



Presents

BITTER CHRISTMAS


A film by Pedro Almodóvar

112 mins, Spain, 2026

Language: Spanish with English Subtitles

Distribution

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CAST LIST

BÁRBARA LENNIE: ELSA

LEONARDO SBARAGLIA: RAÚL

AITANA SÁNCHEZ-GIJÓN: MÓNICA

VICTORIA LUENGO: PATRICIA

PATRICK CRIADO: BONIFACIO

MILENA SMIT: NATALIA

QUIM GUTIÉRREZ: SANTI

WITH THE COLLABORATION OF:

ROSSY DE PALMA: GABRIELA

CARMEN MACHI: DOCTOR

GLORIA MUÑOZ: ELSA'S MOTHER

AND AMAIA ROMERO

TECHNICAL LIST

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

PRODUCER: AGUSTÍN ALMODÓVAR

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: ESTHER GARCÍA

MUSIC: ALBERTO IGLESIAS

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: PAU ESTEVE BIRBA

EDITOR: TERESA FONT (AMAE)

PRODUCTION DESIGN: ANTXON GÓMEZ

SOUND: SERGIO BÜRMAN

COSTUME DESIGN: PACO DELGADO

MAKEUP DESIGN: ANA LÓPEZ-PUIGCERVER

HAIR DESIGN: MANOLO GARCÍA

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Bitter Christmas tells two alternating stories, one starring Elsa, an advertising director, in 2004, during a long weekend in December. The second takes place in 2026 and stars Raúl, a screenwriter and director who is writing a script that we soon discover is the story of Elsa, her boyfriend Bonifacio, and her friends Patricia and Natalia. Mixed with fiction, Elsa is, in a way, Raúl's alter ego, who, like him, resorts to autofiction as a solution to a long period of creative drought. He looks inside himself, and he can't help but also look at the people who make up his most intimate universe: his partner and his assistant.

The film narrates the close relationship between reality and fiction, between inspiration and life, exploring the limits of autofiction and stories within stories.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Bitter Christmas tells two parallel stories (one mirroring the other) and how they interact in the film's final stretch. The first story takes place in December 2004 and the second in the summer of 2026.

At times, it resembles a musical.

In 2004, Elsa meets a man who will love her at a key moment in her life while he is dancing in a strip club. In addition to being a stripper, he is also a firefighter. And there is also a woman, who is Elsa's friend and colleague and who has been repeatedly abandoned and humiliated by her husband. She will find the strength to quit him after listening to a song by Chavela Vargas that is about an abandoned lover. They are joined by a third woman, Natalia. She is a young mother who is still mourning the death of her son.

These stories take place during the long a long weekend in early December, with the streets of Madrid taken over by the imminent Christmas season. As a matter of fact, this is really the only Christmas element in the story, the time in which the drama of these friends unfolds. *Bitter Christmas* is the quite the opposite of a Christmas story.

The other story, which alternates with the one set in 2004, takes place in the summer of 2026 and is about a successful fifty something screenwriter and director who is struggling with a long creative crisis. It won't be long before the viewer discovers that

Raúl Rossetti, as he is called, is writing on his computer the story of Elsa and of the other two women: their loves, their losses, their work, and their pains are the elements that fuel Raúl's inspiration, in which he naturally reflects himself. Memory mixed with fiction is always fiction.

Although not in a literal way, Elsa's character is Raúl's alter ego. She is also a director, but of commercials. Ten years earlier, she had directed two films, but they both flopped. Nevertheless, over time, they became cult films.

Seeing the brutalist villa where Raúl lives and the work proposals that his assistant shares with him, we understand that he is not only a successful director but that his life has always been engulfed by the act of filmmaking. As he approaches sixty, his need to create stories is as pressing, if not more so, than when he started working thirty-five years earlier. Writing and directing is the only way he feels alive.

