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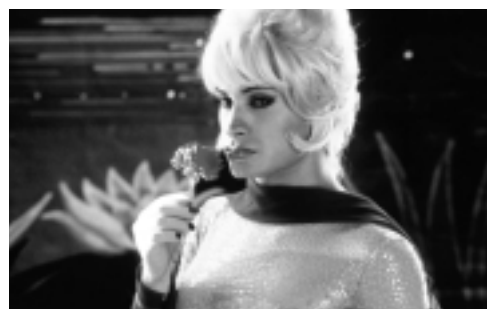
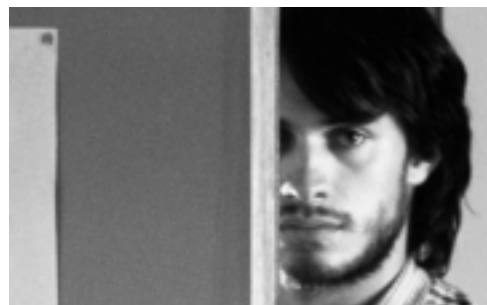
-Stephen Holden, THE NEW YORK TIMES



(HIGHEST RATING)

**GAEL GARCÍA BERNAL IS  
SPECTACULAR! ANOTHER  
GREAT ACHIEVEMENT BY A  
FILMMAKER ON A ROLL!"**

-Glenn Kenny, PREMIERE MAGAZINE



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# Bad Education

(La Mala Educación)

A Film By ALMODÓVAR

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Oscar-winner Almodóvar (*Talk to Her*) has created a ravishing, labyrinthine narrative that exorcises the demons of his troubled Catholic boyhood. Centering on the reunion of two school friends, one a film director, the other an aspiring screenwriter, **Bad Education** is another profound lesson in desire and duplicity by one of contemporary cinema's masters.

SPAIN • 2004 • 109 mins • Color • In Spanish with English subtitles

## Lured by Stories and an Ambiguous Femme Fatale

STEPHEN HOLDEN

Pedro Almodóvar has toyed with film noir before, most memorably in his 1997 film "Live Flesh." But his newest movie, "Bad Education," is a delirious, headlong immersion and re-invention of a style that has lured countless filmmakers onto its treacherous shoals. Because we live in a shameless age, this genre - synonymous with secrets, shadows and twisty, hairpin-turning plots that point toward an abyss - often seems forced when its conventions are recycled in our tell-all tabloid environment.

But Mr. Almodóvar, unlike other filmmakers who lose their bearings, fully understands the degree to which film noir is synonymous with fantasy and a primal longing for the forbidden. He believes in the passions bordering on obsessions that drive films noirs. Any movie that refuses to deliver that emotional payload, he also knows, is only a shell, no matter how clever its construction.

A successful film noir is an act of seduction, in which storytelling, music and imagery lead us to imagine a shadow world of infinite temptation and corruption. Traditionally, the designated siren who lures us into the shallows is a toxic femme fatale as ruthless as she is irresistible.

The coup de grâce of "Bad Education," which ricochets back and forth between 1964 and 1980, with a finale set mostly in 1977, is that here the femme fatale is a predatory pre-operative transsexual named Ignacio. Once a beautiful boy soprano, he/she was abused by a priest, Father Manolo (Daniel Giménez Cacho), the principal of his Catholic boys' school. The priest was so besotted with him that he expelled Ignacio's boyfriend Enrique (Raúl García Forneiro) from the school after catching the two hiding in the shower. Or so Ignacio's version of the story has it.

The grown-up Ignacio is played by two actors, Gael García Bernal (pouty and doe-eyed) and Francisco Boira (lupine and feral). As the film deepens and the characters' mistaken and multiple identities accumulate, and the priest returns from the past in a new, desperate guise, "Bad Education" evokes Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo," with its confusions of fantasy and reality. "Bad Education" is further enriched by the notion of different versions of the same story subjected to modification, first as literature, then as a movie spooled through different characters' imaginations. Only at the end are some, but not all, of the facts revealed.

Because the figure of Ignacio is sexually ambiguous on the most fundamental level, you don't mind the absence of a major female character in "Bad Education." The attraction and repulsion exerted by the two Ignacios lend the film all the sinister heat and tension you could hope for. Mr. García Bernal, who plays three interlocking roles, is a transcendent dramatic chameleon shuffling three faces: ambitious actor, drag temptress and ruthless hustler.

The movie begins in 1980, when Ignacio materializes out of the past on the doorstep of Enrique (Fele Martínez), now a successful 27-year-old filmmaker so desperate for story ideas that he has taken to scouring the tabloids. He hasn't seen Ignacio since they were in school 16 years earlier. Ignacio, now a bearded actor, has brought the manuscript of a story, "The Visit," which he hopes Enrique will adapt into a film. Enrique is enthralled by "The Visit," which recounts the story of their relationship and of Ignacio's sexual abuse by Father Manolo. As Enrique devours it, we see scenes from a movie in his imagination.

But from the moment Ignacio appears, something has seemed wrong. Even after the visitor returns with his beard shaved, he still looks nothing like the person Enrique remembers. He also insists on being called Angel.



When Enrique agrees to make the film, Ignacio demands to play the role of Zahara, a transsexual prostitute in "The Visit" who poses as Ignacio's sister to blackmail Father Manolo with her brother's story.

Mr. Almodóvar has admitted that "Bad Education" has a distant autobiographical component. But the movie is unconstrained by any need to appear realistic. Mr. Almodóvar's cinematic world has always been a place ruled by outsize desire and reckless fantasy. It is a universe that many of us imagine we might inhabit if we kicked off social and psychological constraints and acted out our wildest fantasies. The dream world of film noir suits the director because it is overheated in a similar, if more ominous, way.

"Bad Education" is a voluptuous experience that invites you to gorge on its beauty and vitality, although it has perhaps the darkest ending of any of the films by the Spanish writer and director. A crucial binding ingredient is Alberto Iglesias's score, which suggests prime Bernard Herrmann inflected with flamenco guitar. No composer alive writes more romantically expressive film music.

What distinguishes Mr. Almodóvar's approach to film noir is his refusal to moralize and his willingness to incorporate elements of comedy. A master storyteller and humanist, he will not pass final judgment on his characters no matter how terrible their behavior. Rather than circling hungrily around "the horror, the horror," to quote Joseph Conrad, "Bad Education" contemplates the wonder of storytelling itself and the human instinct to embroider reality to make the tales we tell more real and conclusive, if less strictly factual.

That may be the fundamental paradox of all great movies. They transport us to a fictional universe that appears more real than the one we inhabit. Mr. Almodóvar's films in particular insist that stories, the stories within stories and the fantasies they crystallize are the best (and maybe the only) tools at our disposal for making sense of it all.

### BAD EDUCATION

Written (in Spanish, with English subtitles) and directed by Pedro Almodóvar; director of photography, José Luis Alcaine; edited by José Salcedo; music by Alberto Iglesias; art director, Antxón Gómez; produced by Agustín Almodóvar. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Gael García Bernal (Angel/Juan/Zahara), Fele Martínez (Enrique Goded), Javier Cámara (Paquito), Daniel Giménez-Cacho (Father Manolo), Lluís Homar (Mr. Berenguer), Francisco Boira (Ignacio), Francisco Maestre (Father José), Juan Fernández (Martín), Ignacio Pérez (Ignacio as a child), Raúl García Forneiro (Enrique as a child), Alberto Ferreiro (Enrique Serrano), Petra Martínez (Ignacio's mother), Sandra (Nancy Doll) and Roberto Hoyas (Galicia's barman).

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