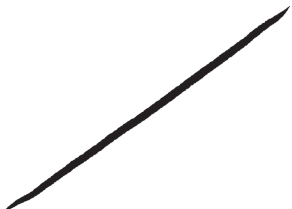


# **AN AESTHETIC OF DEATH AND THE COLOR RED IN PEDRO ALMODOVAR'S FILM *THE ROOM NEXT DOOR***

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses a change in the aesthetic of film director Pedro Almodóvar, as „shown in his latest film, *The Room Next Door*. The change consists mainly in distancing himself from certain means specific to melodrama or likely to be part of the arsenal of this genre. For decades, his so vivid chromatic palette played an important part in associating his films with melodrama. The primary, saturated colors, and especially his red gave the already temperamental characters and their actions and frequently shocking plots an extra dose—or should we say overdose?—of passion, which placed them in a dangerous proximity to melodrama. Inevitably, this essay will also explore the relationship between this new aesthetic of color and the film’s main topic: death. And not death as such, but death in a form that generated (over) heated discussions in contemporary society: euthanasia. Almodóvar’s view of death and euthanasia is reflected in the film’s poetics, in the use of colors, especially red. So, we are going to follow this *red* thread, as it interacts with other colors in order to stress the film’s message and the filmmaker’s means to create *beauty*, to create an “aesthetic of death”.

**Keywords:** Pedro Almodóvar, melodrama, the color red, beauty, aesthetic of death.

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## Introduction

Critics reviewing Almodóvar’s latest film have noticed a number of new features in the Spanish director’s first English-language film, “The Room Next Door”. Some of them will be quoted at the beginning of this essay. As these stylistic switches seem to consist mainly in abandoning some of the excesses that brought him the label “melodrama”, a brief presentation of the genre and of the history of the term is considered useful. Besides, however mildly the word melodrama might be used in certain contexts, we cannot ignore the gap between the characteristics of this genre and those of the art cinema. Which did not prevent the use of both labels to describe Almodóvar’s former films.

However, the most recent of his productions, *The Room Next Door* (2024), does not seem to raise any suspicion of melodrama. In spite of considerable premises that could have tempted Almodóvar to approach it with the usual melodramatic means. So, this essay will continue with a short presentation of the melodramatic traps avoided by the director, before analyzing the films’s poetics and the relation between its topic and the artistic means used by Almodóvar to convey his message in a way that seems to have been unanimously appreciated, bringing him at the same time the first important *European* award.

***A new Almodóvar?***

There are film critics who have always given a high appreciation to Almodóvar's films and who were afraid that, with his first English-speaking production, important elements or even the core of his aesthetic might get lost. David Canfield makes it sound like a pleasant surprise, that, in spite of making a film spoken in English, he does not betray his "iconic aesthetic": The Oscar-winning filmmaker makes a leap with his English-language debut, *The Room Next Door*, while staying true to his iconic aesthetic (Canfield, 2025). And:

Any concerns about Pedro Almodóvar sanding down his signature style for his first English-language feature film, *The Room Next Door*, are dispelled as soon one sees its first shot. The vibrant colors, the emotional intimacy, the exacting compositions and dialogue—the setting may be transferred from Spain to New York, but other than that, it's Almodóvar through and through. (Canfield, 2025).

Peter Bradshaw finds the Spanish director's new film "extravagant and engrossing" (Bradshaw, 2024), while Alissa Wilkinson points at a whole bunch of new elements in Almodóvar's style of filmic storytelling:

"The Room Next Door" is remarkably straightforward for an Almodóvar film, without the signature theatrics or sexual pyrotechnics that tend to pop up in the Spanish auteur's work. Every conversation is blunt, each character plain-spoken and uninterested in subtext. (Wilkinson, 2024).

A certain amount of surprise can be as well detected in the review of François Lévesque. He finds the film of Pedro Almodóvar (...) a poignant, yet surprisingly luminous film about the end of life. (...) The approach is pragmatic and extremely serene" (Lévesque, 2024).

Last but not least: another new and surprising feature in the Spanish filmmaker's cinema: there are no violent arguments or significant verbal conflicts. But—and the author of the French review says it explicitly—this does not change Almodóvar's style.

