

The Skin I Live In: Hunger, Power, and the Monstrous Feminine

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Abstract

In his first film to premiere outside of his native Spain, international superstar director Pedro Almodóvar tackles the horror genre for the first time. *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*) maintains a certain consistency with the director's earlier films, especially in the theme of gender identity and melodrama. In this film, however, there be monsters. One dwells and schemes in some classic monstrous spaces: a dark cave and a private laboratory/fortress, where he builds Vera, a cyborg-like character whose seams remind us of Frankenstein's monster, or of the Louise Bourgeois sculptures that fascinate her. The mad and wealthy doctor who designs Vera also keeps vigilant watch over her, tinkering with and gazing upon his masterpiece. This vigilance introduces a visual play on power through images of hunger and desire. Meanwhile, when another, less socially powerful, but more physically adept monster penetrates the fortress the two main characters have shared, the power dynamic shifts drastically. Looking at Vera, the intruder gushes, 'It smells good. I'm hungry,' and licks the screen of the security camera. This talk draws on notions of the monstrous feminine by Laura Mulvey, Barbara Creed, and Donna Haraway, to consider all three characters' monstrosity through the hungers that drive them and their slippery power dynamic.

Key Words: Film, horror, Spain, gender, hungry gaze, power, cyborg, scientist, animals, vagina dentata, revenge, Almodóvar, Creed, Haraway, Bourgeois, Mulvey, bioethics.

1. The Skin Almodóvar Lives In

In a few key ways, Pedro Almodóvar's 2011 *The Skin I Live In* is a departure from and yet also a continuation of the Spanish director's oeuvre from the previous forty years. For one thing, unlike all of the previous films by the international superstar, this one premiered outside of his native Spain, at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was well received by foreign press. Second: this, his eighteenth feature-length production, is his first foray into the horror genre. This is a horror film that tells of a powerful psychopath who kidnaps a young cis-gender man and forces sex-reassignment surgery upon him. This talk will argue that the film creates horror without much gore in part through its emphasis on vigilance and the monstrous feminine.

The Skin I Live In represents a surprisingly slippery power dynamic between its two main, monstrous, characters, especially when a third and drastically different monster enters the scene. From the start of the movie, the two main characters are the twenty-something Vera (formerly Vicente) and Dr. Robert Ledgard, a middle-

aged cosmetic surgeon and scientist. Believing that Vicente has raped his daughter, which led to her final breakdown and suicide, Dr. Ledgard kidnaps Vicente and subjects him to multiple operations that transform his physical appearance into a woman's.¹ The doctor also covers this body with an experimental, protective, and non-flammable skin developed in his home-laboratory from pigs' cells. Both the gender reassignment and skin transplants are also attempts to resuscitate and recreate Dr. Ledgard's unfaithful dead wife, who had jumped to her death years earlier after seeing the deformation caused by her own severe burns.

Like Almodóvar's earlier feature films, *Skin* is visually spectacular. It draws on phallic symbols such as the row of dildos that look like prison bars, the hash marks Vicente-Vera draws on the wall, and the guns that appear often in scenes of power struggle. These visual cues are familiar to Almodóvar's audiences, but here there are also monsters. As Barbara Creed explains in 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,' femininity itself is often represented as monstrous in films that create horror by building on (the male directors' and audiences') fears of castration.² This view of the feminine body as 'lacking' comes from a wide variety of sources, including Sigmund Freud, Joseph Campbell, and classical mythology. Calling on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, Creed also notes that the gross-out factor in horror films often comes from images of the physically abject, when we see human detritus: blood, gore, and cadavers.³ In *Skin* there is less gore, but a much more literal take on the horrors Creed and others have described, as Vicente is actually castrated and given a penectomy against his will, only to be faced with the subsequent horror of living within manufactured skin and a body whose sex is at odds with his own self-identity.⁴

2. Monstrous Hungers

The mad doctor's monstrosity is not immediately apparent, both because of his (Antonio Banderas's) looks and because his wealth affords him a godlike air, as if outside of the law. His calm, smooth attitude hides the mind of a psychopath. Many, but not all, of the doctor's driving hungers are socially acceptable; Robert is hungry for fame, power, renown, and revenge. In his hunger for revenge, Robert manages to overcome the obstacles of nature that led to his wife's death, and he calls the tough skin he cultivates 'Gal' after his dead wife. Like Dr. Frankenstein, he plays God in building a new woman to his (and Gal's) specifications. As María Teresa Cabello Ruiz points out, Dr. Ledgard looks especially God-like when he gives a speech and the architecture of the auditorium creates rays around his head, or when the lights of the operating room give him a halo.⁵ This character's hungers know no moral bounds. In one instance, we see him buying a black-market biological package from the hospital maternity ward, perhaps blood from a

placenta, considered the most abject product of the monstrous feminine pregnancy. However, Almodóvar has also explained that while hunger for revenge might initiate the kidnapping, in the six years it takes to develop Vera, this motive loses its force. The director states, 'Revenge is now an excuse for Robert Ledgard – a means for him to continue his work on transgenesis,' which suggests that fame, knowledge, and power are his more lasting motivations.⁶ Transgenesis, in this case the use of pigs' cells to grow skin, is an illegal medical practice that also makes *her* into something not-quite-human.

