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Art House Ghost Story

By [Josef Woodard](#), December 20, 2006

***Volver*. Penélope Cruz, Carmen Maura, Lola Dueñas, and Blanca Portillo star in a film written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar.**

Reviewed by ***Josef Woodard***

Among the many pleasures woven into the latest Pedro Almodóvar-directed feast are a few familiar Almodóvaran traits. The Spanish auteur has an uncanny knack for telling a story with his signature blend of cinematic panache, cheeky irreverence, and a romantic glow. He knows the secret passageway into the female psyche (or so it seems from this non-female's perspective), and Penélope Cruz is a much finer actress than her sometimes middling Hollywood filmography allows her to show.

In *Volver*, Cruz — who last worked with Almodóvar in 1999's *All About My Mother* — is much more than a pretty face, although she certainly possesses that. As the character Raimunda, she is a wonder to behold, a woman caught between tangled generational lines, would-be ghosts, and the thorny prospect of how to dispose of a pesky corpse (a sleazy male, of course). Along the way, she also runs a restaurant, squatter-style, gamely runs interference between her sister and mother, and seductively sings the title song.

As with many of Almodóvar's films, one gets the impression he is telling tragicomic ghost stories. But instead of the usual misty woman dressed in white, his ghosts are bothersome memories and events from the past in need of some resolution. In his latest, part of a series of powerful films in Almodóvar's oeuvre, all is done up with a typical high, yet slightly sinister and comic, style. Appropriately, Almodóvar — who shares some mordant humor and surrealist tendencies with the late Luis Buñuel, another Spanish legend — begins with an opening scene in a well-tended graveyard.

Tale spinning may be Almodóvar's primary mission, but he never neglects the all-important sensory pieces of film. Composer Alberto Iglesias — Almodóvar's right-hand music man for several years now — provides a cool, colorful score, sweet and atonal by turns, which plays a critical role in the emotional undertoning of the film. And cinematographer José Luis Alcaine captures the dense, dizzy hues and the visual sensibility so often prevalent in Almodóvar's vocabulary.

Most importantly, *Volver* marks a memorable rapprochement between Cruz and Almodóvar, the director who has given her some of her finest screen moments. They've got to go on meeting like this.