

LIVE FLESH (Carne Trémula) [1997]

by

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Victor (Liberto Rabal) arrives at the home of the girl he met, had sex with, and fell in love with the night before in an attempt to renew the relationship. Expecting a drug delivery, she tries to throw Victor out and in the struggle that ensues, the police arrive. While grappling with Victor, a gun goes off, crippling one of the officers, and Victor goes to jail. Released four years later, he (perhaps) accidentally encounters Carla (Angela Molina), the wife of one of the cops, Sancho (Jose Sancho), who arrested him. He volunteers at a shelter for abused children operated by Elena (Francesca Neri), the girl four years ago, now the wife of the crippled cop, David (Javier Bardem). What follows is a complex tale of love, sex, vengeance, and compulsion: Victor was falsely accused by Sancho, who actually shot his partner David because he was sleeping with his wife; Carla sets up alternate housekeeping with Victor and teaches him about sex while trying to leave her abusive husband Sancho; Victor seduces Elena; jealous David begins following Victor and photographing his trysts; David shows the photographs to Sancho who tries to kill Victor but shoots his wife instead at the very moment she shoots him, and so on. (Spanish with English subtitles.) (Rated R)

In a seeming about-face from his previous camp sex romps, Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar has produced a solemn parable in which passion and procreation are the means to overcome the political oppression of Franco fascism. It nevertheless brims with addictive sex, doomed love, and narrative delirium, as we would expect from the godfather of the Spanish new wave.

What would the Messiah be like were he a political rather than a religious figure? A savior and redeemer of a political rather than a religious system? This may seem like a very off-the-wall question, but is, nonetheless, the subject of Pedro Almodóvar's latest film, *Live Flesh*. Here's the evidence (beyond the obvious reference in the title): The film begins at Christmas time, a large (electric) star in the sky is being repaired and a fatherless baby is being born to a social outcast in a bus (well, not quite a manger, but close enough). The dead-calm streets of Madrid are lonely and deserted in an apt metaphor for Franco's oppressive, iron-fisted rule in 1970. Since the baby, Victor (for Victory?) is the first born of the new year (that is, hope and new life is born into a new era), the Mayor, the head of the bus authority and his assistant give him gifts. While one may doubt the wisdom of these three men, the gifts (a life-time bus pass) are nonetheless given. While the references to Christ are not unique in film (*E.T.*, *The Extraterrestrial* [1982], for instance, is an almost chapter and verse recounting of the life of Jesus as told in the Gospels), what is different here are the political implications.

During the course of the film, Victor transforms, as does the political system around him. He faces temptation in prison – temptation to become bitter, to join the regime, and so on. On his release from prison, he takes care of children; he transforms others through his love (physical love, yes, but after all, this is an Almodóvar film). The coming of Victor marks the transition from oppression to freedom and Victor has found among the ruins of the old regime traces to be followed, embraced and enhanced to lead to a new freedom. With the birth of his son ten years later, a new era of peace and freedom has dawned on Spain.

Victor represents all those who grew up in post-Franco Spain confronting the old regime. By the film's end, all vestiges of the old regime have fallen, freedom and democracy have been reinstated, and there is a golden opportunity for personal happiness and fulfillment. Each of the five main characters takes on political significance, each represents some aspect of the old fascist regime or the new democracy on the horizon. By the film's end, we are once again at Christmas time and another baby is being born. Now, however, the streets are filled with joyous people full of life, and the star that was high in the air, remote and untouchable (and being grudgingly repaired) at the beginning of the film is now fully lit, closer to the ground, closer to the people who have just experienced political and personal rebirth and transcendence.

Victor is the center of the film. He begins the film as a leather-jacketed hedonist, living for nothing more than the moment. He becomes a pawn in the sexual machinations of the old regime. Here sharks devour each other – Sancho intentionally shoots David because he suspects his partner of sleeping with his wife. This is in sharp contrast to the young Victor and the young Elena in the same scene, sticking up for and protecting each other. The lines between youth and the older middle-class are clearly drawn early in the film.

Under the guise of either compulsive love for Elena or vengeance on her and her husband, on Sancho and his wife – we're never terribly sure of Victor's motivations – Victor insinuates himself into their lives. Victor enters a world of despair and by focusing on the positive aspects the post-Franco world has to offer, he pulls himself up by the bootstraps to become a fully functional human being. While the others are given the same opportunities and even have Victor as an example, only Elena survives the encounter; the others cannot survive the onslaught of personal freedom in post-Franco Spain. Some die literally, others figuratively.

