Penélope Cruz in *Pain and Glory.*

Joker (Dir. Todd Phillips). Starring: Joaquin Phoenix, Robert De Niro. Giving everything he has to a film that's hardly worth the effort, Joaquin Phoenix fully transforms himself (he even lost more than fifty pounds for this role) into the Clown Prince of Crime, whose destiny it is to eventually clash with one Bruce Wayne/Batman. Though the Bat-mythos is alluded to here, Todd Phillips' self-consciously dour film (a standalone feature, so they say for now) is more an alterna-origin story in which Phoenix's skeleton-thin sidewalk clown, Arthur Fleck, slow-burns his way toward chaos-inducing psychosis in a decrepit Gotham City that resembles 1981-era New York. Martin Scorsese is aesthetic godfather, evident in the imagery's *Taxi Driver*-esque grit and the casting of Robert De Niro as an officious late-night talk show host (he's playing what is effectively the Jerry Lewis role in *The King of Comedy*). That the film fails to live up to either of those knotty masterpieces is the least of its faults. [R] ★1/2

Pain and Glory (Dir. Pedro Almodóvar). Starring: Antonio Banderas, Asier Etxeandia, Penélope Cruz. Pedro Almodóvar looks in the mirror in his latest color- and emotion-saturated semi-autobiographical feature. He casts his muse, Antonio Banderas, as aging film director Salvador Mallo, a very clear stand-in for Almodóvar himself. Faced with a retrospective screening of one of his earliest works, Mallo reminisces about his upbringing with his mother Jacinta, played by Almodóvar regulars Penélope Cruz and Julieta Serrano at different ages, and tries to make amends with the leading man, Alberto Crespo (Asier Etxeandia), with whom he had a falling out. At once gentle and provocative, especially in its nonchalant treatment of Mallo's heroin addiction, *Pain and Glory* sees Almodóvar equally comfortable exploring who he was and who he is, and it packs a cumulative emotional power that has clearly been honed over a very full and robust lifetime. [R] ★★★★1/2

Frankie (Dir. Ira Sachs). Starring: Isabelle Huppert, Brendan Gleeson, Marisa Tomei. Isabelle Huppert plays the cancer-stricken movie actress matriarch, nick-named Frankie, of a family that gathers in the resort town of Sintra, for a vacation. Taking place over a single day-into-evening, the film's dramas are decidedly micro: Huppert's character loses a bracelet in the brush. Her friend breaks things off with a boyfriend who wants to rush into marriage. Her granddaughter heads to the beach to escape her mother, Sylvia (Vinette Robinson). As co-writer and director Ira Sachs drops in and out of these mini-tempests, the sense of a multifaceted family unit comes profoundly to the fore, aided in no small part by Rui Poças's expressive, sun-dappled cinematography (the last shot, especially, is a stunner). We come to know Frankie and her family precisely because of what is elided and what we have to intuit about them. This is a film in which nothing happens, yet everything does. [PG-13] ★★★★1/2

First Love (Dir. Takashi Miike). Starring: Masataka Kubota, Sakurako Konishi. The Japanese director Takashi Miike specializes in unpredictability, not only in his choice of what films to make, but in the frequently whiplashing tone of each individual project. The noirish *First Love* is no exception, beginning at a fever pitch (a yakuza's head literally rolls before the opening credits have finished) and getting progressively crazier. Our heroes are a boxer, Leo (Masataka Kubota), convinced he has a terminal disease, and a drug-addicted sex slave, Monica (Sakurako Konishi), who escapes her bonds with Leo's unwitting assistance. Car chases, gunplay, and a swordfight in a hardware store ensues. By the time a wackadoo anime interlude hits, we're well past the point of everything-and-the-kitchen-sink. The palpable affection that blooms between Leo and Monica keeps all the craziness grounded. Indeed, there's no better way to express ardor, in Miike's world, than through copious, graphic bloodshed. [R] ★★★1/2