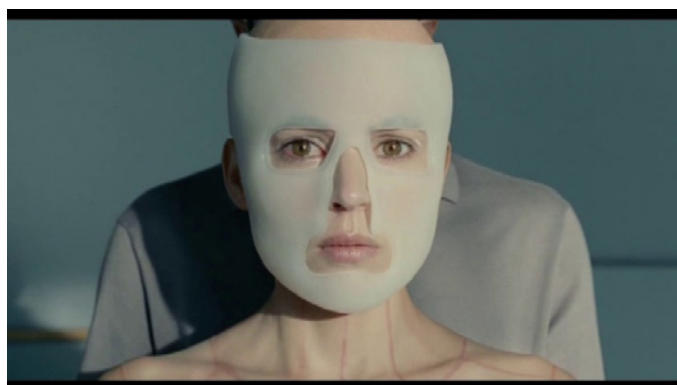


## Surgical horror and melodrama in *The skin I live in*: Beyond the male/female divide<sup>1</sup>

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**ENG Abstract:** Pedro Almodóvar's *The skin I live in* (2011) explores revenge, identity transformation, and the limitations of binary gender categories through surgical horror and melodrama. The film depicts Dr. Robert Ledgard's forced transformation of Vicente into Vera, modeled after his deceased wife, interrogating bodily autonomy and male control over female identity. It critiques patriarchal fantasies while engaging with trans and queer identities, though problematically linking surgical transition to trauma and punishment. The film portrays Vera's transformation as both violent and potentially liberating. Incorporating melodramatic elements, it subverts traditional resolutions, leaving the protagonist in an ambiguous state. This video essay functions as an audiovisual 'surgical operation', using images, sounds, scholarly quotations, and intertitles from the film to dissect its representation of bodily transformation and examine how gender identity is constructed, coerced, and ultimately reclaimed, offering a nuanced critique of hegemonic gender constructs and power dynamics.

**Keywords:** Almodóvar; gender; horror; melodrama; trans.

## ESP Horror quirúrgico y melodrama en *La piel que habito*: Más allá de la división hombre/mujer

**Resumen:** *La piel que habito* (2011) explora la venganza, la transformación de la identidad y las limitaciones de las categorías de género binarias. La película aborda la transformación forzada de Vicente en Vera por parte del Dr. Robert Ledgard, quien la modela a imagen de su fallecida esposa, interrogando los límites de la autonomía corporal y el control masculino sobre la identidad femenina. El filme ofrece una crítica a las fantasías de índole patriarcal, al tiempo que dialoga con la especificidad de las identidades trans y queer, aunque de forma problemática, al vincular la transición quirúrgica con el trauma y el castigo. Este ensayo audiovisual funciona como una 'operación quirúrgica' audiovisual que, mediante el uso de imágenes, sonidos, citas académicas e intertítulos extraídos del filme, disecciona su representación de la transformación corporal y examina cómo la identidad de género se construye, se impone y, finalmente, se reapropia.

**Palabras clave:** Almodóvar; género; melodrama; terror; trans.

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**Summary:** 1. Text. 2. Data availability. 3. LLM use statement. 4. References.

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## 1. Written statement

Pedro Almodóvar's *The skin I live in* (2011) is an intricate tale of revenge unfolding within the confines of a secluded mansion. Dr. Ledgard, a renowned surgeon, seeks retribution by transforming Vicente, a man who sexually assaulted his daughter, into the woman of his own twisted desires. Employing transgenesis—the process of introducing a foreign gene (a 'transgene') from one organism into the genome of another organism—, Ledgard metamorphoses Vicente into Vera. He goes a step further: he replicates his deceased wife's face on her. Despite his initial plan to partner with Vera, Ledgard's creation takes an unwanted turn: ultimately, s/he takes advantage of her/his painfully acquired freedom to kill the mad doctor. In the end, Vera, now free, confronts her/his past, stating who s/he is in a poignant moment of self-discovery. The film concludes with Vicente/Vera navigating the complexities of their newfound body and hybrid identity.