D'ailleurs, le film, là encore à l'inverse de ses prédécesseurs, ne comporte aucun de ces passages lors desquels les personnages explosent en de flamboyantes envolées (le seul réel affrontement entre Martha et Ingrid est d'une retenue atypique et d'autant plus efficace). Cette équanimité

nouvelle que maintient le cinéaste de bout en bout confère une dimension plus contemplative à *The Room Next Door*: pas de surenchère, pas d'effet.

Cela étant, le film n'a rien d'une marche funèbre. On le précisait d'emblée : Pedro Almodóvar a gardé intact son style aussi éclatant que virtuose.<sup>1</sup> (Lévesque, 2025)

Let us recap: concerns that, in this film, Almodóvar would “sand down his signature”, the description of new strategies in the director's style, a “surprisingly luminous film” etc. There is no doubt that something has changed in the Spanish director's style. But not the core of it. Should we believe that he gave up that potentially melodramatic arsenal in favor of more depth, yet remaining as spectacular as ever? For there was a lot of melodramatic potential in the story told in *The Room Next Door*. So let us try to get closer to a possible answer.

### ***Melodramatic „dangers” in The Room Next Door***

A story about the death of a woman, who is also very positive character, is an important melodramatic temptation for filmmakers who want to easily stir our emotions. And the character who is going to die in *The Room Next Door*, a former war reporter, Martha (Tilda Swinton), is such a character. Besides, she is bravely fighting her cancer. Not to mention that she had been left by her lover (John Turturo) in favor of her best friend, Ingrid (Julianne Moore). The latter is a successful writer, her books are bestsellers. Just listening to such a story, an authentic melodrama consumer could already be on the verge of shedding a tear. But let us continue the story. The former war reporter decides not to wait for the humiliating, inevitable sufferings of the inevitable end, so she manages to get a euthanasia pill from the dark web. And to convince precisely Ingrid to assist her. Not her daughter, who does not want to know anything about her mother, nor any other friend. And now let us describe our imaginary melodrama-friend the beginning of the film: In front of the bookshop where the author is signing her latest book, there is a long line of fans waiting to buy Ingrid's new bestseller. The author is signing, smiling, talking to her admirers. She looks happy. Or at least

1 Lévesque, Fr, «The Room Next Door»: *amies jusqu'à la fin et au-delà*, Le Devoir, 2025, Janvier 10. Available at <https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/cinema/831376/critique-cinema-the-room-next-door-amies-jusqu-fin-dela>: “Moreover, unlike its predecessors, the film does not feature any scenes in which the characters explode in flamboyant outbursts (the only real confrontation between Martha and Ingrid is atypically restrained and all the more effective for it). This new equanimity, which the filmmaker maintains throughout, gives *The Room Next Door* a more contemplative dimension: no exaggeration, no effects. That said, the film is by no means a funeral march. As we said at the outset, Pedro Almodóvar has kept his dazzling, virtuoso style intact.” (Accessed 7 November 2024)

Ingrid is feeling good. In the meantime, Martha is lying alone in her hospital bed. Isn't this melodramatic? A second tear cannot be repressed any more.

Let us add that the film is directed by no one else but Pedro Almodóvar, whose films were labelled melodramas. And whose favorite color is red. Intense red. Incandescent red. The reddest of reds. So red, that it bears his name: Almodóvar-red. Could such a plot like that above be labelled other than melodrama? No way.

And yet ...

### ***From melodrama to almodrama***

In his early years, Pedro Almodóvar enthusiastically enjoyed the frenzy of the of post-Franco freedom, that mixture of joie de vivre, emancipation and popular culture known as "movida madrileña". It was a natural reaction to the authoritarianism and machismo imposed by the dictatorship. The cultural and sexual emancipation, especially the emancipation of women were topics gladly embraced by the young filmmaker. The passionate excesses, typical to the products of the popular culture, found their privileged position in Almodóvar's films. In spite of his humor and irony, there are some melodramatic traits in his earlier films. But are these traits *genuinely* melodramatic?

It has already been noted that "Almodóvar usese melodrama against itself". (Vernon, quoted by Akkay, 2025). And the critic just mentioned is one of the many for whom Almodóvar's work just appears to belong to this genre.

