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GENDERED LOGICS OF VIOLENCE:  
SKIN AND CLOTH, SUTURES AND MEMORY.  
PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* (2011)

ABSTRACT:

*The Skin I Live In* is an aesthetically complex incursion into the topic of psycho-social gender violence, i.e., into the traumatic effects of heteronormativity. Posited from the vantage point of the fragility and failure of this master narrative, the film exhibits the brutality of heteronormative masculinity and the violence it entails for both sexes, particularly for the individual living or forced to live a feminine identity within that sexual-normative framework. For this film, identity is about the destruction and repair of the «I's» corporeal dimension through the exploration of the victim's inner life, that of Vicente-Vera. Taking his cues from the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois and her studies of biomorphism, traumatic memory, fabric bodies of mixed genitalia, and spatial cells, Pedro Almodóvar elaborates an epistemology of the self that, like in the case of Bourgeois, undoes gender legibility and makes this confusion the route towards «livability.»

KEYWORDS: *The Skin I Live In*, heteronormativity, Louise Bourgeois, fabric bodies, cells, gender, Pedro Almodóvar.

RESUMEN:

*La piel que habito* trata la violencia de género en su vertiente más psico-social mediante una incursión estética en los efectos traumáticos de la lógica hetero-normativa de género. Partiendo de la fragilidad e insostenibilidad de dicha narrativa maestra, el filme exhibe

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los efectos brutales y la violencia inherente al modelo de masculinidad hetero-normativa para los dos sexos, en particular, para el individuo que vive o se ve obligado a vivir una identidad femenina dentro de ese marco sexual. En esta película, la identidad es un proceso de destrucción y de reparación de la dimensión corpórea del «yo» gracias a la exploración de la interioridad psicológica de la víctima de dicha violencia, Vicente-Vera. Almodóvar le sigue la pista a la artista franco-americana Louise Bourgeois e incorpora sus trabajos sobre el bio-morfismo, la memoria traumática, los cuerpos de trapo de genitalia variada, o el espacio de la celda al filme. Con ellos elabora una epistemología del yo que cuestiona la legibilidad del género sexual y define un espacio de vida sobre dicha confusión y ambigüedad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *La piel que habito*, heteronormatividad, Louise Bourgeois, cuerpo de trapo, celda, género sexual, Pedro Almodóvar.

#### THE STORY OF A DRESS

*The Skin I Live In*, is, without a doubt, Pedro Almodóvar's most sophisticated and aesthetically complex incursion into the topic of psycho-social gender violence. However, the topics of trauma, identity, vulnerability, and resilience are not new. Other characters in previous films (*Laberinto de Pasiones—Labyrinth of Passion*, *La ley del deseo—Law of Desire*, *La mala educación—Bad Education*, *Todo sobre mi madre—All About My Mother*) have embodied twists and turns in gender identity, these being incisive, painful, and moving trips in and out of the traumatic effects of heteronormativity. Nevertheless, none have embodied with the mastery this film exhibits, just how fragile, and therefore, open to «failure» this master narrative of sexuality actually is, nor have any of his other films been so successful, in my view, in exhibiting the brutality of heteronormative masculinity and the violence it entails for both sexes, particularly for the individual living or forced to live a feminine identity within that sexual-normative framework. This is probably Almodóvar's most clearly feminist film for precisely this reason. The film critiques the imposition of sexual and gender identity upon an individual (the theme of identity as retribution or «punishment»<sup>2</sup>) yet, in *The Skin I Live In*, Almodóvar takes this one step further and exhibits, in the best feminist way possible, how identity certainly involves the body but also the burdens and joys of its social and psychic existence, of its memories, cultural and personal.

<sup>2</sup> Readers may enjoy listening to Almodóvar speak about transgendered bodies at the New York Film Festival's Q & A session after the screening of the film in October 2011. There he explained that this film departs from his previous work in that, here, transgendered identity is imposed, no longer freely reclaimed, hence making it «the most awful nightmare one can imagine» (Fouratt).

On one level, the film would appear to be a story of revenge: one of an angry father executing a sex change (castration) on the body of the presumed rapist of his daughter; on another, *The Skin I Live In* is the story of a garment: the travels and incidents of a Dolce & Gabbana flower print dress that is offered as a gift by a young man, Vicente (Jan Cornet), to a young woman, Cristina (Bárbara Lennie), who, in turn, rejects the gift and his sexual advances (she is attracted to women) and suggests in their bantering that he wear the dress himself. The film then takes this literally and becomes the horror story of the phallus and the psycho-social violence imposed on the body of this young man, his passage from offering the dress as someone his family named Vicente to his return after six years in captivity wearing it himself under his new imposed identity as Vera, the dress becoming a marker of memory and of self-identification.

In this sketch of the plot, one already sees how Almodóvar will make viewers rethink the usual categories of gender; however, it should be emphasized that there is a complex feminist epistemology at work here, one that relies not only on exposing how the symbolic, physical, and psychological violence involved in this transformation is gender-based but also on making explicit that a positive architecture of the self can never be centered on a counter-normative narrative of «just» the body. For this film, identity is about the destruction and repair of the «I's» corporeal dimension, about its release from the brutalizing chains of performances of masculinity inscribed in power and domination, but it is especially about «becoming», about developing an architecture of the «I» through the exploration of an inner life (especially of the individual who is consistently denied one) and a language or medium for its expression. Here Almodóvar finds inspiration and insight in the breathtaking work of French-American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), in her studies of biomorphism, in her embodiments of traumatic memory, in her fabric bodies, in the metaphors of stitching and cutting, remapping and suturing, in her spatial notion of «the cell», in her undoing gender legibility, and, of course, in making this undoing the only route towards «livability» for the human being. As I will analyze in what follows, throughout the film, Almodóvar plays with Bourgeois' leitmotiv, «I Do, I Undo, I Redo»<sup>3</sup> and makes it the underlying embodiment of freedom and survival.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This is the title of three 1999-2000 steel and mixed media tower sculptures on the mother-child relationship that were installed for the inaugural of the Tate Modern Turbine Hall in 2000. Art historian Frances Morris suggests that the title implies «the ways in which we negotiate and renegotiate relationships with others throughout our lives—arguably the subject of all of her work. It also seems to evoke the dialectical rhythm of making, reflecting, and remaking, which has driven the development of her work from her very earliest studies to her late masterpieces, through its multiple incarnations in different media and its continuing oscillation between abstraction and figuration» (Morris 11).

