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The Skin I Live In

Jeremy Biles

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, jebiles@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Skin I Live In* (2011), directed by Pedro Almodóvar.

The Skin I Live In, written and directed by the inimitable Pedro Almodóvar, is a Hitchcockian thriller haunted by religion. By “haunted,” I mean that religious themes, ideas, and questions, particularly centering on the body as a site of identity, are implicit but also pervasive and driving. A work of multifaceted pleasures and sensations, the movie involves mysterious doubles and disguises, startling metamorphoses, kinky sex, and homicidal insanity. It also boasts pitch-perfect casting and excellent acting, and is shot through with dark—at times even ghastly—humor (seemingly missed by most critics).

The film follows the evil motivations and machinations of an elegant, brilliant, wealthy, and, as we come to find out, deeply psychotic plastic surgeon, Robert Ledgard. Played with marvelously eerie intensity by Antonio Banderas (in what marks a homecoming both to Spanish film and to the director who introduced him to the world), Ledgard is renowned for his innovative work on face transplant technology. In an early scene, we find Legard presenting his research on an experimental form of artificial skin, produced through a gene therapy called “transgenesis,” that in addition to its lifelike plasticity, is also resistant to burning. The exalted expression on Legard’s face indicates that plastic surgery—the reconfiguration of the flesh—affords him a godlike sense of power; it is something akin to a spiritual experience for this soulless man.

Creating burn-resistant skin is one element of the sinister obsession Ledgard pursues within the cloistered confines of his estate. As we learn in a flashback, Ledgard is possessed by the memories of his wife, who committed suicide following a fire that left

her horrifically scarred. The flashback contains a particularly unsettling scene in which Ledger inhales the odor of his wife's burned flesh, apparently intoxicated by the scent. Conjuring shades of *Vertigo*, Ledger now seeks to recreate his wife through the surgical alteration of a victim he keeps secreted within his mansion.

Almodóvar, like the malevolent doctor he has imagined for this movie, is a man obsessed with the flesh, and inclined toward delighting in the aesthetics of its polymorphously perverse possibilities. Like David Cronenberg, known so well for his "body horror" movies, Almodóvar is interested in the mysteries and monstrosity of visceral depths. As one character screams in this movie, "I have insanity in my entrails!" (This movie's allusions to the work of artist Louise Bourgeois underscore Almodóvar's interest in the more abject forms of corporeality.) But Almodóvar really takes delight in the plasticity and beauty of bodily surfaces, in the skin itself and the fashions that comprise our second skins.

In *The Skin I Live In*, the theme of flesh, already indicated in the title, is signaled from the first shot. The opening sequence finds the camera caressing the lithe but curving figure of Elena Anaya, who plays Vera, Ledger's victim. Anaya's form and luminous skin are ideal for the role, and Almodóvar takes full advantage of the actress's corporeal presence, depicting her in close-fitting body suits, in a variety of outfits, and in the act of applying makeup—so many ways of altering appearance. She is also made the obsessive object of the doctor's, and the audience's, eroticized gaze, which is at once solicited, exploited, and critically scrutinized by the director.

Indeed, the pleasures of the (heterosexual male) audience's gaze (famously analyzed in Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"), here complicit with that of the villainous doctor, is thematized in the very conditions of Vera's captivity. She is held within a sparse room containing a one-way glass through which Ledger can observe his victim. The frame of the window evokes the movie screen itself, subjecting the female form to double scrutiny—a conceit the openly gay director takes patent delight in playing with. The movie's evocations of the flesh extend also to its color palette, which deals in rich, sanguinary reds as well as cool blues that prevail in the clinical settings where the victim's body is reconfigured.

The human body, and particularly its fleshly aspects, provides a primary fulcrum for religious ideas in this movie. Freud famously claimed that "anatomy is destiny"—that one's body, and particularly one's genitals, determines one's personality traits, one's identity. This is a movie that plays with that idea, with gender-bending and alterations of physical form, from the anatomical to the more superficial (makeup, fashion, costumes). Scholar of religion David Chidester has argued that religion has to do with creating and negotiating identity, with the human body being "the basic ground of religion." If so, then one religiously haunted dimension of this movie lies in its deep investigation of the relations between inner and outer, between one's identity—perhaps even one's soul—and one's outward appearance.

The movie's attention to the body carries with it other religious connotations and speculations. The doctor's devotion to the flesh, and his attempt to create perfect skin, is imposed on Vera, who is also subjected to a battery of drugs, both medicinal (for the skin grafts) and recreational (opium is used as an intoxicant). The victim resorts to practicing yoga as a way of attempting to achieve a sense of freedom even within her confines. The ritual aspects of yoga—the pursuit of spiritual freedom and control—in combination with the imposition of aesthetic perfection—disciplined devotion to the flesh—gestures toward questions about the contemporary obsession with bodily perfection.

As commentators like Rebecca Mead have pointed out, today's mania for disciplining and perfecting the body through exercise regimens, drugs, and plastic surgery call to mind the disciplinary rigors of medieval mystics. Mead compares the modern obsession with cosmetic surgery to Christian asceticism. Cosmetic surgery addicts describe their fixation in “the language of religious experience, with its wretchedness and its sublimity and its consciousness of transgression.” They display all the “self-scourging rigor” of medieval ascetics. Mead speaks to women who regard cosmetic surgery as both “a passion and a pastime”; they are “beauty nuns, dedicated to the discipline of personal physical reformation.”

Like some sadistic deity, Ledgard wants to impose transcendence of a sort on his victim, whose body would be the site of his own redemption. He aims to make of Vera's mortal, corruptible body a perfect body, impervious to time as well as fire. The location of eternal life has thus moved from the heavens to the material world. This movie is thus

a meditation on the resurrection of the flesh, a fact indicated in the very name of Ledgard's estate, where he carries out his malevolent rituals of fleshly resurrection: *Cigarra* (cicada), alluding to the insect that "dies" beneath the earth to be metamorphically "resurrected."

Today's surgical rituals usher initiates—or victims—from the imperfect to the more perfect, from the humanly mortal to the deifically immortal. For better or worse, there is something undeniably miraculous about such momentous transformations. Plastic surgery and other responses to the longing for immortality are attempts to effect the miraculous. "A miracle," critic Roland Barthes once wrote in an essay on plastic, "is always a... transformation of nature." Plastic surgery heralds a transformation of the very stuff of humanity. It portends a forfeiture of the "natural" body—a wish to transcend the mortal, aging body and a corresponding desire to be resurrected as immortal. As Chidester puts it, treating the body as—malleable, transformable, and perhaps even imperishable—is a form of "plastic religion" that gestures toward immortality.

The Skin I Live In will readily trigger bioethical questions in relation to the religious dimensions I mention here. But Almodóvar is not out to preach or proclaim a moral position on the matter. Rather, his movie is a darkly playful and skillfully rendered meditation on plasticity and perfection, on demonic devotion and ritualized resurrections, and ultimately on the pleasures and possibilities of spirit and flesh alike.