Victor, however, is not just a teacher, a demonstrator of the new order. In an attractive complication, he must learn from the old regime, for, according to the film, while corrupt it still consists of individual human beings, each to be valued. From Carla he learns about sexuality and sensuality. From David he learns that handicaps – Victor is a bastard and an orphan – can be overcome. From Sancho he learns the depth to which feelings of love can sink (in Sancho's case) or the heights to which they can rise (in his own experiences). From Elena he learns that even those who sell out to the fascists can be

restored to freedom. Victor's evolution is neither linear nor simplistic and this is one of the reasons he becomes so attractive a main character – he struggles for his changes.

Not only Victor changes in his four prison years, so does Elena. She changes from a rich, spaced-out druggie to a respectable, conservative-looking wife of a cop and the director of a children's center. It is unclear whether Victor stalks her for love or revenge – or both (typical Almodóvar). Their experiences in two social movements during their four-year separation – joining the ruling class, being imprisoned by the ruling class – have political implications. Both young people become involved with the Fascist ruling class. During his incarceration, Victor educates himself, learns a trade, gets a college degree, and reads the Bible. He symbolizes the young people who channel their energy into bettering themselves despite the pressures of a repressive regime (this is parallel to what happened in Czechoslovakia during about the same time). Elena, on the other hand, joins the oppressors (she marries David, the very policeman who arrests Victor). Elena, because of her youthful background, manages to do good within the regime – she runs and personally supports a shelter for abused children (victims of the Franco regime?). However, her personal life is unfulfilling. By rejoining with the now evolved Victor, she retains her good works *and* has a satisfying personal life.

David too is changed by his first encounter with youth – he becomes paralyzed (get it?). Rather than being a servant to the community, as a policeman in a democracy should be, he now plays wheelchair basketball. While he is quite good at it, he is impotent. (sex is always very important in all Almodóvar films and symbolizes life itself.) David represents the whole fascist regime – crippled by an encounter with honesty and youthful vigor. Like the government for which he works, he falsely imprisons the innocent, he is impotent, and, ultimately, he causes the destruction of his fellow police and himself.

Carla is in another type of prison – the prison of a miserable marriage. Therefore she is more than happy to fall into the arms of the kind and considerate Victor. Seen politically, this is the old guard using the younger generation for its own purposes, in this case staying young and sensuous. The film's declared political stance must punish this attempt to coopt the energy of the young – Carla must, and does, die.

In addition to the film's exploration of politics as redemption, it is simultaneously (Almodóvar never settles for anything straightforward) a condemnation of what might best be called testosterone poisoning. Each man is so hung up on his own version of his personal masculinity that the men become victims of each others' manipulations – often leading to their own destruction.

Pedro Almodóvar has been reinventing the rules of cinema since his first film *Pepi, Ludi, Bom* in 1980. Significantly, the appearance of this film coincided with the rebirth of both culture and democracy in Spain, the so-called *Movida Madrileña*. There followed a series of mischievous, satiric films that poked fun at the bourgeoisie and their uptight (i.e., Spanish) conventions, the most famous examples of the New Spanish Cinema (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* [1988], *Tie Me Up! Tie Me*

Down! [1989], *Flower of My Secret* [1995], etc.). *Live Flesh* continues in this vein (with appropriate homages to those that made it possible: during the bust, Luis Bunuel's *Rehearsal for a Crime*, a.k.a. *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*, plays on a TV in the background).

This film is Almodóvar's first real departure from what has become his stock in trade: the anti-social chaos that has become his signature reaction-by-denial to the totalitarian Spain in which he grew up. It seems that since he has conquered an aspect of social criticism, he must move on to a more serious, more in-depth analysis of what has happened to his country in the past decades. Having said all he has to say about rebellion, he has now turned his eye to the future of his country. Surprisingly, especially after his previous films, Almodóvar seems infinitely comfortable in this big-hearted, comfortable, less manic place.

Yet his imprint is still there in almost every scene. There remains the convoluted yet absurdly symmetrical plot line that gives Almodóvar the chance to inspect his favorite issues: repression, sexuality, guilt, violence, fear, envy and all the other elements of a Flamenco song (prominently heard in this film). So, too, remain his wild interiors and colorful costumes; but these also come closer to real life, some of his favorite places are *almost* habitable. He has swapped camp and interior decoration for a more penetrating, more insightful view into the nature of humans colliding with political forces that seem far greater than they are . . . and winning.

Live Flesh. Directed and written by Pedro Almodóvar. Based on a novel by Ruth Rendell. In Spanish with English subtitles. (1997)