<sup>4</sup> It comes as no surprise that Almodóvar would find such influential inspiration for this film in the work of an artist who looked for ways to imagine alternative sexual subjectivity. Commenting on Bourgeois' feminist sensitivity, art historian Elisabeth Lebovici writes that she is «not interested so much in group

As contributors to this special number on «Global Almodóvar» we were asked to address the filmmaker's oeuvre in its transnational context. In the case of *The Skin I Live In*, this can certainly be done through the intertextual references of the film: from its literary inspiration in Thierry Jonquet's *Mygale* (1984), to the many filmic ghosts that appear in one way or another, the most obvious being Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* (1959), James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), to the dialogue between the mediums of painting (Tiziano, Jorge Galindo, Juan Uslé, Tarsila do Amaral, Guillermo Pérez Villalta, Julio Torres Romero), sculpture (Louise Bourgeois), and literature (Cormac McCarthy, Janet Frame, Alice Munro). An analysis centered on these texts would certainly frame the film and ground Almodóvar's global appeal on his prolific artistic references, readings, and knowledge of the history of world cinematography. But rather than focus on the seduction that this transnationalism might have for its intertextual references, plays, and differences, I would like to ground his global appeal on his *usefulness*, i.e., on Almodóvar's capacity to push us to think in unconventional and counterintuitive ways, particularly here, on his probing of gender coherence and accessing alternative spaces of being.

In this sense, Almodóvar's impact far exceeds any type of facile local (national) pigeonholing of the kind that makes him a representative of Spanish national culture for a global film market, although, his work is most certainly in dialogue with how the logics of cultural and gender identity are lived and worked through in Spain.<sup>5</sup> Almodóvar has always been an eclectic filmmaker with a deep literary background and profound international film culture. His films are reminiscent of some of the best moments of classical Hollywood cinema, underground punk films, slapstick comedy, the Italian neorealist tradition, or New Spanish Cinema,

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feminism but acutely aware of the politics of the sexes. She knows that to men one is first and foremost a woman, even when, as a woman, one is first and foremost an artist. Which is precisely the subtlety of her approach. She has tended to view the representation of gender as a useful way of signifying male-female power relations» (Lebovici 133). In *The Skin I Live In*, Almodóvar also pushes us in this direction as we are invited to look beyond the story of survival and to reformulate it as the embodiment of the kind of symbolic and literal violence inherent in all normative instances of gender and its naturalization. In Bourgeois' work this will entail, for example, the proliferation of sexual attributes in her bodies or experimentation with a topological conceptualization of space so that the sexuality of the body can be thought of as a continuum with feminine and masculine bodily markers coexisting and in the same piece (see, for example, her *Fillette*-1968, *Femme Couteau*-1969-70, the *Janus Series*-1968, *Blind Man's Buff*-1984 or *Single III*-1996). If these attributes «destabilize in their turn the myths we think of as organizing the originality of either sex, and by the same token, their binary fixity» (Lebovici 133), then it follows that after exploring Bourgeois' work himself, Almodóvar would have the character who has been «locked» into a particular bodily shell explore these reworkings of identity by mimicking her work.

<sup>5</sup> Borrowing from Jack Halberstam, one could underscore that Almodóvar is also a theorist of «failure», or a practitioner of what this critic terms the «queer art of failure» (2011) in that he too both makes «peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal» (Halberstam 2).

to name only a few of his most cited and recognized sources. However, as his filmic oeuvre matures, his dialogic relationship with the masters of cinematography has turned into a conversation among peers, the Almodovarian pupil surpassing many times the intention and impact of his inspirations. Increasingly more abstract, reflexive, and audacious, hence less «local», *The Skin I Live In* marks a new level of sophistication in his filmmaking. Visually stunning, impeccably structured, audacious and fearless in its critique of the trauma of heteronormativity, Almodóvar's global appeal originates, in my mind, in how effective he is at splintering the cultural, symbolic, and bodily logics surrounding gendered prescriptions of identity. Almodóvar's transnational success owes as much to his filmic craft as to his unique and sometimes uncomfortable incursions into feminist and queer geographies and epistemologies. For those of us who like to think about art as a site of «crisis», *The Skin I Live In* deserves a very special place in our library of cultural referents.

#### VIOLENCE, FAILURE, GENDERED LIVABILITY

Vicente: ¿Para qué me afeitas?

Robert: Esa es una buena pregunta.

Part laboratory, part jail, part refuge, part surveillance cell, El Cigarral, the monastery-like home of Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) is an exquisitely decorated and tailored palatial home on the outskirts of Toledo, Spain. Secluded, gated, with tight surveillance, it is the place where Robert Ledgard, a renowned plastic surgeon, and his team of medical assistants perform very lucrative sex-change surgeries on elite clients who wish to keep their make-overs confidential, clients who we assume secure the discretion of the doctor and his team thanks to the high sums of money exchanged for their services. When we see Vicente on the operating table at El Cigarral, only his young age surprises; everything else, the documentation and the rationale for the surgery, seems to be in order. A quick, «Tiene veintisiete años y sabe perfectamente lo que quiere. Es un caso especialmente confidencial» (Almodóvar 108) by Ledgard satisfies the query and displaces any misgivings the surgical team might have about the appropriateness of the situation. Once Vicente awakes and asks, «¿Qué me han hecho?», the words «una vaginoplastia» sound incomprehensible. As he fully begins to grasp the gravity and irreversibility of the situation, his genital mutilation and sex change become signifiers of a different order: they become the site where psychological and bodily wholeness fork and *the skin he lives in* is that of another.