In the film's insistence on vigilance within the doctor's home, Robert Ledgard exemplifies Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's assertion that monsters are powerful allies of the society of the panopticon.⁷ Apart from the obvious fact that this is a film, and will be seen by spectators on a screen of some sort, various types of screens also dominate much of the intradiegetic narrative. Dr. Ledgard spends his time making and looking; he peers through his microscope and zooms in on the screens that allow him to watch Vicente-Vera. Perhaps forgetting his captive's humanity, the doctor tinkers with his creation constantly throughout the six years of his/her captivity.

Dr. Ledgard's hungers for revenge and for power do not translate into a visceral, bodily hunger for his captive, however. His is an unfeeling, almost robotic (certainly psychopathic) gaze. This controlling but apparently unhungry vigilance echoes in the tradition of fine Renaissance art that adorns his walls, with its images of women objectified in painting. Within this home and alongside the Venuses that adorn its walls, Vicente-Vera adopts an identical pose. The tradition of creating and then trapping nude women within the frame of a painting, often under the patronage of wealthy and powerful men, has long allowed spectators to possess and gaze upon the female form. The pose of Vicente-Vera's nude-colored body, owned by the doctor and contained within his walls, and within the flat screen televisions on those walls, mirrors the Venus exactly.⁸

Meanwhile, Vicente-Vera is also beautiful, yet monstrous along the lines of those that 'refuse easy categorization, [are] disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration,' and therefore 'threaten to smash distinctions'⁹. She is not quite natural, not quite human, and somewhere in between traditional categories of gender. From the outset of their interactions, when Vera is still called Vicente, Dr. Ledgard intentionally dehumanizes him. He has him kidnapped, shot with an animal tranquilizer dart, and stripped half naked. The script explains that Vicente is 'a tame beast'¹⁰ by the time Dr. Ledgard enters the dungeon.¹¹ The deprivation of food from Vicente is a particularly important move towards taking power and humanity away from him. In his first incarceration, Vicente can drink water from a bucket, but he is starved. As he becomes desperate and dirty, he cries out several

times that he is very hungry. This hunger weakens him and prevents him from thinking of anything else. It also transforms Vicente's body, making it smaller and more delicate, the first step towards making him more in the likeness of the doctor's deceased wife. With this deprivation, Vicente becomes hungry like a beast, and he eats like one when finally given a bowl of rice, thus signaling his departure from an earlier fully human status.

Later on, Dr. Ledgard will carefully control what Vicente, and then Vicente-Vera, eats, even drugging his/her food with antidepressants and hormones. The doctor's manipulation of his captive's body also necessitates him growing new skin, using cells that aren't born of humans. The captive's skin reveals the seams of its origin for several years, but it eventually heals in a superhuman way that makes these seams and future injuries invisible. When she cuts herself in two defiant suicide attempts, for instance, Vicente-Vera heals extremely quickly. Her skin is different from – better than – human skin. In 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' Donna Haraway contends that the cyborg rejects rigid boundaries, especially those that separate 'human' from 'machine' and 'human' from 'animal.'¹² In this sense, in that her body contains elements of human and animal flesh, and qualities that are superhuman, Vicente-Vera is a cyborg. Almodóvar's artistic notes explain that the bodysuit should make her look like a hybrid between a robot and a mannequin.¹³

Though she cannot refuse the skin she lives in or the drugged food she receives, Vicente-Vera does reject the flowery dresses her captor provides. With notable energy, she rips them to shreds, using her hands, feet and, most effectively, her teeth to destroy them. The script describes her attacking them 'like an animal'.¹⁴ She only dons women's clothing (including high heels) much later as a disguise to convince those around her that she is fully feminized, and also 'safely' under the doctor's control. I don't have space to go into this here, but part of the reason she is able to reach that point later is that Vicente-Vera has reappropriated the fabric of the dresses in her room as raw material for making her own visual art which pays homage to the French-American feminist artist, Louise Bourgeois. Vera is not just an art object, but also a maker of art.

