

Article

Destruction, Reconstruction and Resistance: The Skin and the Protean Body in Pedro Almodóvar's Body Horror *The Skin I Live In*

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Abstract: The instinct to tame and preserve and the longing for eternal beauty makes skin a crucial element in the genre of the Body Horror. By applying a gendered reading to the art of destruction and reconstruction of an ephemeral body, this paper explores the significant role of skin that clothes a protean body in Almodóvar's unconventional Body Horror, "The Skin I Live In" (2011). Helpless vulnerable female bodies stretched on beds and close shots of naked perfect skin of those bodies are a frequent feature in Almodóvar films. Skin stained and blotched in "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" (1989), nurtured and replenished in "Talk to Her" (2002), patched up and stitched in "The Skin I Live In", becomes a key ingredient in Almodóvar's films that celebrate the fluidity of human anatomy and sexuality. The article situates "The Skin I Live In" in the filmic continuum of Body Horrors that focus primarily on skin, beginning with Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" (1960), and touching on films like Jonathan Demme's "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991) and Tom Tykwer's "Perfume: The Story of a Murderer" (2006) and attempts to understand how the exploited bodies that have been culturally and socially subjugated have shaped the course of the history of Body Horrors in cinema. In "The Skin I Live In" the destruction of Vicente's body and its recreation into Vera follow a mad scientist's urge to dominate an unattainable body, but this ghastly assault on the body has the onscreen appearance of a routine surgical operation by an expert cosmetologist in a well-lit, sanitized mise-en-scène, suggesting that the uncanny does not need a dungeon to lurk in. The exploited body on the other hand may be seen not as a passive victim, but as a site of alterity and rebellion. Anatomically a complete opposite of Frankenstein's Creature, Vicente/Vera's body, perfect, beautiful but beset with a problematized identity, is etched with the history of conversion, suppression, and the eternal quest for an ephemeral object. Yet it also acts as an active site of resistance.



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1. Introduction

From the humanities and social sciences to physiology and cosmetology, most disciplines have charted their own ever-evolving theoretical concerns on human skin. Skin has been a crucial factor in determining identity and difference. Scarification, piercing, tattoos, masks, cosmetic surgeries and various other inscriptions on skin have long been looked upon as pointers of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and as bearers of political and cultural status, of the sacred and the profane and of the past as well as of the present. From the 1990s, greater emphasis has been placed on the materiality of skin and its subjectivity while considering the body as a cultural construct. Scholars like Pippa Brush (1998) in "Metaphors of Inscription", Turner (2008) in "The Body and Society" (2008) and (Atkinson and Young 2001) in "Flesh Journeys", among others, focus on the cultural and material reading of reformed skin and react against a "disembodied" representation of body and skin. Speaking on cosmetic surgery, Brush asserts that we cannot ignore "... the materiality of the body and the social contexts within which bodies are experienced and constructed. While the rhetoric surrounding cosmetic surgery denies the physical process ... so theories

of the body which stress the body's plasticity also deny the materiality of that process and the cultural and social contexts within which the body is always placed" (1998). Again, the primary project of Bryan S. Turner in "The Body and Society" is to establish that "the social sciences have often neglected the most obvious 'fact' about human beings, namely that they have bodies and they are embodied" (Turner 2008, p. 192). He reminds us that an individual's "biological presence is socially constructed and constituted by communal practices" (Turner 2008, p. 192). As a significant part of the material body and as an interface between the self and society, the skin thus becomes a central issue for scholars in their study of the remade body.

Remade bodies, and the preservation of those remade bodies, by rearranging the skin that clothes them form a major strand of this paper. Closely related to this study of rearranged skin is the art of taxidermy which serves as an entry point to the films that will be discussed here. Eastoe (2012) in her book "The Art of Taxidermy" speaks of the role of skin in taxidermy: "Skin is valuable; it is eaten, worn, upholstered and fetishistic. It is the raw material of taxidermy" (1). This "raw material" and its "value" that Eastoe speaks of have been exploited by Body Horror for decades. Body Horrors from the literary text of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" (1818) to the cinematic texts of *Psycho* (1960), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2006) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011) use human skin in each and every way as described by Eastoe: it is ingested, worn, upholstered and fetishized. The words "taxis" (arrangement) and "derma" (skin), conjoined in "taxidermy", impart to the latter a literal meaning "arrangement of the skin" (Milgrom 2010). It involves the complex process of prizing the skin, emptying it of its innards, and then rearranging it in a life-like form—thus bringing forth the permeability and agility of the skin.