The film turns the distinction between the skin and the I into a smart narrative device to both underscore the horrific punishment imposed on Vicente but also

as a means to go deeper and actually get under the wrapping of the body and understand just how complex the social ordering of the I and its bodily form actually are.<sup>6</sup> There is no clean separation of the body from a transcendental I. We live our gender coherence, if such a thing does exist, exclusively through a body and skin that are much more than mere intermediaries. The entanglement of «inside and out» (our sense of self) occurs, of course, with a body always already confused and merged with a psychology that, in turn, is also already shaped by numerous external factors. Vicente's forced sex change allows Almodóvar to delve into the terrain of «livability» (Butler 2004), i.e., into the experiences of the self that might necessarily have to «undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life» (Butler 1). If this is the case, the surgery is less, then, about revenge and more about the story of a young man who learns to understand through his new «skin» what types of normative «doings» take place for both heteronormative masculine and female bodies/subjectivities. The loss of the phallus undoes his psycho-social identity, reformulates what had been thought of as his masculine gendered coherence, and allows a glimpse into the kinds of regulatory expectations and deep psychic wounds that are inscribed on his new feminine body, all of which trigger a profound questioning of the ontological status of the I.

In the film, the undoing of the heteronormative is presented first through the shock effect of medical discourse and later through the deep internal transformation that art (the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois) facilitates for Vicente as a survivor of captivity, forced gender-identity, and rape. The initial instance of «undoing» can best be illustrated in the scene where a postoperative Vicente looks at his anatomical transformation in a mirror for the first time, a quick and fearful glimpse through the opening of his green silk robe at the mutilation, the scars, and the wound imposed on his body. He is in shock, speechless, and in deep fear; one assumes that he is also in physical pain, despite being wrapped in silk. Ledgard comes to his room to check on his patient, as if he were a «normal» doctor completing his rounds at a hospital. Vicente's psychological discomfort is blatantly obvious in the nonverbal communication between the two. And the monologue that ensues is probably the most brutalizing of the film for it reduces Vicente's subjectivity to the orifice of the vagina:

Dr. Ledgard: Como acabas de ver la operación ha sido un éxito, pero los tejidos que forman la vagina están todavía muy tiernos y podrían pegarse. No te preocu-

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Almodóvar conceives Vicente-Vera's bodysuit as a «second skin», as a post-surgical body wrap, and uses it to exteriorize the character's interior identity, its sutures (the body's reconstructed and mutilated nature), and its process of healing or need to be «shaped» and held together. Almodóvar worked closely with fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier on the suit, the master of what Almodóvar terms «arte y concepción», a pun on the rather different profession of «corte y confección» (see Fouratt).

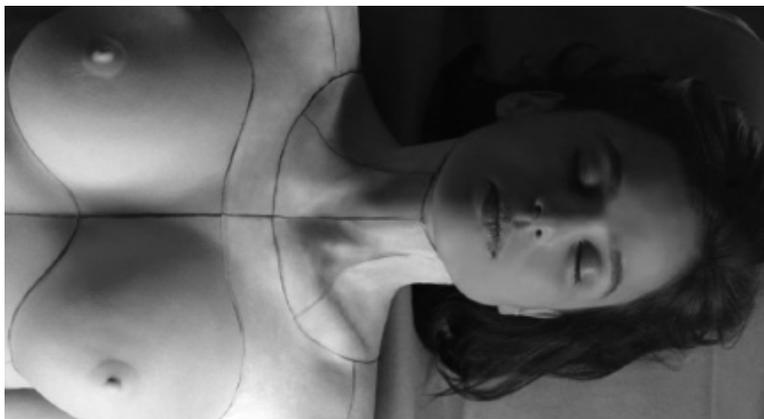
pes, evitarlo es fácil. Tienes que mantener abierto el nuevo orificio y conseguir que poco a poco se haga más profundo. Piensa que tu vida depende de ese orificio, que respiras por él. Dentro de esta caja hay varios dilatadores de distintos tamaños. Empieza introduciéndote el más pequeño. Te dolerá al principio, pero dentro de unas semanas te cabrá el más grande sin esfuerzo y la piel estará perfectamente cicatrizada. (Almodóvar 111).

By placing the phallic-like dilators on display for Vicente, Ledgard instructs this young man to reimagine and live his future sexuality as a pathology (as many women are taught to do) and to conceive its new distinctiveness exclusively through the surgical reconstruction of his body, more specifically, to gage his new identity around a reconstructed orifice, around a wound, around «lack», his missing penis, the very familiar psychoanalytic scenario. Vicente's initial response to this formatting of identity is shock, humiliation, and complicity: he obediently follows Ledgard's instructions to the extent that several months later, after a careful gynecological examination, his captor finds his skin sufficiently cured and ready for the next phase: his full bodily transformation into a woman, and supposedly, a sexuality that includes that vaginal piercing of his body. If in phase one, Vicente's identity and future were reduced to that of the «orifice», what should one expect when his masculine features are fully erased in the next steps of bodily transformation?

In phase two, Almodóvar masterfully plays with film's scopophilic pleasures, its voyeuristic instances, its turning the body (especially the female body) into an object of heteronormative desire by literally exchanging the body of Vicente, that of actor Jan Carnet, for the body of Vera, that of actress Elena Anaya, in a disturbing scene where Ledgard experiments with skin transplants on a headless and sexualized mannequin body (Figure 1) that then transforms into the living body of Vera (Figure 2) thanks to an intelligent camera dissolve. Ledgard has crossed the ethical boundaries of what the scientific community deems to be legitimate research given how he has successfully created a new skin type that is impervious to fire and insect bites through the process of transgenesis. After numerous skin grafts on the body of Vicente, Ledgard creates, in the best Frankensteinian manner, a new individual, an anatomically «perfect» female out of the imperfect body of Vicente. And, of course, for Ledgard, this new body also holds the promise of a new subjectivity and coherent gender identity in accordance with the reconstructed body. One could say that Ledgard, is trying to fulfill a megalomaniac phantasy by playing God in the creation of this «new» life, and, like God, not only does he have the power to create but also of resurrecting the dead, for Vicente has been given the face and body of Ledgard's late wife, Gal.



