

Katya Myasnikova

Films of Pedro Almodovar

Maternal Instincts and Hunting for Rectification in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*

Pedro Almodovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is a melodrama imbued with phone calls, bad timing, and various imperfect relationships. The narrative focuses on the recently fractured relationship between protagonists Pepa and Ivan. In attempts to reconverge, Pepa fruitlessly tries to reach Ivan by phone, whilst Ivan prepares to leave the country with another woman. His only goal involving Pepa is to obtain his suitcase of belongings before leaving for his trip. With the abundance of missed calls and voice messages left on answering machines, the telephone as a tool meant for communication creates a deeper rift in Pepa and Ivan's relationship. Yet, the phone, and other symbols, signal more implicit traits of these characters. Motifs, such as telephone booths and ducks, allude to character relationships and traits within the characters themselves, through meticulous script indicators and prop design.

The introductory shot of the film, after the opening title sequence, is a close-up of an artificial apartment model. Pepa is introduced by voiceover, along with additional sounds of quacking ducks. This prompts a following shot of ducks and chickens from Pepa's terrace, as they are revealed by a gradual exposure of light. Over the visual and sonic identifiers of the ducks, Pepa voices several key lines that set forth the foundation of her character: "The world was falling apart and I wanted to save it and save myself. I felt like Noah in the coop on my terrace, I wanted to save a couple of each species. Anyway, I couldn't save the couple I cared about most: Ivan and me." Ivan's voice follows soon after, in a black-and-white tracking shot

wherein Ivan carries a microphone, giving vapid compliments to various women. Later, the motif of the duck re-appears in a starkly unnatural form. As Pepa packs Ivan's suitcase for him, she critiques his possessions that were once gifted to her—objects like a fake flower and the wooden duck figurine. Upon seeing the duck in particular, Pepa remarks, “Who'd think of giving a duck as a present?” Given Pepa's terrace alone, these objects make for interesting choices of gifts. Why gift a fake flower when Pepa's living space holds an assortment of living plants? And why gift an artificial duck when Pepa owns two living ducks? It seems an absurd choice in gift-giving, and one that is not especially remarkable or dazzling. Yet, aside from this poor choice on Ivan's part, the duck itself is a symbol that can be interpreted in a few ways. In a generalized manner, the duck is representative of Ivan's offerings. All of Ivan's offerings, through either objects or words, have ultimately been factitious. There isn't anything he can offer that is tangible or real, at least, not for Pepa. Throughout the film, he is seen being dishonest with his intentions and then becoming extremely avoidant of any potential consequences. He uses his own voice to propel his dishonesty, transmitting these messages either through written notes or by telephone. In an instance where Pepa listens to one of Ivan's messages on her answering machine—a message clearly saturated with lies—she is immediately aware of his trickery, declaring that “he can fool me with everything but his voice.” Another way in thinking of the gifted duck is in connection to Pepa's own opening lines where she associates herself with the biblical figure, Noah. Like Noah in the story of the ark, she wants to save those around her. Her terrace itself is an oasis for various life forms consisting of plants, rabbits, chickens, and ducks. Pepa's priority is in somehow saving, or otherwise rectifying, her relationship with Ivan, but she also acts as a stable basis for other characters as well. This care-taking quality ties in with the maternal aspect of her character. After her and her friend, Candela, make plans to leave, Pepa

goes out on the terrace to water her plants. It is a gentle moment, in which Pepa soothes her plants with her words, telling them that she won't leave them alone and that they'll come along with her eventually. Like in Noah's travels, Pepa wants her living plants and animals to travel along with her—to save them from their own depression, as she states mid-watering. In this way, Ivan's gifting of the fake duck is a token of his reliance on Pepa to keep the relationship afloat, or, for her to be the one doing the 'saving.' It is Ivan who requests for Pepa to pack his suitcase for him, and it is Ivan who becomes too cowardly to face Pepa in person when attempting to retrieve his items. He claims that she is the one avoiding him, despite all indications to his own escapist behavior.

Telephones and telephone booths also represent key motifs throughout their frequent incorporation within this film. The telephone is a tool meant for helping to bring people closer together through communication. However, in Almodovar's portrayal, the telephone propagates a complex web of miscommunication, creating further distancing between characters. Pepa desperately attempts to call Ivan to relay important news. Ivan also attempts to get into contact with Pepa, but mostly seems to use the telephone as *evidence* of his simple attempts; otherwise, he fervently avoids actually connecting with Pepa. The phone booths themselves are especially symbolic in relation to the characters that occupy them. For example, when Pepa visits Lucia's apartment at night, she enters a phone booth that has two children depicted on its outside. Inside the phone booth, Pepa is seen using the phone—and in the immediate foreground, is the out-of-focus image of a child. This connection is indicative of Pepa's motherly role, especially concerning her own future in regard to her pregnancy. In fact, imagery related to children is often associated with Pepa. Her living space itself is filled with lively color, and her shelves are decorated with various children's toys and blocks. In another scene involving a phone booth, Ivan makes a call just outside of Pepa's apartment, claiming he could not reach her. The resulting

message left on Pepa's answering machine from this call is infused with lies: "I want you to know that our years together were the best of my life. I'm not going away with any woman." These lines reflect Ivan's character from the beginning, where he had spoken to women in empty phrases. Thus, the phone booth Ivan utilizes has an image of a duck on it. As he speaks into the phone, the out-of-focus duck remains in the immediate foreground. So, it could be assumed that the duck is representative of Ivan himself, who presents himself in a fabricated manner. Even when Lucia, his wife, enters the scene, Ivan literally *ducks* down to hide and avoid any possible confrontations. Ivan as symbol of the duck can also be interpreted in the way that ducks may be targets of hunting. Throughout the film, Ivan is targeted for different reasons. Pepa is consistently seen trying to 'hunt' him down to talk to him, attempting to use the phone as a form of tracking. Meanwhile, Lucia targets Ivan for the purpose of actually killing him—Ivan becomes a target of *literal* hunting. As in connection to the prior associations between Pepa and Noah, Pepa becomes the hero in the situation when she ends up saving Ivan's life from Lucia's murderous intent at the airport.

After a hectic journey, Pepa returns to her apartment with a newfound clarity. She sits out on the terrace alongside Marisa, and finalizes that she won't be subletting her apartment (of which, she had prior considered). As she looks out at the view, which she declares her love for, her two ducks and assortment of plants are also in-frame. Pepa is suddenly encased by life, including her own pregnancy. She is embracing this reality, and has let go of the artificial baggage that she had been emotionally, and physically (in the form of Ivan's suitcase), carrying around from her severed relationship. Pepa has a new outlook on life, and finds herself finally enjoying the view.