

Pain and Glory by Pedro Almodovar
A movie review by Selma Duckler

Pedro Almodovar's tender and beautiful new film, "Pain and Glory," follows a long line of enchanting films that include within the fictional world fragmentary memories, actual dialogue and experiences taken directly from the filmmaker's own childhood, specifically surrounding reminiscences of his mother.

The theme of this movie, unlike the others, is mourning and transformation, captured in the two-word title. The mourning is his real and fantasized childhood with his mother and the transformation, as I see it, has to do with his own recovery from depression and drug addiction to a life where he can again write and live creatively. The film does not focus on the painful circuitous road one travels recovering from depression and heroin addiction. Instead, it is a film of bright colors, humor and constructive creative life that is energetic and spends little time with the more malignant drives. The transformation from a deadened creative man who has momentarily lost his ability for accomplishment to one who can access love for and from the mother of his childhood, whether real or imagined, is the central theme. The strong belief in himself comes along with and is a result of the turning of hate back to love, and his acceptance of self is the journey of the film.

The film opens with the credits on a background of undulating pulsating colors ever rolling and changing tints. This is a promise of the changes in Salvador we are going to see. The music by Alberto Iglesias, here and throughout the film, is exquisite and becomes another dimension of Salvador's character and the scenes of his life. The film begins in the first person with a narrative by Salvador Mallo, a famous film director who has retired from filmmaking. We get a sense of his life from the animated drawings of maps showing the places in the world where he has traveled as a celebrated film director who enjoyed international fame. There is a bit of healthy braggadocio here. Madrid is the mother city for Salvador. In this sense he is a small town boy. He became famous so the rest of the world became interested in him. But it is Madrid that claims him, and during these years of pain, that is where he remained. The maps show and brag what had been happier times.

Then the scene goes to drawings of the body, organs and nerves all colorfully outlined perhaps as in a human anatomy book intended for children. Salvador lists his many ailments as the figures turn and change following his monologue. He lists varied illnesses including asthma, sciatica and shows a close up of the ear to tell you he also has tinnitus. There is a quality of taking this message over the top, to either arouse a response, or to give himself stature.

He had a spinal fusion operation but his specialty, he claims is headaches. He ends this list with an announcement of his ongoing major depression. This really belongs at the top of the list and the remainder should be filed under symptoms.

We have learned in this history that his body is crying out his inner pain. He receives the somatic message but also realizes the depression because he names it in his list of ills. But he has not connected his inability to function creatively to the depression he suffers.

Or maybe he has, and this is the film that tells that story and brings him to the glory in the title.

The next scene we see him almost nude stationary in a deep pool of water, meditating, serene, We are given a good long look and a very brief one to see the long scar of his surgery. This shows you the injury to his body, and symbolically to his soul, the depression.

Now dressed he wanders into a café and sees an actress he knows. He asks her if she knows where Alberto Crespo is, who was the star of his last film, 32 years ago. She does know and gives him the information. He had a bitter fight with Alberto over that film as he felt Alberto did not follow his direction and ruined the film. It was not what he wrote. Alberto promised Salvador, he would give up heroin for this film and he did not. He has not spoken to Alberto in all these years, nor has seen the film again, nor has produced any work.

The film has been resurrected for a film festival and he has been asked to appear with Alberto for a Q&A following the showing.

Salvador goes to Alberto's home and is met by a hostile Alberto but he presents a reconciliatory tone and is invited in. They discuss the festival offer and agree do it together. Salvador has not for a moment relinquished his anger and sense of betrayal of Alberto so the visit is tense. There is a poster of the movie, "Sabor" that Alberto owns and Salvador flares up seeing it, feeling Alberto stole his movie from him. Alberto can only face this situation by "chasing the dragon" and starts a heroin fix. Salvador has never used heroin but the anger is hard to control so he accepts the drug and falls asleep having the first of many childhood dreams which become a main part of the movie.

This first dream repeats the water theme of our first view of Salvador. He is on the bank of the river where his beautiful mother is washing bedsheets with a group of village women. The mood is lighthearted. The women joke that they would like to be like the men so they could swim nude in the river. The women wring out the sheets and move to bushes where they spread the sheets over bushes, similar to the way sheets are spread on a bed. They all sing a lilting folk melody.

Salvador is the only child and is enjoying playing with the water and the small fish attracted to a piece of soap.

His mother (Penelope Cruz as Jacinta) fondles him, comments on the fish and tells him to stay, as she goes to drape the sheets.

It is a dream, a fantasy and not a piece of his childhood revisited. He is the only child in the dream and in all the dreams of his childhood. A true scene of a small Spanish village would have many mothers with numerous children, or his siblings. In Salvador's dream the rest of the world didn't exist. Just mother and him. The water and the small fish he enjoyed as evidenced by his sweet smile was a pre-birth state of bliss when he was wrapped in amniotic fluid, his comfort and serenity and the bed-sheets a memory of his intimacy with a loving mother. The drug induced sleep brought back a world of being loved, safe and cared for and being the primary person in this world. We have a glimpse of a sweet satisfied smile on sleeping Salvador. Salvador becomes addicted to heroin, which causes many deep sleeps for him. He always dreams of his illusionary childhood. If the dreams are taken literally, the fabric of the movie that moves him, to glory, will be lost.