*Figure 1: Headless, sexualized torso*



*Figure 2: Mannequin turned into recreated, surgical, living body*

In a flashback scene, viewers learn that Vicente meets Norma (Blanca Suárez), Ledgard's daughter, at a party in a large aristocratic home on the outskirts of an undetermined city in Galicia, Spain. Norma has been in treatment at a psychiatric hospital for some time given her fear of people and social phobias. The traumatic event that set off Norma's mental breakdown was her mother's suicide. Unhappily married, Gal suffered a car accident while running away with her lover, Zeca (the Tiger-Man), Ledgard's beastly and brother unbeknown. Left to die in the car fire, she is rescued from the flames but lives a life in severe bodily pain, completely disfigured from the scars of her burns. Ledgard unsuccessfully tries to find a cure for her wounds but unable to endure the magnitude of her suffering, Gal prefers to jump to her death as she hears young Norma (Ana Mena) sing a song that she had taught her, the beautiful «Pelo de amor de amar», in Portuguese outside her window. Traumatized by the monster she sees reflected back in the window

pane, Gal jumps from her bedroom window to die at Norma's side in the garden, forever linking in the child's mind the music and words of the song with her mother's tragedy. This is Almodóvar's way of converting the song into a memento mori, an aural linkage between mother and daughter through death, a recurring theme for the filmmaker, alluding to other aural mother-daughter ties in his films, such as those in *Tacones Lejanos* (*High Heels*), *La flor de mi secreto* (*The Flower of my Secret*) or *Volver*, for example.

Back at the party in Galicia, readers will recall that this is Norma's first time in public and amongst so many strangers in a very long time. Ledgard, who holds deep feelings of guilt for both Gal's death and Norma's breakdown, is very apprehensive about his daughter's reaction and is vigilant of her comings and goings throughout the party until she unnoticeably slips outside with Vicente and a group of other young people who are drunk, high, and looking for sex. As the two of them walk through the gardens alone and confide in each other just how many different pills they each took during or prior to the party (a funny miscommunication), a not so comical misunderstanding ensues between them when an aroused Vicente tries to penetrate Vera at the moment when her mother's song, this time in Spanish and interpreted by singer Concha Buika back at the party, trickles out of the house and finds her in the woods at the moment of her first sexual encounter. Deeply moved by this painful memory and linking her mother's death to that of her own (loss of innocence under a violent patriarchal cultural paradigm), Norma begs him to stop. She screams; they struggle; she bites; and he responds to her fear by punching her with excessive force and Norma loses consciousness. With the situation spinning out of control, afraid, and not fully understanding the events unfolding in front of him, Vicente quickly zips up his pants, gathers his things, and makes Norma look less vulnerable and himself less responsible of how the scene will be interpreted by the person who finds her (he covers her breasts, brings her legs together, and lowers the skirt of her dress to make her look more dignified and modest). This is how Ledgard discovers his daughter as Vicente rushes off on his motorcycle. Mistaking her father for her attacker as she recovers consciousness, Norma relapses into a confused state of mind that interestingly rejects all things connected to her father, posing a very suggestive psycho-social interpretation of the kind of cultural logic Ledgard embodies in the film, a small Almodovarian tribute to the woman's film of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Norma's condition worsens until, like her mother, she ends her suffering by taking her own life. In narrative terms, this is what triggers Ledgard's thirst for revenge and the Vicente-Vera nightmare.

<sup>7</sup> For a framing of the woman's film within the Spanish context see my analysis of Luis Lucia's *De Mujer a Mujer* (1950) in *La gramática de la felicidad* (2005), where a similar logic of rejection of the world of the father is transformed into female friendship.

If Ledgard begins Vicente's transformation as retribution for his daughter's rape and suicide, on a deeper level, however, the force motivating Ledgard's actions might be better described as an infinite loop of mourning for his deceased wife and daughter, one that is dependent upon a particular model of sexual politics and gender identity for the sexes. In its non-pathological manifestations, mourning is a long and complex process in which the ego becomes capable of severing «its bond with the lost object as a precursor to forming new attachments» (Nixon 229). In the film, Almodóvar adds a gendered nuance to the process of mourning by linking Ledgard's difficulty of such a rift to the cultural logic that frames his masculinity. His is a paradigm of excess of power, control, and responsibility, extremisms that inhibit the awareness and acceptance of his own vulnerability and do not permit him to live the loss of wife and daughter as anything other than his own failure. This inevitably provokes an unbearable sense of guilt that questions his own primary sense of self. The type of internal rage that this frustration provokes causes the individual, in psychoanalytic terms, to «damage or destroy [...] the distinction between self and other» (Harrang 1307) and one could even venture of time itself give how Ledgard lives in a timeless circle of guilt and rage in his monastic, prison-like, cell-like, heterotopic existence at El Cigarral. In Harrang's analysis of the film:

The result, as seen in the character of Robert, is an individual who becomes ever more isolated, terrified of losing control of the internal and external objects he holds captive in a desperate attempt to maintain the phantasy of perfection, absolute power, and invulnerability. [...] Thus, a vicious cycle is perpetuated wherein intolerance of hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty interferes with access to differing points of view necessary for reality testing, which in turn increases reliance on omnipotence as a bulwark against vulnerability of any sort. (1307)

