

 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

# DISCUSSION GUIDE



## PARALLEL MOTHERS (MADRES PARALELAS)

A film by PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

Spain / 2021 / 122 min  
Spanish with English subtitles

## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Pedro Almodóvar at <https://pragda.com/film/parallel-mothers/>.

### INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Parallel Mothers*:

Starring Penélope Cruz in what could be the best performance of her career, Pedro Almodóvar's *Parallel Mothers* is an unabashed story of cascading twists and turns, thickening complications, and high family drama.

The film follows two mothers who meet at the hospital ward during their pregnancy, and whose lives become intertwined from then on. Janis (Penélope Cruz), middle-aged, doesn't regret her accidental pregnancy and she is exultant. The other, Ana (Milena Smit), an adolescent, is scared, repentant, and traumatized. Janis tries to encourage her while they move like sleepwalkers along the hospital corridors. The few words they exchange in those hours will create a very close link between the two, which by chance develops and becomes complicated, changing their lives in a decisive way.

In one of his best films to date, Almodóvar revisits the legacy of his country's political violence during the Spanish Civil War to provide a broader and richer perspective on the exploration of one's ancestry.

- From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film?  
From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.
- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e., trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/parallel-mothers/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

### NARRATIVE

- > To begin, explore the significance of the film's title, *Parallel Mothers*, and how it reflects the interconnectedness of the characters' lives and stories.
- > The film follows two principal plotlines: Janis attempting to uncover the remains of her great-grandfather, and Janis' journey through motherhood which includes a relationship with Ana. Are these plotlines related? How do they complement each other?
- > Throughout the film, Janis' role as a friend and mentor to Ana continuously evolves in complexity. What are the different facets to Janis' role in Ana's life?
- > After giving birth, Ana is immediately faced with a variety of problems. What kind of economic and social/familial issues arose after leaving the hospital? How does Ana's socioeconomic background compare to that of Janis?
- > Analyze the character of Arturo and his role in the narrative. How does his presence challenge and shape the lives of the parallel mothers?
- > Teresa, the mother of Ana, is proven to be an absent parent. Should Teresa be judged for following her aspirations or should she reserve the right to prioritize herself as her daughter enters motherhood and adulthood? How does Teresa's motherly instincts (or lack thereof) affect the audience's perception of Janis' and Ana's motherhood styles.
- > After discovering the truth about Cecilia, Janis is faced with a major moral dilemma. Discuss the issues she faces and the choices she makes in response to her circumstances.
- > Throughout the film, Janis emphasizes the importance of revealing the mass graves of the Spanish Civil War. By finally exhuming the remains of her great-grandfather, do you believe that she was able to overcome the generational pain that lingered?



### CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- > Almodóvar signature style can often be identified by his use of bold colors, especially red which signifies fiery passion and love. In contrast to this, Almodóvar opts for the emphasis of a more somber green throughout *Parallel Mothers*. From the walls of the hospital to the clothes that the mothers wear, green seems to flood the mise-en-scène in every shot. What significance might the color green have?
- > Throughout the film, many of the most intimate moments take place in the kitchen. It is where Ana and Janis bond over cooking a tortilla, where they share their first kiss, and where the fight that ultimately ruins their romantic relationship begins. Why did Almodóvar choose this setting for his most important scenes? What cultural importance comes with food and what influence does it have on one's relationships?
- > Consider the scenes in which Janis and Ana are alone together in Janis' home. How does Almodóvar frame characters together in order to portray different levels of intimacy, alongside certain elements of their relationships? Think about the use of space within every shot. Provide specific examples from the film.
- > Throughout the film the abundance of shots often varies in length; Scenes that solely frame Janis tend to linger while those displaying conflict tend to be snappy. How would you describe the pacing of *Parallel Mothers*? How do you think these different lengths were chosen? In what way do they inform the narrative?



## CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- One of the most critically acclaimed aspects of this film is its subtle yet captivating score by Alberto Iglesias. How does the score compliment the journey of Janis as she enters motherhood?
- The majority of *Parallel Mothers* takes place in a single location: the home of Janis. What impact does this choice of setting have on the narrative? Does this decision influence the power dynamics between Janis and those she interacts with?
- The film frequently favors the use of close-up shots, often capturing two characters in one frame. What effect does this have on the viewer's perception?
- The film ends on a final aerial long shot that shows the various characters involved in the exhumation replacing the skeletal remains. What statement does Almodóvar want to make with this shot?



## THEMES

- Besides the primary theme regarding motherhood, what other themes play pivotal roles in the narrative? How are these themes depicted?
- Explore the social and political commentary presented in *Parallel Mothers* and how it reflects or comments on real-world issues related to motherhood. How does the film explore these themes of gender roles and feminism within the context of motherhood?
- Besides the two parallel mothers, the film also portrays motherhood through a variety of characters including Teresa and the grandmother of Janis, Cecilia. In what ways do these various depictions portray motherhood? How do they differentiate from each other? What complexities arise from societal expectations and personal desires?
- Although, *Parallel Mothers* mainly focuses on the experiences of single mothers, the various fathers, including Arturo and Ana's aggressor play relevant roles in the film's storyline. How does Almodóvar explore the concept of fatherhood through these characters? What kind of statement is he making?
- Explore the portrayal of female friendships in the film, particularly between the parallel mothers. How does their support and connection influence their individual journeys?
- On many occasions, such as when Janis discovers the truth about Cecilia, the different characters are faced with major moments of personal sacrifice. How do these characters navigate these sacrifices? Should they be condemned for prioritizing themselves?
- Explain the roles of secrets and buried truths. What effects do they have on the characters and their relationships?
- The various characters often face situations in which they must confront transgressions against themselves. Most notably, Ana is forced to react when Janis kept Cecilia from her. To what extent can someone forgive another? How does one surpass the strains that can fall on a relationship?
- By the end of the film, Janis is finally able to uncover the mass grave hidden in her hometown. By acknowledging these tragedies and rectifying the past, can one finally be relieved of generational trauma? How does one proceed after addressing these issues?
- This is the first film in which Almodóvar addresses the mass graves that hold the bodies of those disappeared during the Franco regime and the families' efforts to exhume and identify the bodies to give them a proper resting place.
- How do you think this theme and the theme of motherhood are related?