Let us mention the Spanish writer and film director, Vicente Molina Foix. He was the one who tried to save Almodóvar from this label, which he considered inappropriate. Instead, he invented the term "*almodrama*." Which means that stories that might seem to belong to the melodramatic genre are transformed by Almodóvar into art films, using certain means of the melodrama. But in his own way. It is a pity that Foix's term *almodrama* did not enjoy the expected popularity.

### ***Melodramas or art films?***

So let us have, briefly, a closer look at what is called melodrama.

When it was born, melodrama was an honorable artistic genre, in which music (*melos* in Greek) was combined with drama. Invented and lauched in France in the early 19th century, the word has acquired rather pejorative connotations in the meantime. Today, it is used to define literary productions, shows and movies with stereotypical characters, involved in schematic, tear-jerking plots, marked by sensationalist twists and turns, superficially or not at all motivated, intended to provoke the most intense emotions with rather simple means in an audience with a lower cultural level.

Meanwhile, however, the term has lost some of its negative connotations. This is especially true in filmmaking, where the television series called “telenovelas” have taken over and developed the stridency of melodrama, eclipsing it to a certain extent.

Almodóvar’s first films, with strong characters and plots that shocked after the long years of censorship, with extreme passions and an almost violent color palette made this label almost inevitable. And the striking red—usually identified as specifically Spanish, synonymous with passion, blood, and fire—points in the same direction. Meanwhile, after numerous major awards, including an Academy Award, critics seem to have agreed that, for four decades, Almodóvar has been not only the leading Spanish director, but also one of the world’s most appreciated filmmakers. And his films are almost unanimously regarded as art films.

Though, Almodóvar himself does not seem to be offended by the inclusion of his films in the melodrama category. If we disregard a number of factors, his works are not so far from it, at least at a superficial glance. Anyhow, as mentioned above, especially in his early years, Almodóvar was very attached to popular culture and its consumers. There is no doubt that the director would be happy to have the latter among his viewers. In any case, they are often identified among the characters in his films.

Besides, we have to mention once again his vivid, even violent chromatic palette, dominated by that red so frequently mentioned. Belonging, of course, to the favorite arsenal of melodrama.

Well, nowadays Pedro Almodóvar is celebrated as the the most important Spanish filmmaker after Luis Buñuel. And after an impressive number of awards, his work is labelled art cinema.

This raises two questions. Can his films still be described as simple melodramas, or are we beginning to see also those traits that are not at all melodramatic and more sophisticated aesthetically? Or maybe melodrama has been elevated to the status of art film?! A contradiction that *The Room Next Door* seems to solve. In spite of the strong, saturated primary colors, in spite his omnipresent red.

### ***Red is both life and death. For the beginning, life.***

As for the melodramatic use of red, it has been suggested that it stands for repressed feelings and thoughts: Traditionally, melodramatic mise-en-scène must present elements that cannot be rhetorically or dramatically expressed (Toribio, 1996), often becoming a representation of repressed emotions and thoughts (Akkay, 2025).

Such an element might be, of course, the color red. An extensive use of red could be expected to suggest feelings, passions and even (political) ideas forbidden during the Franco regime. But Almodóvar made his films after the end of the dictatorship. Besides, he does not seem to be an artist willing to repress anything at all. Instead, we rather believe that repression might have, as the filmmaker himself stated in the same study, traditional roots: “I was formed [in the 1960<sup>th</sup>] and my films owe a great deal to the aesthetics of that time in which red was always essential” (Akkay, 2025).

It looks like, starting with some sort of inherited aesthetics, the artist came to truly fall in love with the color which is, as he puts it in most of his interviews, “life and death”.

In *The Room Next Door*, irrespective of the origin of the filmmaker’s love for this color, it is both life and death. To be more specific: Both in life and in death, red has common meanings: Intensity, passion, love. At least in this film. Where it is also meant, in a sophisticated relation with the other colors, nuances, of tints and shades, to have an important contribution to beauty as such.