This cultural logic that rejects «hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty» engraves a model of masculinity on Ledgard's skin that, in turn, instills in his psyche what psychoanalyst Daniel Lagache (1956) termed as a paradigm of «pathological mourning» or mental state of being where «the dead haunt the living aggressively, exacting a toll of guilt that can be appeased only 'by installing death in life'» (Nixon 232). Lagache's words were intended as a description of the kind of psychic trauma the survivors of WWII faced in the aftermath of profound loss and of how such trauma impeded satisfactory psychic operations that could offer mechanisms for internal reconstruction and reconciliation with death. Lagache understood that the full devastation and pathology of the war violence was revealed, «in the crux survivors faced by either accepting 'an obligation toward the dead that stipulates dying,' or to defy 'a moral authority that does not permit being alive'» (Lagache qtd. in Nixon 232). In the case of Almodóvar's character, Ledgard's urge for omnipotence stems from the overwhelming sense of guilt he

feels for not having been able to rescue his wife and daughter from madness and trauma. His is a pathological attempt to «fix» or undo their deaths as a desperate plea for forgiveness that, in turn, will facilitate, he mistakenly believes, the restoration of his I. The film turns this need into a male phantasy of power that gets inscribed and executed on the increasingly sexualized body of his kidnapped victim. It is a closed circuit of emotion, an obsessive and recurring loop of pain that inhibits a restorative «dialogue» with the dead and with the feelings of abandonment that their loss deepens in his already traumatized psyche.<sup>8</sup> It would seem that for Ledgard no reconciliation with loss is possible, no room to accept that the absence of the other is in actuality an estrangement of the «I» with itself.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that in actuality, the death of the loved one is also the death of the I, or at least of one of its constitutive parts. To mourn entails recognizing the dual nature of the loved one, of that individual being «an inner possession, component of our own ego» but also «a stranger, even enemy» (Freud 298, qtd. in Nixon 231). Ledgard cannot wrestle with this realization, with the need for a sense of compassion towards the self in pain that begs us, again, in psychoanalytic terms, to «embrace the aggression required 'to kill the dead' (Lagache 1938) by severing our bonds with them but also to confront the hatred that is harbored against the loved ones in life» (Nixon 230-31). In other words, Ledgard cannot accept the dual nature of the ties that bind the parts of his self together (love and hatred) nor can he peacefully accept how vulnerable his incapacity to mourn (of not being able to «kill the dead») makes him feel. The film illustrates how unfathomable it is for his psyche to stabilize those tortuous feelings in any other way than by misguidedly exerting the same torment on his victim in a god-like, omnipotent fashion. This, of course, is a pathological and hurtful re-interpretation of the self's capacity to «remake» the world in more livable terms. For as Butler wisely points out, we cannot reconfigure the world so that «I become its

<sup>8</sup> The film indirectly tells us a story of motherly love and abandonment that Almodóvar uses to contrast the psychological upbringing and pathologies of victimizer and victim. Robert's bonding with Marilia (his actual birth mother) never took place for, despite being placed in her care at birth, he was brought up to believe he was the biological son of another woman (the wife of her lover, Robert's biological father) who, in turn, did not love him. Marilia compensates for the secrecy and makes Robert her life project in contrast to her relationship with her first child, Zeca, whom she abandons to his luck on the streets of Brasil. This version of sacrificial motherhood will take a Lorquian twist later in the film when Marilia makes her blood the origin of the madness that dominates both of her sons, she too blinded by and complicit with the same logic of identity that torment her sons and make them who they are. On the other hand, Vicente's mother (Susi Sánchez) is also a somewhat traditional version of the mother on emotional grounds (intuitive and compassionate with the son) but her strength comes from a different source, from a different set of (gender) politics. Indefatigably loyal, there is a fluidity between mind and heart in her character, an internal strength and richness, a psychological border between mother-son that makes her less of a prisoner of maternal normativity and more of a woman, a successful small dress shop owner, who mourns her missing son.

maker. That fantasy of godlike power only refuses the ways we are constituted, invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside of us» (3). Ledgard has closed every door, severed every tie with all things external not directly in his control, and undeniably made the paradigm of supreme authorial power or hypermasculinity his own death sentence. It will take Vicente-Vera's courage and gun to liberate them both from this closed circuit structure of violence. And it is Almodóvar's masterful filmmaking and reflections on the psychic architecture of gender identity that put this all into play.

#### CELLS OF DOMINATION, METAMORPHOSIS, SPACES OF SURVIVAL

If the captor's logic leads to the destruction of the individual behind the project of domination, the logic of the prisoner-survivor follows a strikingly different path in this film. In both literal and socio-symbolic terms, *The Skin I Live In* suggests that survival depends on a sophisticated and malleable notion of the self, one that the character Vicente-Vera develops over the course of his captivity thanks to the world of artistic creation. Here Almodóvar looks for inspiration and pays tribute to the work of sculptor-painter Louise Bourgeois and her incursions into the explorations of gender identity, the malleability of the body, and the nexus memory-trauma. There are many cues taken from Bourgeois's oeuvre, especially from her studies of the female body and emotional trauma and her visualization of inner psychic space as that of a «cell». Almodóvar stages captivity and confinement in *El Cigarral* by having his characters traverse spaces that are conceived as prison-like enclosures, spaces that, in turn, become spatial representations of the compartmentalization of the emotionally complex registers of identity.

Spatial categories play a significant narrative and conceptual (cognitive) role in *The Skin I Live In*. In a Foucauldian sense, this space on the outskirts of Toledo is conceived as a site to explore the violence of normativized gender identity, a heterotopia of sorts that allows the filmmaker to scrutinize in great detail the trauma of sexual violence, the brutality of body and gender normativity, and the usefulness of art as an epistemology of survival. Following Foucault, on a broad psycho-social scale, *El Cigarral* operates as a site where this violence is exposed given how the space functions as: (1) «a system of opening and closing that isolates it and makes it penetrable at the same time» (26): the coming and going of Ledgard, of his team of assistants, the arrival of Marilia, of Tiger-Man, Vicente-Vera's escape; (2) a space that is *other*, i.e., «as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled» (27): painstaking functional and aesthetic order present in every room both inside the living quarters and

the surgical and laboratory spaces; (3) a play with time (26): linearity turned into circularity (Ledgard's psychic state of revenge and mourning, Marilia's Lorquian motherhood), advancement turned into suspension (Vicente-Vera's captivity); and (4) a juxtaposition of spaces that are incompatible (25): the surgical and laboratory space, the bedroom of surveillance and cure, the kitchen of isolation, nourishment, control, and memory; movement as confinement and freedom; space as psychic and physical.