He lives quite a lonely life, alongside his faithful partner Santi, with hardly any social life. At this point in his life and career, he can only find inspiration within himself. So far, he had always refused to do so, but faced with the urgency to continue creating stories, he cannot help but turning to his own life for inspiration. He looks inside himself, but also at the few people who make up his universe, who are his partner and his assistant. In the end, he will have to face reproach for this personal appropriation of the lives of others, however fictionalized they may be in his script.

CREATION/LIFE

Among other matters, *Bitter Christmas* reflects on the connections between creation and reality, with life itself. And how a film can rebel against itself, questioning its *raison d'être*.

This meta-cinematic and Pirandellian game also questions the ethics of the storyteller. In the case of this film, the creator resorts to autofiction. He talks about himself (in a cryptic way) but also about how everything and everyone around him influences him (in a much less cryptic way). Is there anything in the lives of others that is off limits to him or, as a creator, does he have an unlimited right to draw inspiration from everything around him, with the sole justification that the lives of others are part of his own and, therefore, belong to him? What are the limits of autofiction? Do those limits really exist for the creator hungry for inspiration, who

sometimes only achieves it by immersing himself in everything around him, including (and above all) the pain of others?

THE WINDOW

Raúl Rossetti is a prestigious name, success has accompanied him since his beginnings as a screenwriter and director. We can understand this just by looking at where he lives, a spacious villa with valuable works of art on its walls.

Opposite the desk where he has been struggling to write a satisfying script for the last five years (one that enraptures him, as his assistant Mónica tells him) hangs a painting by Asher Liftin depicting a window which has the size of a real window. It is realistic and, at the same time, a representation of reality. The film opens with that window, through which the protagonist observes the immediate exterior to turn it into fictional material.

If we look too closely to the painting, we only see abstract dots and lines. It is only when we move away and the painting fills the entire screen that we realize that we are actually looking at a window. The painting has been made using the pointillist technique, and that is which gives it this ethereal quality.

By starting with this painting, I propose from the outset that the writer's external reality, the one that lies beyond the window, and his own reality coexist in the same space, which is the interior of his villa. The reality he will write about won't go beyond the limits of that huge living room where his desk is located. The basis of his writing is his life, camouflaged, and the conversations, both in person and by telephone, with his assistant of the last twenty years, Mónica.

TIME

The story of Elsa and her friends takes place during a long weekend in 2004 because that was when Raúl suffered a brutal migraine accompanied by his first panic attack. He is familiar with migraines, which are genetic, but panic attacks are new to him and he doesn't recognize the symptoms. I didn't know them myself at that time either. Now, with reality TV, anyone who has seen *Survivor* knows what a panic attack is, that feeling that your body is going to collapse without you knowing why.

Raúl overcame that crisis twenty-one years ago with the support of his partner Santi, which is somehow reflected in 2004 in the character of Bonifacio.

There is a Pirandellian ending in which Elsa and Natalia, in the beautiful villa in Lanzarote, look directly at the camera, as if asking the creator, Raúl, what will become of them. Will they continue in the story or will they vanish into the creator's new fiction? Breaking this fourth wall, the two women travel through the tunnel of time, because by looking directly at the camera, they arrive in 2026, when Raúl is in front of his computer. The camera lens and Raúl's computer screen are the two extremes that unite the twenty-two years that separate one image from another.

There are characters in the fiction that come directly from Raúl's life, like his partner Santi, who becomes Elsa's partner, Bonifacio, in the fictionalized version. Santi lives in the same time and place as Raúl, in his house, with him, but he also feels the urge to ask him about the future of his alter ego, which is the equivalent of asking what is his future in Raúl's life. Raúl replies that he doesn't know, he has to write it to find out.

This is the wild nature of the writer, the engine that drives him to write. If he is interested in the story that reality has inspired him, then he must be the one to write it. Because reality provides you with the first lines, perhaps the first pages, but the rest has to be written by the creator. (That is what storytelling is all about. That void and the need to fill it are the basis of creation.) And the vertigo of that adventure, when it takes hold of you completely, is toxic, inescapable. The most addictive drug.