Dr. Ledgard's unfeeling robotic gaze comes sharply into contrast when his half-brother Zeca enters the story and breaks up the dynamic between the two monsters I've described. Zeca was also the cause of the breakdown of Robert's earlier marriage to Gal when his affair with her led to the car accident that disfigured Gal and eventually caused her suicide. Zeca is a wholly different beast in several senses of the word. While he shares a mother with Robert, they have different fathers, different upbringings, and different inclinations to insanity and violence. Zeca's violence is driven by literal hunger and poverty, and he responds to very animalistic impulses. Zeca grew up in poverty, and lived a life of crime from a very early age. Born of a servant mother and father, he started running drugs when

he was seven.¹⁵ Zeca's monstrosity is of the animalistic sort; his humanity is not supplanted by his superhumanity like Robert or Vicente-Vera, but rather by his apparently innate subhumanity.

In his first and only appearance in the present day of the film, he wears a tiger costume for Carnival.¹⁶ The current image of the costumed character, the fact that he mentions that he has identified as a tiger since childhood, and the criminal circumstances of his arrival suggest Zeca's animalistic monstrosity from the start. He's currently on the wrong side of the law again, being pursued by the police for having robbed a jewelry store and revealed his identity in looking straight at one of the store's twenty-four security cameras. Images of mouths, desire, and penetration dominate the representation of Zeca in this film, again suggesting that his monstrousness is primarily bestial.

Trying to gain access beyond the bars of the homestead, Zeca states, 'It smells good. I'm hungry.' He becomes captivated by the tiny screen image of a woman practicing yoga. She closely resembles his former lover, and she seems to look directly up at Zeca. Unlike when she is on the screen in Robert's room, her image here is minuscule, and Zeca hungrily licks the screen. Unlike his brother who uses primarily mental and psychological forms of control, Zeca is a more physical monster, using force to confront his victim. He forces his way into Vicente-Vera's room and rapes her, something Robert has not yet tried.

In this scene, backgrounded by the fine art on the walls, Zeca repeatedly opens his mouth wide as if he wants to bite and consume her. Vicente-Vera doesn't know Zeca's name, and simply calls him 'the tiger,' thus reinforcing his physical prowess and subhuman status. Likewise, the rape scene itself resembles an animal attack more than a sexual assault by a human character. After Dr. Ledgard comes home and shoots and kills Zeca, the relationship between Vicente-Vera and the doctor changes drastically. Having disposed of Zeca's body, Robert and Vicente-Vera sleep together, and he calls her 'my love.' It is then, through the two character's dreams, that the film begins its extended flashback to the original suspected crime on Robert's daughter, and subsequent kidnapping of Vicente.

3. Power, or the Monstrous Feminine Looks Back

The power dynamic between these three characters hinges on the hungers that drive them, and the film often presents images reminiscent of phalluses, castration, the vagina dentata, and devouring mouths. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia states, 'The toothed vagina is no sexist hallucination: every penis is made less in every vagina, just as mankind, male and female, is devoured by mother nature'.¹⁷ Curiously, it is precisely when Vicente-Vera's new vagina subsumes a penis for the first time that she recovers power over her captor. Further, as already noted,

Zeca licks the screen image of, and then wraps his teeth around, Vicente-Vera's head and face (themselves commonly considered phallic symbols).¹⁸ The fact that her skin doesn't leave a bite mark only increases Zeca's desire. Unexpectedly, it is this scene of rape that allows Vicente-Vera to regain her power, and eventually, to reenter the real world.¹⁹

This film also reinforces and makes literal Laura Mulvey's argument that pleasure in watching the female form in cinema comes from a 'patriarchal unconscious' because 'she symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis'.²⁰ The script calls for Vicente-Vera to climb on a chair so he and the audience see in the mirror the swollen incision where his penis once was, but the film cuts away just before this moment, focusing instead on the reaction on his face. Shortly after, Dr. Ledgard enters and tells Vicente to imagine that his life depends on healing and expanding his new orifice. He says, 'Think that your life depends on that orifice. That you breathe through it,' thereby explicitly confirming the idea that Vicente's castration and vaginoplasty have created a new mouth as well, one that ultimately allows Vicente-Vera to seduce, kill, escape, and thereby survive.²¹

Mulvey further argues that cinema presents opportunities for scopophilia, pleasure in looking, both intradiegetically on the part of the male characters, and extradiegetically on the part of the spectators. This pleasure is primarily associated 'with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze'.²² Particular pleasure, according to Freud, comes from children's voyeuristic curiosity about 'the presence or absence of the penis,' and those most likely to be taken 'as objects' are women who both fascinate and terrorize due to their apparent lack.²³ Mulvey calls this their *to-be-looked-at-ness*. In *The Skin I Live In*, Robert's constant vigilance of Vicente-Vera certainly supports this premise, as the more normatively feminine the captive looks and acts, the more pleasure the captor takes in gazing upon her.