Following Bourgeois, Almodóvar also uses these spatial and conceptual heterotopias (or realms where socio-symbolic meaning unfolds and collapses) to create «cells» or encapsulated spaces that metonymically exhibit, through the enclosed objects, variant aspects of pain (physical, psychological, emotional)<sup>9</sup> that audiences can only engage in voyeuristically. On a smaller scale, both artists displace onto the elements that compose their spatial compositions, the history of trauma behind the objects as they exhibit particularly meaningful moments in the individual's interiorization of identity and its normativized cultural violence. However, if Bourgeois' cells are dark and cage-like exhibits of psychic interiority, Almodóvar is attracted instead to the underlying violence in beauty. Hence, the majestic scenes of glass enclosures and close-ups of medical and laboratory subjects where objects and instruments are conferred a special life and meaning as if elements in an aesthetic composition, or Vicente-Vera's bedroom, art and yoga studio, and lieu de mémoire, where the tormented body and psyche wrestle with identity, agency, and violent encapsulations of the self through body posture, writing, and sculpture. These are voyeuristic spaces that fascinate and terrify us, that function at times as if they were curiosity shops, but, like in the case of Bourgeois' cells, contain objects and people that are «encapsulated in a structure that, with its obvious references to the solitary habitation of prison, monastery, or hospital suggests confinement, suffering, and reflection» (Morris 16) (figures 3 and 4).

<sup>9</sup> In her words: «I wanted to create my own architecture, and not depend on the museum space, not have to adapt my scale to it. I wanted to constitute a real space which you could enter and walk around in» (Morris 71). See *Cell (Choisy)* (1990-3), *Cell (Clothes)* (1996) or *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* (1989-93) as examples of the confinement of objects within particular signifying spaces. Commenting on her *Cell, (You Better Grow Up)* (1993), Bourgeois writes, «It has overtones of a jail and its occupant, of the inescapable; it also has overtones of the biological cell. [...] First there is fear, fear of existence. Then comes a stiffening up, a refusal to confront fear. Then comes the denial. The terror of facing ourselves keeps us from understanding and subjects us to the repetition of acting out. [...] Through self-knowledge we recognize and understand the mechanisms of our fears. We cease being dependent on the unknown and the acting out stops. The goal is to become active, and to take control. Until the past is negated by the present, we do not live» (Bernadac and Obrist 231-232).



*Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois: Peaux de lapins (2006)*



*Figure 4: Louise Bourgeois: Domestic Incidents (2006)*

Captor and captive lay at the opposite ends of this experience of confinement and reflection. I previously argued how Ledgard was being held captive, in his own way, by a system of normative exigencies that dominated the composition

and outcome of his emotional universe. Despite being the «master» of his home and gatekeeper of the borders of his psychic and physical spaces, Ledgard cannot maneuver within his identity because he is trapped within a traumatic framework that is predicated on a model of gender normativity and its psychic devastation, when transformed into a pathological state of being. On the contrary, Vicente-Vera substitutes this gnoseologic framework of trauma for one of understanding and vulnerability through the practice of art. He finds the strength to convert his prison-cell into a space of what Bourgeois terms «friendly silence» (Morris 30), i.e., of artistic labor, of the transformation of fear into knowledge, of the merging of «physical, emotional, and psychological states» (Morris 41) into works of art. This provides Vicente-Vera with a new set of epistemological references because the artwork allows him-her to develop an interior life that helps this captive understand that identity is malleable, multiple, biomorphic, like his new body and the Bourgeois artwork that so captivates him. It also helps Vicente-Vera understand that by creating, i.e., by «doing», one «undoes» in order to «redo» (Bourgeois' leitmotiv and transformational grammar).

*The Skin I Live In* explores the collapse of meaning around the categories of gender, more specifically the erosion of categorical differences (like those of male and female) and the type of psychic restructuring, undoing, (and trauma) this can entail. It easily follows that Almodóvar would have a character in the film attracted to an artist who has made the questioning of these complex boundaries central to her work throughout her career. For example, one of Bourgeois' most celebrated pieces, *Fillette* (1968) (figure 5), is an early sculptural work that blurs the distinction between male and female. Curator Frances Morris describes the sculpture as exhibiting a «vaginal opening at the foot of the shaft and between the two testicles [that] forces male and female to merge» (Morris 146). Bourgeois proposes a psychic and corporeal rewriting of the body that Vicente-Vera is instinctively attracted to on a conceptual and deeply personal level given the violence he is trying to overcome. However, in addition to the intellectual probing he sees at work in her artistry, Vicente-Vera is also spellbound by its materiality (like his own), the fact that her pieces are executed in mediums and materials that are less rigid, more fluid, more unpredictable, more unconventional and problematic for sculpture such as wax or cloth, materials that beg imperfection, materials that open and fracture, materials that break the usual cognitive boundaries and allow for readjustments. Morris has astutely explained that, «in place of a language of construction, her creations begged a vocabulary of evolution, metamorphosis, and indeterminacy» (Morris 13-14). And this is what Vicente-Vera finds so captivating, for there is an obsession in Bourgeois work with the mutability of form, with transformation and metamorphosis, hence granting her «the poetic license to *de-nature* imagery with an abandon and a feeling for the unexpected rightness of the 'wrong' pairings or permutations that precious few artists can boast» (Morris 28).