The film revolves around the interrogation of identity and the malleability of gender categories to define a subject position beyond a clear-cut differentiation between male and female. More specifically, it explores how the patriarchal order seeks to control women by enacting male fantasies of violence and desire. By delineating that a woman can be conceived as a creation of man, a pliable entity composed of clinically grown and enhanced skin and tissue, Almodóvar delves into «the perils of a society that has quartered and dissected womanhood to exhaustion in order to satisfy the requirements of individuals with specific physical fixations. In that respect, the film is a direct descendant of timely discourses surrounding beauty and the commodification of bodies in Western societies; woman is here seen as a direct victim of male desire and its concomitant culture» (Reyes, 2013, p. 820). Moreover, technology, wielded by a disturbed man, governs the female body and molds it socially in alignment with the man's desires and gender biases. However, the film also approaches the psychological and embodied experience of Vera, extending beyond the patriarchal gaze. Almodóvar foregrounds her complex process of self-formation within and against the material confines of her surgically transformed body. This emergent subjectivity resonates with the works of artist Louise Bourgeois, whose sculptures—particularly her representations of fragmented, reconstituted, and hybrid bodies—explore trauma, memory, and the female body as sites of both vulnerability and strength. Thus, Vera's transformation may be conceptualized not merely as victimization but as an act of reconfiguration and reclamation of the body. Furthermore, Almodóvar's use of classical myths, notably those of Dionysus and Ariadne, reinforces the cyclical nature of destruction and rebirth. Dionysus, god of chaos and metamorphosis, embodies the dissolution of boundaries, while Ariadne represents the thread that guides one through transformation but also betrayal, abandonment and rebirth. These

mythological allusions illuminate Vera's journey toward a new, self-defined identity—one that escapes the binaries imposed by the patriarchal order.

Almodóvar's work may be conceptualized in relation to an early 2000s horror subgenre, torture porn, epitomized by *Saw* (Wang, 2004) or *Hostel* (Roth, 2005). However, rather than centering on a spectacle of multiple and explicit images of bloodletting and body dismemberment, the Spanish filmmaker situates the narrative's focus on the violent and yet scientific and scrupulously planned transformation of a human body to question the fixity of gender categories. Consequently, it may be understood as a surgical horror piece in which Vicente/Vera's body turns into the raw material for Doctor Ledgard to feed his obsessions, craftily reshaping her/his body to match his cravings.

Additionally, the film adopts key melodramatic elements, including the pervasive use of masquerade, last-minute identity revelations, and radical transformations in a character's appearance to signify change, recovery, or alteration (Marcantonio, 2015). In contrast to traditional melodrama, there is no initial restoration of order, or a sacrificial virtuous act aimed at evoking pathos in the audience. Instead, Vicente, now transformed into Vera, confronts the challenge of a new beginning along an uncharted path, navigating this new journey with a body and psyche that are still in the early stages of adaptation. Armed with the unambiguous power of the melodramatic imagination to communicate and express affect and the terrifying, aseptic and meticulous visual fabric of surgical horror (Barker, 2017; Modal, 2021), *The skin I live in* ultimately questions the hegemonic societal constructions of the gender divide and aims at a specific target: a subject that potentially embodies a new way of understanding the relationship between males, females and those subjects who do not fit any of these two identifying markers.

This video essay exclusively deploys images and sounds from *The skin I live in*, along with quotations from scholars and original intertitles, to unravel the modes of representation through which Almodóvar's film constructs a new type of subject beyond conventional gender categorizations. Thus, it performs a series of 'surgical operations' on the materiality of the filmic object, reshaping its narrative and aesthetics to chronicle the physical transformations in Vicente/Vera's body and the ways in which their psyche subverts the heteropatriarchal power that attempts to mold it.

## 2. Data Availability

The video essay is also publicly available on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/1094034550>

## 3. LLM Use Statement

This article has not used any text generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing.

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