Wild Tales* (14)
Jacinta, the mother: Julieta Serrano: Acted for Almodóvar five times across 1980s, not since
Young Jacinta: Penélope Cruz: Sixth collaboration with Almodóvar, her greatest advocate
Mercedes, assistant: Nora Navas: Spanish hit *Black Bread* (10), *The Distinguished Citizen* (16)
Eduardo, painter: César Vicente: First three credits all within the last year, in film and TV

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Pedro Almodóvar: Won two Oscars; directed 22 feature films since late '70s
Cinematographer: José Luis Alcaine: Consistently worked with Almodóvar since *Volver* (06)
Film Editor: Teresa Font: Quite a few of her best-known credits came in the horror genre
Production Design: Antxón Gómez: Near-constant in Almodóvar's career since *Live Flesh* (97)
Original Score: Alberto Iglesias: Several Almodóvar collaborations, plus Hollywood work

Other Almodóvar films that pertain closely to this one...

Law of Desire (1987) – Almodóvar's seventh movie was a commercial and critical breakout, and the movie *Pain and Glory* references most directly. Like *Sabor* (aka *Taste*), Salvador's movie that has recently been restored, *Law of Desire* is 32 years old and remains a sprightly challenge to sexual and aesthetic orthodoxy. The lead actor, Eusebio Poncela, never worked again with Almodóvar, and they are rumored to have had a falling-out over his performance. In the movie, he plays a lovelorn filmmaker whose hot new fling, invigorating to men and to women, turns out to be homicidally possessive. That character was played by rising star Antonio Banderas.

The Flower of My Secret (1995) – This drama of a discontented romance novelist is often seen as the pivot into what became Almodóvar's "mature" period, with even more critical acclaim, international prominence, and festival prizes. The movie ends with the lead character leaving the city and returning to her family's home country in rural Spain, which Almodóvar depicts as a woman-dominated space. This portrait was very rare for this decidedly urban filmmaker and is the kind of story Salvador's mother probably resents for depicting her and her neighbors.

All About My Mother (1999) – Almodóvar's first Oscar winner and many people's favorite among his films is a about a single mother recovering from her son's death and returning to theater, where the onstage stories reflect some real experiences of their performers. The plotline in *Pain and Glory* about the one-man show *Addiction* returns to this theme of art mirroring life.

Bad Education (2004) – This sinister mystery concerns an actor (Gael García Bernal) who visits a famous filmmaker, claiming to be his childhood friend and former lover, and hawking a script seemingly based on their shared experiences as young victims of abuse in their school and their church. It is increasingly unclear whether this actor is telling the truth and/or has some agenda to harm the filmmaker; meanwhile, lines between real events and their fictionalized staging get increasingly blurred. *Pain and Glory*'s similar blending of reality and cinematic embellishment is linked here, as is the dark sense that Catholic school turned out badly for Salvador.

Volver (2006) – Penélope Cruz had small, poignant roles in earlier Almodóvar movies, interlaced with her first, inauspicious projects in Hollywood. Her Cannes-winning, Oscar-nominated star performance here gave her the artistic prestige she continues to enjoy. It also set the template for the kind of charismatic, somewhat idealized, but totally human and internally troubled mother that Cruz plays in *Pain and Glory*. Set in the La Mancha region of Spain where Almodóvar grew up, this is also the kind of film Salvador's mother would likely have resented.

Other films you may enjoy if you liked *Pain and Glory*...

Mamma Roma (1962) – This classic of post-World War II Italian cinema concerns an archetypally strong but embattled mother (the iconic Anna Magnani) struggling by herself to raise a son who is increasingly difficult and judgmental of her past experiences. The version of Salvador's mother that Penélope Cruz plays in *Pain and Glory* owes a lot to the example of Magnani in *Mamma Roma*; you might even spot a copy of the DVD on a table in Salvador's apartment.

8½ (1963) – Among the most famous films in all of cinema, this Federico Fellini masterpiece stars Marcello Mastroianni as a close alter ego for Fellini himself, contending with a huge creative block as he attempts to proceed with his ninth movie. Whether his reconnections with various lovers and acquaintances from his past and his frequent escapes in childhood memory are distracting him from his work or leading to an artistic breakthrough is an open question. *Pain and Glory* owes its autobiographical leanings and some of its plot points and tones to *8½*.

The Holy Girl (2004) – When Alberto, the alienated former star, surprises Salvador in his flat, they wind up watching a movie on TV where two teen girls are floating together in a swimming pool. This is the final scene of *The Holy Girl* (*La niña santa*), the second feature by Lucrecia Martel, an Argentinean filmmaker whose debut film and artistic sensibility had so impressed Almodóvar that he and his brother served as producers on this follow-up. The story concerns the coming-of-age of one of those young swimmers, growing up in her mother's hotel; she begins to believe she hears God's voice directly, around the same time that an older male guest in the hotel tries to seduce her. This film, too, was inspired by the director's own experiences.