In all these dreams of his mother and himself he recalls the love he felt and the feeling of specialness and competency he had in those years. It was a beginning to

again believe in himself and bring back a deep rooted faith of himself he had had with his mother.

Alberto visits Salvador in his beautiful home. The walls are covered with art but the shades are drawn. Salvador says when he has headaches he keeps it dark. They take heroin again and Salvador falls asleep.

While he is asleep, Alberto open his computer desktop icons and reads a play called "Addiction."

Alberto is enamored of this play and wants to do this as a monologue in a theatre. When Salvador awakens he says no, it was just written as a confession of the failures in his life. Then he says Alberto can do it but not to use Salvador's name. Alberto can claim ownership or it can be anonymous. Salvador does not want to be associated with it. However, he gives Alberto good stage directions how to present it. The next dream is an older Salvador, now in school taught and controlled by priests. He falls asleep as he hears someone playing the piano. This is replaced by a dream priest playing as little boys march in and sing basic scales sung by the priest who needs a boys' choir. The first two boys are terrible. The third boy, Salvador copies the priest in perfect pitch with a beautiful clear child soprano voice, so he becomes a choir boy. He is so remarkable; he never has to go to classes to learn required courses. They want him to sing and study voice, so he develops into a young man who is uneducated in basic learning. Salvador says he became a complete ignoramus. The priests arrange that he gets excellent grades for courses he never had to take. An earlier film of Almodovar's, "Bad Education," shows the abuses of the priests to their young students to satisfy their own needs. That movie is sexually explicit and this is not. The abuse here is the denial of education in the service of making the priest's choir glorious. It is a dream showing the priest's abuse, the children's acceptance of a system where they have no power and the slow awakening from innocence to reality for these vulnerable children.

After the 32 year old movie, "Sabor" is shown to a packed house, it is Q&A time but there is no Alberto and Salvador. The upset theatre manager calls Salvador's home to find he has not left for the theatre. Salvador and Alberto are both dressed in fancy clothes to attend, but Salvador decides he does not want to go. They are sharing a heroin fix and are in a state of silliness. They offer to do the Q&A on the phone. The first question is for clarification of the argument between the two men. Has it been resolved? Have opinions changed? Is there forgiveness? This puts Salvador into a furious rage; they drop the phone and carry on the fight at home and both men are stoned. This scene is supposed to be funny but it gives us a little insight into the side of Salvador that is pain. He is already sensitive and injured by this movie that carried with it the memory of a breakup with Alberto who he trusted to bring his written characters to life as he had made them. He cannot tolerate criticism of this movie. The betrayal of his play was a deep injury.

We get a hint of more and greater injury in another scene of Salvador visiting his mother shortly before her death. She is an old woman, and not attractive. She is not Penelope Cruz grown old. She attacks Salvador and says he was not a good son. She didn't like seeing her neighbors portrayed in movies and she doesn't like his movies. She discusses thoughts on her death. She is very specific about how she wants to appear in the coffin. She wants to wear certain selected things and have a

rosary in her hands. She plans her appearance as if she is an actress on stage. She verbally arranges herself to be the best of corpses according to the views of the Catholic Church. The priests will be proud of her holy appearance. She is focused on this narcissistic view and is excited about it. Regarding her death, brings no discussion or concerns of leaving her son without her presence and importance to him. She expresses no sorrow about her death which will make her unable to follow the happenings in his life. There is no discussion of Salvador's life without mother love, admiration, involvement. We get a different picture than the dreams give us and of the woman who raised him. I believe Salvador's sweet dreams of his loving mother were deep wish fulfillment dreams, or perhaps, this woman had deep changes in her hard working life that brought about a harsher, negative view of her life.

Critical and hostile, there is no match between this woman and the mother of his dreams. All this criticism and attack through many years becomes the fabric of his soul. He incorporates it and it becomes his ardent constant self-criticism, and is projected to those in his life as criticism for who he is.

He has projected this criticism into the audience of the movie, Sabor, because it was already a scene of a breakup with him and Alberto. It is so vivid and real to him that he cannot go, and tries to ease his imagined pain of attack with the heroin and becomes silly and laughing that erupts into a fight again with Alberto.

Salvador probably spent his life trying to capture the interest, admiration and love of a mother who seemed interested in what her son was not.

Another dream Salvador has is one in which he is a school-age boy. His mother abruptly leaves the home of her husband's mother as she has been insulted by the mother in law, and is following her husband to a new home that he had to quickly find. It is a basement home, under street level. One looks at the ceiling where there is a grate to see the outside world. She is very angry to live in a cave but Salvador loves it. His father says he will whitewash and improve it which he never does. In fact we never see the father again.