THE HEARTBEAT

For both stories, Elsa's and Raúl's, which are ultimately linked by the character of Mónica, I decided to leave an open ending. The director/writer has received a cruel and definitive lesson from his assistant, and, unintentionally, it is Mónica who gives him the key he was looking for to recover his feverish drive to write.

The pulsating cursor on Raúl's computer screen represents the heartbeat of fiction. And that heartbeat is incorruptible; it is not Raúl who decides when to finish the script he is writing, it is the cursor, its heartbeat is stronger than the beating of his own heart. (The pulsating cursor is also the equivalent of the Super 8 camera in front

of the filmmaker in Iván Zulueta's *Arrebato*. The heartbeat of a being—or a machine, or a monster, it doesn't matter—before it engulfs you, with the victim's consent). Because Raúl Rossetti only lives to tell stories, stories that captivate him; the rest, until he finds them, is emptiness, dissatisfaction, meaninglessness. That is why, when Mónica, with tears in her eyes, leaves him behind at the park and an idea for Raúl to develop, he becomes a medium through which fiction will come to light. That state of feeling vampirized, possessed by an idea (inspiration) that demands immediate development, is the most powerful drug Raúl has ever experienced in his life. It is something he cannot reject and that places him in a territory where the question “do I have the right to be inspired by the pain of others?” does not exist. In that territory, he is not the one who decides. He is only the means for the beating of the cursor to find an outlet and manifest itself in the form of a story. And once he experiences again the same feeling of being possessed, the same passion he felt before with all the films he made in the past (his filmography has always been the result of passion), Raúl knows he cannot refuse. He is fully aware that, if that cursor ever stops beating, it will be the end for him.

That fear is the driving force behind *Bitter Christmas*, and the reason why its protagonist is capable of selling his soul to the devil in order to continue in the presence of that vertical line which is the cursor on his computer pulsating, alive. That is which will lead him to write a story that he does not know yet but for which he is willing to do anything.

The creator is not his own master; in a way, he is not even the full master of his own work. He intervenes in an essential way, of course, merging with it, but he is not the absolute master. Raúl would have preferred that it had not been Mónica's pain which revealed itself to him as the unexpected inspiration he was looking for, but there is something fatal, helpless, and guilty about this.

We writers are definitely dangerous people for those around us. At the end of *Bitter Christmas*, everything depends on Raúl's fingers, pounding the keys of his computer as if they were elephants' feet.

THE COUPLES

Several couples appear in the film: Raúl and Santi, Elsa and Bonifacio, Patricia and her husband, and Mónica and Elena.

Elsa and Bonifacio's relationship mirrors that of Raúl and Santi.

Raúl and Santi have been together for many years. The film does not show the couple's intimacy. Their relationship is cordial, without arguments or ups and downs, but dominated by silence. For years, neither of them has addressed something as intimate as the absence of desire; its disappearance, at least in Raúl. It is a tacitly chosen silence, in which they both have settled.

Mónica has been working with Raúl for twenty years. Over time, she has become indispensable in his life and career. She is the first reader of his scripts and his right-hand woman. Discreet, her life is almost unknown to her boss, not because she hides it, but because Mónica is secretive and Raúl has always respected her privacy. They have gotten used to this status quo. They only grow closer when a catastrophe occurs in Monica's life, and that clearly resonates with the script Raúl is writing.

There is also Patricia. She is Elsa's close friend. One is a graphic designer and the other an advertising director. At work, they form a couple. But, in real life, Patricia is married to Ricardo, a serial cheater whom she is unable to leave, despite Elsa's best efforts to provoke their breakup.

Natalia is a young and beautiful model who lives in seclusion, accompanied only by her mother in a little village in Almería. Her drama is that she lost her son in an car accident while she was driving.

As Mónica explains to Raúl after a long and cruel tirade (about the latest script he has written, which Mónica returns to him after reading it), theirs, all of theirs, whether real or fictional characters, are stories of losers. Indeed, they have all lost something vital. Raúl too; he has lost his spark and that has made him miserable for the last five years.