Honey Boy (2019) – While not really "like" *Pain and Glory*, this upcoming release (a Special Presentation at the Chicago Film Festival) also concerns a film artist confronting his own difficult upbringing and tempestuous personal life and attempting to heal them through lightly fictionalized art. In this case, the artist is the young actor Shia LaBeouf, a talented child star who had an increasingly rocky reputation in the industry as he achieved adult success. LaBeouf wrote this screenplay about growing up on movie sets and in cheap hotels, largely in the company of his envious, abusive, yet somehow loving father (whom LaBeouf plays in the film). The innovative structure of this quasi-autobiography shuttles between these father-son scenes and the story of a slightly older LaBeouf (played by *Manchester by the Sea*'s Lucas Hedges) in a rehab center. All three actors, especially the youngest, give sterling performances.

Facts about *Pain and Glory* you may appreciate...

Almodóvar's [IndieWire interview](#) offers one of the clearest sketches of what is and isn't autobiographical in *Pain and Glory*. Several details of his childhood apparently do mirror what we see in the film, as does his long and recently-increased struggle with chronic back pain. Other details are technically inaccurate (he insists, for example, that he has never tried heroin) but he still admits they resonate at a broader level (he has known many addicts and did not have to struggle to imagine their sensations during or after a hit). Salvador's creative dry spell also correlates with Almodóvar's recent past to some extent, after his 2013 comedy *I'm So Excited!* tanked, his 2016 drama *Julieta* came and went with little fanfare—though I insist that's a really interesting movie that deserved more!—and he abandoned a subsequent script after all his drafts disappointed him. Having avoided self-disclosure in his previous films, he thought it might be the energy-boost he needed, and would relieve him of having to research or consult.

It isn't just the script that cleaves closely to details of Almodóvar's biography. The set of Salvador's apartment is an almost exact replica of the director's flat, to include reproductions of the art he owns and other aspects of layout and décor; Banderas has described the strange sensation of inhabiting the set having been to the actual apartment so many times that he knows it intimately. Some of Salvador's costumes are modeled closely on Almodóvar's own clothes, or are direct reproductions, or are Almodóvar's actual garments and shoes.

As much as the Salvador character and the movie as a whole closely allegorize Almodóvar's own experiences, Banderas has made clear that he has several personal stakes in this story as well. For example, he [suffered a heart attack](#) two years ago that changed his relation to his own mortality, not long before Almodóvar first described his plans for this film. The actor and director also had an uneasy time with each other on their last collaboration, the creepy and sexually provocative mystery/thriller *The Skin I Live In* (2011), so the theme of re-building bridges with former colleagues may have resonated. I have not heard Banderas discuss this in interviews, but his ex-wife Melanie Griffith publicly struggled with addictions during their two decades of marriage, so I can only assume that material in the film was a raw nerve for him.

Banderas told [Thrillist](#) that some pivotal scenes in the movie were expanded or devised on the day of shooting—for example, the scene on the outdoor balcony between Salvador and his mother, where he apologizes for not having been the son that she wanted. Banderas felt he knew how to act this brand-new scene with no prep, after watching Almodóvar's emotions across the shoot. (That said, the two agreed early that Banderas should not over-invest in imitating Almodóvar.)

In this [YouTube interview](#), Banderas gives some amazing backstory about the intimate, vulnerable scene between Salvador and his long-ago lover Federico. After trying but failing to get the scene right the night before, everyone reconvened the next morning, and Leonardo Sbaraglia, the actor playing Federico, asked if the camera could be planted on Banderas for the first take, since he might need at least one full take to warm up to the level of emotion Federico both reveals and withholds during this late-night conversation. Banderas, though, says that Sbaraglia was so touching in the way he delivered his dialogue that Banderas himself could barely hold back from crying, and Almodóvar refused to cut or to film his performance a second time. Every shot of Banderas in that scene is from one take. They filmed Sbaraglia's side of that dialogue immediately afterward, and the results of that one half-morning are up on screen.

Broad conversation topics about *Pain and Glory*...

Almodóvar on Almodóvar: Everything about *Pain and Glory*, from its telltale echoing of events in Almodóvar's life and films to Antonio Banderas's personal restyling with his director's trademark hairstyle, makes clear how closely the film hews to the director's own life—though Banderas has also admitted that, even having worked with Almodóvar many times over four decades, he didn't know many of the details that this screenplay discloses. Did you know Almodóvar's life or career well enough for that knowledge to inform the way you watched the movie? If so, did it change your view of the films you know best? If not, did the story still resonate on its own terms, separate from its autobiographical resonances?

Autofiction and Metafiction: Salvador's mother says she's learned the term "autofiction" from him, for stories inspired largely by the maker's own life. Metafiction, relatedly, describes narrative art that underscores its own states as constructed fiction—most clearly in the final shot of *Pain and Glory*. How did your responses to the childhood scenes or to the movie as a whole change after that final revelation, as the camera pulls back in the train station? Where or how else does *Pain and Glory* flaunt the fact that it's an *imagined* twist on real events?