Figure 5: Louis Bourgeois: Fillette (1968)

It is this idea of «becoming», of transformative identity, of exhibiting masculinity and femininity as a natural biomorphism and continuum that makes Bourgeois' work feel like self-portraits to Vicente-Vera. Flipping through the three cable channels that connect him-her with the outside world, Vicente-Vera, finds a documentary on the work of the artist and is immediately enthralled by the images of her contemporary fabric creations, especially those of the pieces, *Seven in Bed* (2001) (Figure 6), *The Couple IV* (1997) (Figure 7), and *Single III* (1996) (Figure 9) that are highlighted on the television screen (Figures 8 and 10).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In Linda Nochlin's words: «Not merely the 'erotic' but actual physical coupling between a man and woman or several of each—also make their appearance in recent cloth works by Bourgeois. *Couple IV* (1997) may be said to explore the dubious joys of the prosthetic-erotic: one of the two sinister, enlaced, black-clothed bodies has a fully articulated, laced up, neatly-carved wooden leg strapped on to his/her thigh. Neither has a head, and the blatant perversity of the piece is enhanced by its presentation in wood and glass Victorian vitrine, as though these were specimens of some exotic, vanished, more brutal race of beings» (194). She describes the other fabric piece, *Seven in Bed* (2001) as a «multifigured work in pink fabric, employing seven overheated, sexually ambiguous figures going at each other on a white mattress. The heads, however, don't quite add up—some lucky creatures seem to have more than one and are kissing in two directions at once. Certainly, *Seven in Bed* incarnates a utopian dream of the old and post-sexual: all you can get, all at once, all in the same bed. What could be more spectacular evidence of the sexually powered inventiveness of Bourgeois' old-age style?» (194). *Single III* is another powerful fabric piece of a dual headed figure with both masculine and feminine sexual attributes and mutilated arms.



*Figure 6: Louise Bourgeois: Seven in Bed (2001)*



*Figure 7: Louise Bourgeois: Couple IV (1997)*



*Figure 8: Vicente-Vera and Couple IV*



*Figure 9: Louise Bourgeois: Single III (1997)*



*Figure 10: Vicente-Vera, body duality, and Single III*

If at first Vicente viciously needed to shred the dresses that were offered to him as signs of the new gendered embodiments that were expected of him as Vera and make them disappear (recall the violent force of absorption of the snake-like central vacuuming system in his room), it is through the artwork that he finds a place of resolution, of working through the trauma, of recuperating those shredded pieces, and regaining for himself an interior life that only he controls. In his captivity, Vicente-Vera learns that he possesses two spaces of boundless power: time («time lived, time forgotten, time shared»—Bourgeois in Bernadac and Obrist 362) and art, and that both are inexorably tied together as time (his life) is his art, the source of the struggle with creation. Vicente-Vera learns that it will be through making that he will find a place for peace in his psyche for a free being is an impenetrable space, locked away, seclude, but in direct communication with his hands, with the Bourgeois-like imitations that explore concepts of identity, its borders, its malleability, and the literal and hidden cultural and internal violence that are revealing themselves to him in his captivity. In this film, art is

peace, empowerment, self—and world knowledge, and especially a new logic of being that, yes, «does, undoes, and redoes». In Bourgeois' words: «What does time inflict—dust and disintegration? My reminiscences help me live in the present, and I want them to survive. I am a prisoner of my emotions. You have to tell your story, and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you» (Bernadac and Obrist 362). The story Vicente-Vera finds that art facilitates for him is that of the story of the «skin he lives in», of how and why that came to be, and of the kinds of «undoings» of that skin and «redoings» of the he-she this individual has had to embrace in order to survive.

If we take notes so we don't forget, what is Vicente-Vera trying to remember on the room of his dormitory-cell? Images of yoga postures, of his-her gateway to peace and the inner-self, the number of times she smoked opium to forget, the number of times he took deep breaths so that he could keep on resisting, a journal of the captivity, a wall of meaning, written in black, with Chanel facial crayons, an undoing and recycling of her «feminine tools» with the hope of keeping track of time, of not forgetting who he-she is, a reconfiguring of the pronouns that make up this individual's I (Figure 11).



*Figure 11: Vicente-Vera's wall diary of captivity and survival*

Amongst the markings a careful viewer would catch images of the work of Bourgeois' wonderful «Femme Maison» (Figures 12 and 13) which depicts the biomorphic body of the house-woman, her head securely hidden inside the structure of the home, her naked body vulnerably exposed, highlighting the complicated and sometimes tortuous relationship between women and home and Vicente-Vera's physical and psychic entrapment of identity.

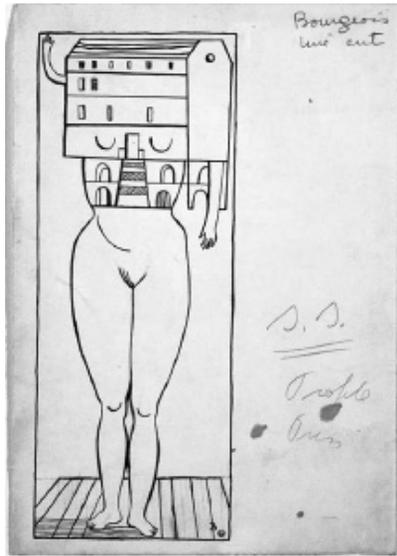


Figure 12: Louise Bourgeois: Femme Maison (1947)



Figure 13: Louise Bourgeois: Femme Maison (1994)

Vicente-Vera's wall diary is his route towards understanding the architecture and grammar of his I (past and present) as he sorts through what his new body will mean in terms of his history and future. If his wall is a documentation of trauma, metamorphosis, inner secrets, and routes of survival, it also follows that, in this context, memory, writing, and creating are mostly about forgetting, editing, and survival. In «The Lining of Forgetting», Xandra Eden writes how in 1983, French filmmaker Chris Marker pronounced, as his alter ego Sandor Krasna, in *Sans Soleil*: «I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten» (20). Are Vicente-Vera's wall, his artistic artifacts, moments in this metamorphosis of time and self-identity? Will his past serve as an imperfect anchor to his inner reformulation? Is there a way home? Can art, the manipulation of form and material, the materialization of memory and experience, show him a way towards healing?

