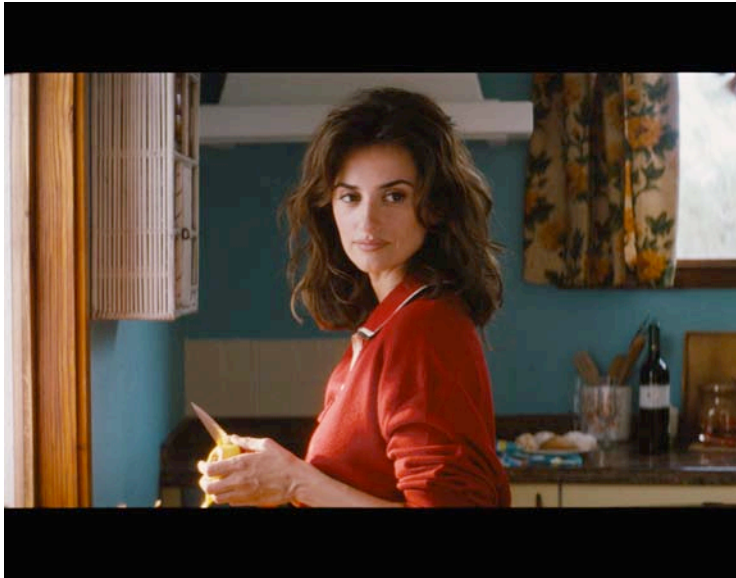


## Broken Embraces

The great Spanish director Spaniard Pedro Almodar is at it again, with “Broken Embraces” (*Abrazos Rotos* in Spanish), an intricate and satisfying melodrama about memory, movies, and mystery involving a film director and his actress muse. Once again his work is enhanced by the stunning presence of Penélope Cruz (see below) whom he used so effectively in “Volver” and who here plays a doomed actress.



Almodovar tells an elaborate flashback story of Harry Caine, a blind screenwriter, who has an assistant, Judit. After Harry learns of the death of Ernesto Martel, a wealthy businessman, Ernesto's son visits him. The film then flashes back to the 1990s, when Harry, who then used the name of Mateo Blanco, was a film director. He falls in love with Ernesto's mistress, Lena, and casts her in a

film which Ernesto finances. Ernesto becomes jealous and obsessive, sending his son to film the making of the movie and particularly to shoot footage of Lena and Mateo, which he is to show his father. To complicate matters, Judit isn't keen on Lena and thinks Mateo (i.e., Harry) is playing with fire. The couple try to escape the pressures closing in on them, but tragedy results.

All the complex plot and the time-shifting is handled adroitly by Almodovar, and his varied cast is handled superbly. Be aware that the story is openly and unabashedly melodramatic, but that is precisely what Almodovar often does best (many of his early films were plainly over the top). It doesn't matter in this film because the passions and larger-than-life conflicts are the point.

This is elegant soap opera about soap opera-like characters, but that doesn't make them any less interesting. Also, like so much of his work, “Broken Embraces” is full of ripeness, in story detail, acting styles, and, especially, in his colors and composition. He is the kind of director (there are not that many) who leave you with indelible scenes and images, but ones that don't detract from the narrative but rather enhance it. In this picture, for example, one magnificent close up of a dewy tomato (yes, a tomato!) will linger in the mind both for its beauty and for its symbolism. (in Spanish)

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