Shifting, Compartmentalized Structure: Salvador's first major bond in the film is an unsteady one with Alberto, the former star with whom he has not spoken since their falling-out after a movie that was otherwise a huge success. It's easy to believe this relationship will propel the rest of the film, but as soon as Alberto performs *Addiction* on stage, he disappears, ceding the movie temporarily to Salvador's reunion with former lover Federico, who inspired that script. The focus shifts again to Salvador's complex rapport with his mother, and the last 20 minutes are almost fully committed to resolving a thread that has fitfully appeared across the rest of the movie, concerning young Salvador's encounter with an illiterate laborer/artist in his rural community. What do you think the film says by successively spotlighting different relations in Salvador's life, such that each one often gets dropped entirely as a new "center" emerges?

The Body in Pain: This is the title of a famous book about how impossible it seems to represent the sensations of pain visually, or in any way that conveys its debilitating gravity to someone not experiencing pain. If other emphases shift across *Pain and Glory*, Salvador's pain is a constant (maybe *the* constant). Did you keep that context in mind even as other aspects of character or plot seemed to supersede it? What did it mean to you for the film to illustrate his series of maladies in such ornate terms early on, distinct from anything else in the film?

Gender and Masculinity: I have noticed among my friends that *Pain and Glory* seems to hit male spectators the hardest; I already know that a few of you have encountered this pattern with men in your own life. Do you have the sense that Salvador's emotions and predicaments relate specifically to middle-aged masculinity, or do they feel more universal to you than that? As for the female characters, do you think it's significant that Mercedes, the assistant character, is so unexplored compared to others in the film, despite playing a crucial role?

The Catholic Church: In a movie that continues to fill its own gaps, reveal new layers, and reframe people and plot points we thought we knew, Salvador's time in his Catholic high school and church remains a void that characters discuss uneasily. What did you assume?

Some suggestive details from *Pain and Glory*...

The opening credits play out over a fixed, clean, white rectangle surrounded by a soup of bright-colored paints that keep moving and intermixing. To me, this is a rich emblem of how the movie and also Salvador's mind entail a combination of deceptively tight structure and, on the other hand, a constant shifting and intermixing of memories, patterns, and colors.

The first dialogue in the movie is an exchange among four women doing laundry in a river, in which one expresses envy for the relative freedoms of men, who could swim naked in the water and nobody would care. This is an interesting note to launch a movie that will often return to the constraints on women's lives—the mother who has constantly had to adapt to changing circumstances, the female assistant who lives totally in Salvador's service—but will quickly, frequently go on to stress the different prisons and aches that men do suffer.

When Salvador runs into a former collaborator named Zulema (played by Cecilia Roth, who starred in *All About My Mother*), she is wearing a vivid, purple-and-magenta floral dress that is prototypical of Almodóvar's penchant for vibrant, even outlandish design...but Salvador himself is notably dressed in nothing but some nondescript jeans and an untucked, pale blue Izod t-shirt. This is one early "tell" that Salvador's (i.e., Almodóvar's) life is not exactly a carbon-copy of his film's style or the public's perception. If you watch how his costuming evolves over the movie, you can see a story of how he does and doesn't match this persona.

Hitchcock has been a strong and repeated influence on Almodóvar's work, though it operates differently in *Pain and Glory* than in other films. Here, I thought of him most during the Technicolor, animated montage sequences where we learn about the character's professional travels and physical ailments, a one-of-a-kind sequence within the overall film that reminded me of the animated dream/fantasy sequence in the middle of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. That movie is about all the ways the Jimmy Stewart character over-identifies with the Kim Novak character, projects relentlessly onto her, but also realizes he knows very little about her. To see Salvador treat his own body and his own life story as a similar site of infatuation but also mystery and alienation is a powerful and revealing gesture, if you catch the reference.

When Salvador visits Alberto's home, we see a huge poster for a production of *Hamlet*, featuring a gigantic skull. Alberto also wears a skull-shaped ring on one finger. Particularly once we see the intensity of Alberto's commitment to drug-taking, it is easy to guess that he might represent a kind of danger or death figure from Salvador's past (or, given the plots of this film and of *Hamlet*, possibly a semi-welcome "ghost" from the director's past, with important messages to share?). The fact that, against all these premonitions, Alberto seems to rescue himself quite ably and recover his artistic vision and discipline is one of many signs that Almodóvar refuses any moralistic, one-dimensional view of addicts or drug-taking.

The scene where these two men take heroin together behind the house marks the first instance of an electronic, not particularly melodic passage in the movie's score, typified by a series of intermittent bleeps and bloops. This motif will return in other moments when Salvador is explicitly or implicitly high...but then, it also resurfaces in less expected scenes, like the final visit to the hospital when he seeks medical aid. Why liken *this* scene to those others?