For in this latest film of his, the artist uses his “iconic aesthetic” (Canfield, 2025) to show *only* beauty. This is why there are no excesses in the use of colors; just harmony, complementarity and meaning. Not even in the use of red. This might be the “leap” mentioned by Canfield: the precisely, harmonically dosed use of the *same* saturated colors—but with the only aim to create beauty.

### ***Life is beauty***

For Martha and Ingrid, life is beautiful. It has to be beautiful. Beauty seems to be their supreme value. And life cannot be beautiful without love, passion, friendship. Not even an unfaithful lover can spoil it. Red and its symbolism is essential in all they love, in everything that has value for them. Life has to be red. Although the destinies of Martha and Ingrid are so different. One is going to die. The latter will live.

So there is plenty of red in this latest var-film. Each and every red is a strict necessity, placed precisely where it has to be. The first half an hour or so, there is no important frame without red. Except a few passage frames, none of them lasting more than two or three seconds.

Red is present right from the beginning. After just 57 seconds, a plunging shot shows us the writer signing autographs. On the table, lined up in rows, are the books she will sign for her many admirers. Why are they arranged this way, and not piled up, as they use to be on such occasions? So that the *red* and *blue* illustrated covers can be as visible as possible. And that they can cover as much

surface area as possible. A combination of colors appreciated by specialists as being tense and extravagant. It will often be seen throughout the film, especially in the captivatingly elegant clothing. Of course, each color is ambivalent, as even Sergei Eisenstein showed a long time ago in a chapter dedicated to color (Eisenstein, 1957, pp. 113-157). So, the impact of the combinations of colors and nuances will be different. In fact, in this very sequence, Ingrid wears *blue*, and her assistant wears a long *red* dress. Maybe to express a certain amount of tension as well, as Ingrid is hearing from Martha and her illness?

Yet, and blue go together in many Almodóvar-films, and not only to express tension. In an essay entitled *La Chromohagie d'Almodovar* or instance, Lili Davenas, conservator at the Musée Bourdelle and film critic, writing about *Todo sobre mi madre*, has made some interesting remarks on the use of red and blue—remarks which are relevant to the entire cinematic work of the Spanish filmmaker, the *Room Next Door* included:

En effet, plus que le rouge en tant que couleur unique, c'est bien le contraste bleu/rouge que le réalisateur met en place tout au long du film. La dialectique rouge/bleu se met en place de manière précoce, dès le Moyen-Age, alors même que le manteau de la Vierge est théorisé comme étant bleu et rouge, le premier pour marquer sa nature céleste, le deuxième pour préfigurer la Passion du Christ. Le contraste bleu/rouge est donc très vite emprunt d'une religiosité latente, qui, dans un pays imprégné de tradition chrétienne comme l'Espagne, n'a pas pu manquer d'intéresser Almodovar.<sup>2</sup> (Davenas, 2015)

A little bit later, Ingrid is going to visit her friend after years during which they knew almost nothing about each other. The first shot shows Martha on the hospital bed. We would expect to see a woman in a dreary hospital gown behind the door of the ward. Or perhaps she is dressed in pajamas, like any well-behaved patient? That would be the outfit a director would choose if he wanted to move us. Not Almodóvar. So the sequence begins with a close-up of Martha, her face is literally “bathed” in red. The red of the collar and the hood of a jacket, contrasting with her pale face? Of course. But, besides, the color is

2 Davenas, L. (2015) *La Chromophagie d'Almodovar*, 27 March, Available at: <https://lemacinema.hypotheses.org/1040>: “In fact, more than red as a single color, it is the blue/red contrast that the director establishes throughout the film. The red/blue dialectic was established early on, as far back as the Middle Ages, when the Virgin Mary's cloak was theorized as being blue and red, the former to mark her heavenly nature, the latter to foreshadow the Passion of Christ. The blue/red contrast is therefore very quickly imbued with a latent religiosity, which, in a country steeped in Christian tradition such as Spain, could not fail to interest Almodóvar.” (Accessed 7 November 2024).

meant to express attachment to life. It is the color of the tracksuit jacket Martha is wearing over her hospital gown. The latter is blueish, but the intense red makes the blue of the robe to look even paler. A little later, she will put on a magenta gown. Let us add that the wall behind her is dominated by wallpaper with large flowers, exuding vitality. As for the tall, *pistachio green* armchair—it could find its place in any sophisticated living room. Lest we forget that we are in a hospital, the frame also captures a piece of the bed. But more so that we can see the vase on the nightstand with more than a dozen white tulips. Then the camera captures, as if by chance, the rich bouquet on the right side of the image, in which there are some red flowers as well.