Surrounded by books on Bourgeois work, pieces of fabric, and clay, Vicente-Vera undertakes reformulations of the body, materializations of fear, incarnations of violence to the aesthetic realm in order to initiate that journey. One could speculate that Almodóvar's prisoner is especially attracted to Bourgeois' fabric pieces and heads because of their roughness, grotesque stitching, and unfinished appearance. For example, in the case of her heads and portraits, despite this genre's association with «naming», i.e., with «conveying recognizable aspects of a person's unique character [...] Bourgeois' concerns are with rage, suffering, and vulnerability» (Nixon 120) hence making her appeal universal. The heads are «notably sophisticated in construction, physically convincing but finished with a degree of deliberate crudeness so that they create the impression of hastily bandaged victims of fire or creatures shaped by horrific facial surgery» (Nixon 120) (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Louise Bourgeois: Untitled (2002)

On the surface, the connection with Vicente-Vera's transformation would be clear: the perfection that Ledgard has obsessively engrained on Vicente's skin has transformed itself into the erasure of a crime and annulment of Vicente's subjectivity, hence, the fabrication of «Vera». Bourgeois' work, its calling attention to the messy craftwork, to the unfinished edges, to the ugliness behind the mask, points beyond the surface of perfection to the uneven subjectivity that lies behind. As Mignon Nixon insightfully explains, «Within these blasted physiognomies some details are oddly precise, such as carefully parted lips which reveal vulnerable interiors, and eyes which either return or dispel one's gaze» (Nixon120). And this is the power that this work has over Vicente-Vera, in that it confirms for him that he is much more, so much more, than the orifice implanted on his body, the physical and cultural scar that he obsessively tries to «undo» and «redo» in his clay faces, rag people, and drawings. There is an inner life that can only be made visible by focusing on the scars, on the «grotesque handiwork» of the bodies made in fabric (Figures 15 and 16). The carnal skin of the fabric, this artistic epidermis, needs to be harsh and crude so that it can serve as a «punctum» (Barthes 27) of the past and anchor for the present. The assembling of the body, its rough stitching, the cutting, the piercing, are all reminiscent of Ledgard's activities in the laboratory, of his god-like work, of his believing he was creating a new life as he changed the sex of Vicente. In the case of Bourgeois:

[t]he woven skin that surrounds and covers the body or the head is the 'covering' through which the artist speaks, the 'mask' with which she communicates the subject is not there, but that sinks in the distance, although it still makes her suffer. The fabric is the surface over which passes her horror of self and disgust for life, but it is also the vehicle with which she tracks down her own identity. This means of obtaining another chance of life, with which to put back together the fragments of herself that loneliness and abandonment had scattered. (Celant 18).



*Figure 15: Vicente-Vera and the exploration of the inner I*



Figure 16: Almodovarian homage to Bourgeois' grotesque handiwork

There is a world of residues, of parts, of memories, that Vicente clings and cuts into, as if revealing through his clay forms, through his fabric clippings of dresses imposed, that by severing he can outline a perimeter for himself, achieve a psychic demarcation and mapping of the reconfigurations that will save him from insanity or from taking his life. This is no less than coming to terms with the type of psychosocial violence inscribed on the body in the project of normativity, in this particular case, the kind of symbolic learning demanded of the female in regards to her body and eliciting of desire. This discovered knowledge «queers» and «improves» on the old Vicente in that his new body pushes him into an unfamiliar, traumatic, yet imaginative place of understanding.

Vicente-Vera strategizes his freedom with this discovery and the internal strength it provides him and will use it against his captor in the last section of the film. After a frustrated attempt to escape ends in the terrible violation of his body when Zeca, the Tiger-Man (Roberto Álamo), confuses him for his ex-lover, Gal, Vicente-Vera learns that there is a particular kind of power that his new phallic embodiment of femininity offers him: seduction through the promise of sex, even if this involves his own physical pain for vaginal sex is new and discomforting, and is being experienced in a predatory fashion. When Ledgard finds his dead wife's ex-lover (his brother) raping his creation he first points his gun at Vicente, as if to revenge the pain and fury this re-enactment of the past conjures for him; instead he decides to opt for the present, his new creation and the cry for help her eyes invoke, and kills Zeca.<sup>11</sup> This is where Vicente-Vera's liberation begins, in

<sup>11</sup> Almodóvar describes the situation in these terms: «Mientras retira de la cama las sábanas empapadas de sangre, empapándose ella misma de la sangre que en algún momento fue suya, la sangre de su hijo Zeca, Marilia le explica a Vera que en su juventud engendró a dos hijos de dos padres distintos, pero que los dos nacieron locos. ("Llevo la locura en las entrañas", confiesa). Locos, monstruosos y feroces,

the new complicity between captor and captive lived as if it were a relationship between lovers. Vicente-Vera will use to his advantage the fact that Ledgard has fallen in love with the «hetero-visual model of femininity» (Halberstam 95) that he embodies and plays out so convincingly, an illusion and faith in a model of identity that will culminate in the death of his two keepers and allow him to return to his own family dressed as Vera in the Dolce and Gabbana flower print dress that in some sense initiated this journey.<sup>12</sup>

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los dos hijos de Marilia vivieron y actuaron como unos desalmados y, al final de sus vidas, sus destinos paralelos les llevaron a encallarse contra el oscuro callejón sin salida que era el nuevo sexo de Vera. Un final idéntico para dos trayectorias tan diversas como las vidas del doctor Ledgard y Zeca, el bandido disfrazado de tigre» (155-56).

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note here that the exchange of actual male and female bodies that has taken place in the film for the character of Vicente-Vera is what adds another interesting layer to the issues of sexual identity and of bodies and skin. On the one hand, viewers know that the female body of Vera is that of actress Elena Anaya, hence adding to the narrative confusion (or not) of what transpires between Vera and Ledgard in terms of desire. Narratively speaking, within the diabetics of the film, we have a man (Vicente) whose naked body does not unveil the wound of trauma but instead the perfection of the voyeuristic pleasure of what is recognizably and conventionally female. We have (and don't have) a «failed» (non-normative) masculinity in the character of Vicente when he tries to have sex with Ledgard. Almodóvar's character is, of course, a transgression (the male-female), a «failed» heteronormative psychic structure but only in the fiction of the film, camouflaged as a transgression, when in narrative terms what we actually watch is a successful story of heteronormative desire in the most traditional sense (between a female actress and male actor), albeit, dressed in layers of ambiguity off the screen (Anaya's lesbianism, Banderas' heterosexuality) and on the screen as in the dream sequences keeper and captive diabetically share their first night together.

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