It is a dream of change for Salvador. He is becoming an adolescent but the cave home has the look of the womb, hidden and round. He is scholarly, reads a lot and can do arithmetic. Sitting outside on steps one day, he is reading when a young woman stops to admire his reading such difficult books. She asks him if he will teach her boyfriend who is illiterate and cannot get a job because of this. Jacinta returns from her washerwoman work and says Salvador will teach him at no fee if Eduardo, the young man works on the cave, paints it and makes it more beautiful. The couple agree. This dream is important as it portrays Salvador now as a boy/ man who has abilities and responsibilities that increase his value to his loved mother.

In the dream, Eduardo is finishing decorative tiles covering one wall as Salvador lays down for a nap in the heat of the day. Eduardo, the young man asks if he can wash up as he is covered with whitewash.

He brings a basin and Salvador brings him soap and settles down again for a nap. The theme is water again so it is going to be a sensual dream.

Eduardo undresses and starts carefully to wash himself. Salvador starts to fall asleep but can't stop looking at the naked man. As Eduardo turns and his penis is in full view he asks for a towel. Salvador gets up to get him a towel but as he approaches him, Salvador falls in a faint. Eduardo carries him to the bed and gets dressed. This dream

of his sexual awakening, and his excitement frightens him. It is the beauty of the man's body, not his mother but the male splendor, which has evoked such a response in him. In the dream, Salvador shows Eduardo's response. He dreams it happened because Eduardo also has sexual feeling for him, but expressed differently. This artistic young man sits at the table and draws an exquisite picture of Salvador sitting on the steps in a red t-shirt and reading. The picture is so beautiful, one is aware of the love of the artist who was moved by this boy to draw him so sensitively.

Jacinta returns in the dream, disturbed to find Salvador unwell and burning with a fever and very annoyed Eduardo had bathed in her home. She scolds and dismisses him. It is a big change from the loving Jacinta. Her anger expresses the feeling she has because she has arrived home and finds herself in an environment of highly charged atmosphere and her son's excited state. Salvador at the moment of enlightenment about his feeling, realizes the societal rejection of his choice because of her very angry attitude towards Eduardo. He recognizes disapproval in his loving mother. The beautiful picture is unnoticed. Jacinta is livid. She recognizes the rejection of her and it is very hard. The relationship of her and her son is changed forever.

Now we see Alberto, opening night of his one man show of Salvador's play, "Addiction". Salvador does not attend as he said he would not.

It is a moving performance, sensitively done. We, the movie audience, see it as it is performed. In the audience is a former lover of Salvador. Federico watches intently and knows instantly, who the author is, and that this play is about him and Salvador. He meets Alberto after the show and gets the address of Salvador. Alberto has never met Federico and knows nothing of him.

Salvador gets a phone call from the past, from Federico. They broke up years ago because of Federico's heroin addiction and have entirely lost contact. He says the hour is late so he will meet Federico the next day.

He hangs up and takes out a hidden portion of heroin. He starts to measure it, but has a change of heart and instead flushes it down the toilet. It is final. He is over his addiction. He calls Federico back and says to give him 15 minutes for a shower and to come over.

The meeting of the two former lovers is one of the highlights of the movie. Antonio Banderas, the actor who plays Salvador has a beautiful face, alive with expressions. He smiles a lot in this movie but when he sees Federico, Salvador's former lover, his face comes into a smile that makes you feel his arms are wrapped around you and he is smothering you with kisses. It is more than an excitement, more than ardor and welcome. It is an embrace of acceptance and love.

This is how he looks when Federico comes into the room. His delight captures the screen and the moment.

The men embrace 30 plus years have passed. Federico lives in Buenos Aires and has come briefly to Madrid on business. He married and has two sons. He proudly shows the pictures to Salvador. He told the older one who is 20 about his relationship with Salvador but not the younger one. He says he will in time. He is separated from the mother of the boys but is in a relationship again.

A man?, Salvador asks. "No, a woman". Salvador was his only relationship with a man. Ending with him, was the end of his same sex relationships. He offers to spend the night with Salvador. Salvador says he would love it, but no. He doesn't want it. Of

course. A night with Federico would end in separation again and Salvador does not want the pain of that. They kiss and embrace with love and Federico leaves

Now we see Salvador with a close friend, Mercedes. She takes him to a doctor who changes his meds and refers him to a surgeon who can fix a frightening choking problem he has had for years.

More time passes. Mercedes and Salvador are in an art gallery that exhibits art by unknown artists. They see the picture that years ago, Eduardo, drew of the boy, Salvador. It was found in a flea market in Barcelona. Salvador buys it and brings it to his home where it belongs.

The movie ends with the knowledge that Salvador can write again, and has found glory within himself...the only place it can be.

I watched a clip of Almodovar talking to an audience in Toronto. He says all of his movies are autobiographical but this one is the closest one to his life. He said the clothes worn in the film are his real clothes and the home of Salvador in the film is his actual home. This movie is half fiction, half autobiography.

I saw the film twice. Both times the audience had many same sex couples.

When I left, I said to a man, "did you like it?"

He said, "Oh, my God. it was so beautiful."

I looked at him. His eyes were full of tears.

And so were mine.