There is no surprise that the dialogue has nothing melodramatic. Not even dramatic. Although the discussion will not avoid cancer, will not ignore death. It is just a normal conversation between two old friends who haven't met for a very long time. They share memories, they joke, they laugh.

### ***A Life Worth Leaving or Fiction as reality. And vice-versa***

It is not our intention to list all the scenes where red appears in this first third of the film, alongside with other vivid colors, flowers and other elements filling it with life. And with beauty. Each sequence is so unobtrusively, so naturally beautiful and so necessarily emerging from the one before, that an intense feeling of reality comes up. You cannot think but just that the world, that reality is not as you knew it. The camera does not capture, even “accidentally”, anything ugly. The world has to be a beautiful place. In *The Room Next Door*, beauty is created with such mastery, that it is too ...beautiful to be true. It has to be fiction. And fiction is necessary, fiction is vital. Almodóvar has learned this truth as a child. “I learned much from my mother, without either of us realizing. I learned something vital to my work, the distinction between fiction and reality, and how reality needs to be complemented by fiction to make life easier” (Almodóvar, 2023, p. 94).

The characters in his film live in such a beautiful reality that their life is too beautiful to leave it. Yet, Alissa Wilkinson could not resist the temptation of a good pun and entitled her review in the New York Times *A Life Worth Leaving* as a contrast to all those films trying to state that life is worth living.

There is a point here. We just have to add that a life lived beautifully is worth leaving beautifully. In other words, a beautiful life deserves a beautiful death. Martha has lived beautifully, she dedicated her life to victims of war. Now, she just claims her right to fight cancer—and to win. In fact, this fight is a race: it is about who gets Martha first. “If I get me first, it [death] cannot get me.” By choosing her own time and way to leave this world, she will be triumphant.

Not over death itself, but over the *ugliness* of a humiliating death, full of pain and suffering.

But, right now, in the first third of the film, with a lot of red, with all those beautiful interiors, with relaxed dialogues, death is not yet present. Even when death is mentioned, it sounds like fiction.

And fiction it is. When Martha and Ingrid are watching the purple snow falling over New York, although the season seems still far away, a work of fiction is cited: it is the end of Joyce's short story *The Dead* (30:24). The ending that talks about the snow falling on the living and the dead alike. None of them is dead yet. But everyone will be some day. Martha is preparing and Ingrid is going to learn from her that death is a part of the game. So is this snowfall really unreal? In his film, it will snow one more time. Again, in a season the season makes snowfall unlikely.

Fiction complements reality the same way death complements life.

### ***Red is death***

Death may come up when there is no sign to announce it. When it is less expected.

When Fred, a former boyfriend of Martha's, with whom she had a daughter (Michelle), sets off with his wife, who is wearing a *red* blouse, we do not suspect that he is heading towards death. But the huge red flames that engulfed a house they were passing in their *red* Dodge will consume him when he rushes inside because he thought he heard voices crying for help.

In another sequence, Martha, talking on the phone, wears a green sweater, while Ingrid is dressed in red: the green of vegetation "intensified" by that almost ever-present Almodóvar red. The same color that dominates Martha's kitchen on three sides by long red countertops. As for Ingrid: when she is not dressed in red, she has a huge red bag. The same is true in the sequence where Martha wears a beautiful navy blue coat over a green turtleneck sweater. Finally, the car in which they will drive to the vacation house where Martha will eventually swallow the euthanasia is, unsurprisingly, *red*. Once again, a car heading toward death is *red*.

"I think I deserve a good death," says Martha (28:33). And she continues: "Going out with a little dignity. Clean and dry." But we cannot fail to mention the truly pictorial beauty of many frames. The urge to press the pause button to enjoy the "painting" before us is counteracted by the tension, albeit discreet, of the film, by the desire to see the next frame, the next frames. And this, without any of them seeming forced or contrived. The film has a fluidity that makes each sequence seem to be necessarily generated by the previous one, as if we are witnessing an inexorable flow.