In that theatrical, Pirandellian and devastating tirade, as night falls in the Retiro Park, with Raúl crushed by his assistant's reproaches, it is her who suddenly emerges as the long-awaited inspiration. Everything she throws in his face, the brutal breaking of the silence she had previously maintained in front of her boss, makes her a true revelation and the inspiration that changes the script Raúl was writing.

Unconsciously, mysteriously, Mónica gives him (accidentally) the key to the plot he will write. As she leaves the park, her eyes filled with tears, Raúl throws himself onto the back of the pages of his old script (which she brought to the park to discuss further, with the intention of crushing him) and begins to rewrite the same story from another point of view, which will change everything.

Inspiration is always mysterious, obscure, and sudden. Fortunately, when it appears, it is unmistakable, and all the creator has to do is let himself be carried away by it. And once whatever it is has been developed (a script, a novel), return to it again and again and rewrite it. The pleasure and what defines writing is rewriting.

LANZAROTE

This is the second time I've shot on this island, the first was in *Broken Embraces*. In *Bitter Christmas*, I have returned to one of my favourite landscapes, the Golfo Beach. That was where Penélope Cruz embraced Lluís Homar while he was taking a photo of the beach, which later would reveal a tiny couple of unknowns embracing in the background. This image is also repeated in *Bitter Christmas*, but this time in the steps leading up to the Sacré-Cœur church in Paris, where a couple embraces as if they were alone in the city.

The darkness of Lanzarote, a volcanic island, is very dramatic, very cinematic, and very psychological. It is the perfect landscape for disappearing, hiding, mourning or dying.

In the film, it is the place Elsa chooses to mourn the death of her mother, which occurred a year earlier. She is accompanied in her grief by her friend Patricia, who is also experiencing her own grief, that of a love for her husband, which has not yet died. She has just left him, fed up with his constant cheating, but the fact that this love and her dependence on it still survives in Patricia breaks the harmony between the two women.

In the silence, interrupted only by the sound of the sea and the tops of the palm trees swaying in the wind, Elsa recovers, while Patricia sinks. Elsa feels the need to write and to make a third film, which makes her exultant. Patricia instead feels too tied to what she has left behind in Madrid, and the trip, far from freeing her, shows her the extent of her dependence.

THE SONGS

Amaia Romero sings a version of *Las simples cosas* in a scene that seems straight out of a comedy (Elsa has gone to a friend's party in search of tranquilizers to alleviate her anxiety attack). Amaia appears with her charming spontaneity and she ends up being the best remedy for Elsa's predicament, who listens to her with tears in her eyes. The film has some touches of humour in the first half. I couldn't and didn't do anything to avoid it; after all, I've always mixed genres. I've changed, but not that much. Amaia's song is so delicate and unexpected that it turns the initial humour into genuine emotion.

Several scenes later, I return to two songs by Chavela Vargas for something as seemingly undynamic as Elsa and Patricia just listening to them, sitting on a sofa, both immersed in their respective problems. They are moved by these two songs, *La Llorona* and *Amarga Navidad*. After Patricia hears "*I liked December so you could leave me, let your cruel goodbye be my Christmas*", she confesses to Elsa that her husband is in Paris with another woman. This is the reason for using Chavela's song: to shake Patricia's passive resistance and push her to leave her husband. Patricia travels with Elsa to Lanzarote, induced by Chavela's voice, which is the voice that has best sung about abandonment. "*I don't want to start the new year with this sad love that hurts me so much*", she sings. Later, Patricia will discover that a song is not enough to leave a husband, even if he deserves it.

There are two more songs: *Libertango*, in the canonical version by Grace Jones; and *Run Baby Run*, by Amanda Lear. Both appear in Bonifacio's striptease scenes. Two perfect songs for someone to take their clothes off to, representing the heyday of disco music in the late 1970s. I still listen to them.

Alberto Iglesias is once again in charge of the original soundtrack. And once again, he surprises and amazes me.

- Pedro Almodóvar