

Talk to Her (Hable con ella)
Spain, 2002

“Nothing is simple.”

Major Credits:

Writing and Direction: Pedro Almodovar
Cinematography: Javier Aguirresarobe
Music: Alberto Iglesias; song performed by Caetano Veloso
Dance Choreography: Pina Bausch
Cast: Javier Camara (Benigno), Dario Grandinetti (Marco), Leonor Watling (Alicia), Rosario Flores (Lydia), Geraldine Chaplin (Katerina)

Background:

Following *All About My Mother* (1999) and preceding *Bad Education* (2004), *Talk to Her* represents a significant turn in Almodovar's remarkable string of cinematic successes, a maturing of both his style and thematic interests. Although there are farcical and melodramatic elements still present in each, these three films take the director's characteristic exploration of gender roles and social morality much more seriously, so that despite some deliberately outlandish images (e.g., *Talk to Her*'s film-within-the-film) and contrived twists of the plot, all three films remain profoundly moving in unexpected ways. Roger Ebert has accurately captured the essence of Almodovar's achievement in the conclusion to his review of *Talk to Her*: “No director since Fassbinder has been able to evoke such complex emotions with such problematic material.”

Cinematic Qualities:

1. Dance: *Talk to Her* begins and ends with two extraordinary dance scenes choreographed by Pina Bausch. The first, “Café Muller,” has been described by Almodovar as the direct inspiration for his film and serves as a kind of “argument” (as in medieval drama, a condensed plot summary) of the narrative to follow. The concluding social dance, “Masurca Fogo,” provides narrative closure and even the promise of a new relationship beyond the diegesis.
2. Wide Screen Cinematography: Almodovar frequently employs horizontal compositions that take advantage of the film's wide aspect ratio, as in the three-shot in Lydia's hospital room or the four-shot on the balcony. Because frequent cutting is more distracting in widescreen format, Almodovar frequently uses rack focus rather than classical editing to concentrate the spectator's attention within the mise-en-scene.
3. Intertitles: Although generally more realistic than his stylistically flamboyant earlier films, *Talk to Her* regularly interjects narrative intertitles (“SEVERAL MONTHS LATER,” “LYDIA Y MARCO”) as a reminder of the director's controlling presence.
4. Film-Within-Film: The most outrageous expressionistic element in *Talk to Her* is, of course, the silent film, “The Shrinking Lover,” which is both a brilliant

parody of the American science fiction classic *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) and an audacious vision of male fear and desire.

5. Tail Credits: The concluding credits provide the audience an exceptional musical experience but also time to contemplate the complexity of the film's text, the last line of which is the dance mistress' "Nothing is simple."

Questions for Discussion:

1. Predictably, *Talk to Her* provoked a good deal of debate among feminist critics (as has nearly all of Almodovar's work). On the one hand, the female protagonists remain largely still and silent throughout the film; on the other, the men enact traditional feminine roles of nurturing, sensitive concern, and emotional responsiveness. On a more disturbing level, the film seems to afford a rapist the most profound attention and empathy. Almodovar surely anticipated the controversy surrounding the film's sexual politics, but what is he trying to express about gender relationships?
2. Almodovar is an openly gay director, a fact which foregrounds his film's treatment of sexual orientation. Note how Benigno manipulates gay stereotypes to gain intimate access to Alicia; consider how the love that develops between Marco and Benigno seems more profound than any of the heterosexual relationships. David Denby has praised *Talk to Her* "as a gay director's admission of emotional avidity and physical fear." How can we best describe the film's presentation and understanding of human love?
3. The film's moral ambiguity centers on the character of Benigno. He seems honest enough when he describes himself to Alicia, "I just wanted to see you... but I'm harmless," but then we remember that he has just stolen her barrette. Does the film—and, by extension, the audience—give him a "pass" that exonerates not only his casual deceits but also his horrendous crime? Is there a moral lesson to be derived from *Talk to Her*?
4. A personal confession: when I first watched this film, I denied the reality of Benigno's act, viewing him as the victim of bureaucratic injustice rather than the perpetrator of a perverse crime. Upon subsequent viewings, I have been forced to abandon this reading—somewhat shamefacedly. But is there some sense in which my own "misinterpretation" can be accounted for in the film's narrative strategy and aesthetic design?