**...and death is red. And beautiful.**

In the flow of the action, as I mentioned it above, a change will gradually take place. Imperceptibly, yet undeniable. In the first thirty minutes or so, red seems to be omnipresent. You get the feeling that there is no frame without something red in it, except perhaps for a few transitional frames that last no more than two or three seconds. However, things are different in the last part of the film. No, red does not disappear from the film's color palette. But there are several *important* frames in which this color is missing. It will come up only in crucial situations.

For instance, when Martha is showing Ingrid the house. The tone of the dialogue and the atmosphere are really relaxed and serene, like at the beginning of a real vacation. Martha has chosen the room upstairs, the one with the *red* door. Ingrid is supposed to stay in the room next door; it's in the title. And they had already agreed. Only that Ingrid has changed her mind. Martha understands and has no objection to Ingrid staying downstairs. Especially since, from her bedroom door, she will be able to see the red door of Martha's bedroom. And this door, Martha explains to Ingrid, will remain open every night when she goes to bed without the intention of taking her euthanasia pill. Only on the morning when Ingrid sees that the red door is closed will she know that Martha has fallen asleep forever.

One morning that door is closed indeed. Ingrid feels sick, takes a pill to help her calm down and opens the door. The room is empty. Ingrid rushes out. There is no one on the deck chairs either. She sits down on the *green* one. On Martha's.

Although Ingrid's had been the red one, the one destined to the woman who would live. Right now, both deck chairs are free. And Ingrid sits on the green one, as if she would be next.

But Martha is still alive. We see her spectral apparition through the huge glass wall. She seems to levitate between the trees and plants outside, as they are mirrored by the glass. In a long, almost white night gown. Like coming back from the dead. Her red door had been closed accidentally by the breeze, she explains.

But Martha has not changed her mind. We know that she is preparing to die when we see how carefully she is preparing her final make up. Covering every little pale spot on her face. And especially putting lipstick on her lips. The most intense of reds

Later, when seeing her lying dead on her green deck chair, one might think she is sleeping. But her lips are so red, that they can be seen from the stratosphere. Dressed in dazzling yellow, jacket and trousers, that make the green of her chair look pale. A good death indeed. Or at least a beautiful one, aesthetically speaking.

Perhaps any other director, assuming that up to this point he would have made the film the same way as Almodóvar, would have ended it with this image.

In *The Room Next Door*, however, the action follows its logical course: the police investigation, the inevitable interrogations, Damian coming to help Ingrid and providing her with a lawyer. Finally, Michelle, Martha's daughter. She didn't want to know anything about her mother while Martha was alive. Now she is here to find out from Ingrid what she didn't know before: the truth about her mother, about her feelings towards her. It doesn't matter if it's too late. And she makes peace with her.

This is why they even seem to meet somehow. When entering the room where Martha lived her last days, Michelles shadow on the red door makes you think it might be Martha's.

And there is no shortage of images that are as beautiful as they are expressive. Like, for instance, Michelles shadow on the red door of the room her mother used to sleep in. One might think, one should think that it is Marthas shadow. Mother and daughter—finally together. In fact, this had been Almodóvar's intention:

One of the things that was important to me is that when Michelle enters the room and is looking at the bed where her mother died, the shadow presents almost as if Martha was there—as if her mother was there. The natural lighting of the scene threw that shadow on the door. But during the postproduction process, we actually accentuated it such that we could have that suggestive sense that what we're seeing here is both mother and daughter. (Canfield, 2025)

Yet, this is not all. Finally, Michelle (also played by Tilda Swinton) "becomes" Martha. We see her behind the same glass wall facing the lawn with deckchairs, in which the surrounding vegetation is reflected, overwhelming, like an invincible army. Among the trees and flowers reflected in the glass wall, she has the same almost ghostly appearance like her mother, some minutes before. Once on the terrace, with the same fluid gait, as if levitating, she sits down on the green deck chair. Ingrid sits on the red one. Snow begins to fall on the vividly green vegetation. On the living and the dead alike. And on them.

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