The imminent slippage in power is preempted when Vicente-Vera seems to reverse her *looked-at-ness*, unsettling the power game between herself and her captor. An example of the reciprocal possibility of the mansion's security cameras is when a larger-than-life (and much larger than Dr. Ledgard) Vicente-Vera first seems to look straight at Dr. Ledgard, though she cannot actually see him. Examining the screen, the doctor suddenly leaves his room and enters hers, which is unusual. He smokes some apparently celebratory opium with her, having decided that she finally looks just the way he has envisioned. It is in this conversation that she asks 'Do you like what you see?' and 'I know you look at me [...] We practically live in the same room,' thus breaking the earlier pact whereby he watches her and she remains quietly complicit in her *looked-at-ness*. She cannot be an object if she *knows* he watches her. She even corrects him when he looks in

the wrong pocket for the key to lock her in the room, making it clear that she, too, has been watching him. Robert, flustered and breathless, escapes from her room, as if he were the one entrapped.

When Robert returns to the huge screen in his bedroom, Vicente-Vera is larger than ever, and she again seems to stare right at him, this time smiling knowingly. In fact, the script even states, as if she really could see through the eye of the camera, 'From the enormous television screen, VERA continues looking at him'.²⁴ When Vicente-Vera's gaze looms large on this screen it reduces her status as a captive and the apparent distance between the two rooms. The director's notes explain that the larger-than-life image of Vicente-Vera 'seems to watch the surgeon' and 'that she could devour him if she wanted to' (160).

4. Conclusion

We can read *The Skin I Live In* as a commentary on power, monstrosity, and vigilance in a world where scopophilia is no longer available only to rich patrons of the arts. The horror here is not just from the *idea* of castration, as theorists have postulated for years, but in making this threat literal. Though this film seems not to speak directly to the Spanish populace wracked by financial crisis, it speaks to longstanding themes of horror cinema and to the recent phenomenon of hyper-vigilance by and of average citizens. This film is not intended to be divorced from current realities; Almodóvar explains, 'We have never had more information about other people's tragedies. I don't believe that we have ever lived in a more alienated world than the one in which we are living now.'²⁵ The film suggests that we must 'watch the watchmen,' even in contemporary Spain where literal hunger pains are widespread, or our watchers might never know the true, *de veras*, power within the people.

Notes

¹ For the purpose of clarity, I will use feminine pronouns and the name Vicente-Vera for scenes where a female actor plays the character, and masculine pronouns and the name Vicente for scenes when a male actor plays the character.

² Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,' *Screen* 27.1 (1986): 44.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ Much of Creed's analysis looks into abjection as it pertains to human pregnancy in art and film, and this aspect is not particularly relevant for Almodóvar's film.

⁵ María Teresa Cabello Ruiz, 'Intertextualidad en *La piel que habito*: Louise Bourgeois según Pedro Almodóvar.,' *Sesión no numerada: Revista de letras y ficción audiovisual* 4 (2014): 36.

⁶ María Delgado, 'Flesh and the Devil,' *Sight and Sound* 21.9 (2011): 18.

⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 1996), 14.

⁸ Laine writes that, 'The mise en scène of *The Skin I Live In* is dominated by copies of various works of art, most notably *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and *Venus and Music* (1547) both by Titian, as well as *Dionisios encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos* (2008) by Guillermo Pérez Villalta (which is typically considered a homage to Titian with its comparable theme and image composition)' (2).

⁹ Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 6.

¹⁰ This and all translations in this paper are mine.

¹¹ Pedro Almodóvar, *La piel que habito* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2012), 102.

¹² Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

¹³ Almodóvar, *La piel que habito*, 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵ Ibid., 69.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Bakhtin described this holiday as a time of reversals that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos.

¹⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, (New York: Vintage, 1991), 47.

¹⁸ See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Films, feminism, psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁹ Another, earlier, human bite also sets the back-story into action. Robert's daughter Norma bites Vicente's hand when she wants him stop fondling her, but can't find the words to tell him to stop. It is this bite that causes Vicente to slap Norma so that she hits her head and loses consciousness. Her unconsciousness and then hysteria are what cause Dr. Ledgard to misinterpret the situation, seeking revenge on the apparent rapist of his daughter. Therefore, this other bite was the start of all of Vicente-Vera's troubles with Dr. Ledgard.

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- ²⁰ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6.
- ²¹ Vicente-Vera also writes 'I breathe. I breathe. I know that I breathe' obsessively on her wall. She survives through the existence of her mouths, maintaining her sanity through yogic breathing and eventually by promising to have intercourse with the doctor.
- ²² Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' 8.
- ²³ Ibid., 8.
- ²⁴ Almodóvar, *La piel que habito*, 42.
- ²⁵ Troyano, np.

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