The construct of a tame and docile body follows a predictable process: destruction of a natural body, its recreation into a controllable/comprehensible version, and its careful, patient preservation (Mondal 2017). These three strands of destruction, recreation and preservation are brought forth in the anatomical reconstruction of a male body into a female one in Pedro Almodóvar's "The Skin I Live In". The story of an obsessed scientist, Robert Ledgard, who transforms Vicente, who he thinks has raped his daughter, into a spitting image of his own dead wife, Gal (who was burnt in a car crash and whom he almost nursed back to life but ultimately failed as she committed suicide after seeing her face without a skin) speaks of skin as a trap. Robert Ledgard takes a male body, emasculates it and then assigns it a vagina, breasts, a "perfect" body and a face that he is obsessed with—the face and body of a woman whom he could not properly tame, a woman who ran away with his half-brother, Zeca. When Robert discovers that another man (Vicente) has apparently molested his daughter (Norma), he conveniently finds in him an object on which he could heap all his anger, all his frustrations, and transform him into a "toy" that would pay for all his past failures—thus Vicente becomes Vera Cruz.

The very use of the name "Vera Cruz" or the "True Cross" is significant in "The Skin I Live In" because of its obvious association with the notion of atonement. The name may also serve as a yardstick to measure the tortures meted out to Vera/Vicente's body in the film. While Zeca and Robert use Vera/Vicente's and Gal's body as convenient spaces of displaced aggression, it is the female bodies of the victims that are repeatedly tortured and mutilated on their behalf. The body of Gal (on which Vera is modelled) is burnt while trying to elope with Zeca who leaves her dying in a burning car. Similarly, Vera slits her throat to escape the clutches of her kidnapper. Vera is dissected, patched up and transformed to be used for sexual pleasure. The body of Vera Cruz is created in the form of a dead femme fatale, not only to be preserved as a memory, but also to be punished. Her name suggests a significant function that she performs in this drama of sin and expiation: that of vicarious sacrifice.

Filmmakers who belong to the 1950s and 1960s noir and, later, the 1980s and 1990s slasher genres, are known to transform fiery wild femme fatales into domesticated objects. Almodóvar, on the other hand, in a marked departure from his predecessors, chooses to

problematize the very codes of sex and gender. He creates confusion in the very realm of representation by transforming a man into a woman, a woman who refuses to yield. Vera's constant efforts to escape, her refusal to accept the clothes and cosmetics that would adorn her refashioned female body, and her slashing of her own throat and self-mutilation with the sharp edges of books, as desperate measures to destroy the work of art that her body has become shows how this created woman attempts not to succumb to the social and sexual role assigned to her by her creator.

The protean body is one of the favorite premises of Almodóvar on which he builds his oeuvre. *Labyrinths of Passion* (1982), *Dark Habits* (1983), *Law of Desire* (1987), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002) and *Bad Education* (2004) all speak of bodies that are extremely volatile both in terms of sexual identity and sexual orientation. "The Skin I Live In" is a surgical horror that can also be seen as a Frankenstein's fantasy that predictably turns against him. Vera in "The Skin I Live In" is literally the creation of a man, a body born out of the labors of an obsessed surgeon. Here the biological material (Vicente/Vera's body) itself becomes a narrative of transmutations that feeds on desire, obsession, destruction and reconstruction. Anatomically a complete opposite of Frankenstein's Creature, Vicente/Vera's body is etched with the history of conversion, suppression, and the eternal quest for an ephemeral object. Skin is shown in myriad ways in the film: marked, dissected, spliced open, stitched together, peeled off, or covered with layers of stockings, bandages and masks. Like the narrative of the film (with its frequent use of the flashback) that slowly unfolds before the viewers, the sheets of Vera's skin are peeled off layer after layer until we get to the raw core. Like the imagery of clothes that runs throughout the film, skin is also used by Almodóvar as a raiment that encapsulates both identity and deception, vulnerability and resistance.

From Titian's Venus to Villalta's Ariadne and down to the body of Vera in "The Skin I Live In", Almodóvar stitches together a narrative of unclothed female bodies. (Hollander 1993) "Seeing Through Clothes" states that in fine art each and every body is historically, socially and culturally determined through the fashion it sports, even in its state of nakedness: "At any time, the unadorned self has more kinship with its own usual *dressed* aspect than it has with any undressed human selves in other times and places, who have learned a different visual sense of the clothed body" (Hollander 1993, p. xiii). Consequently, "even nude snapshots will betray their date" (Hollander 1993, p. 87). While the reclining Venus of Titian, adorning the corridor of Ledgard's mansion, carries hints of the opulent clothes of contemporary Renaissance costumes that she has removed, Vera's skin-suit carrying clear traces of stitch marks is a statement on how easily manipulable our very surfaces are. From cosmetic surgery to body modification and sex change operations the present world of medical science has transformed the idea of "the socially constructed nature of all forms of dress" (Spooner 2004, p. 4) to the socially fashioned nature of all forms of bodies (Spooner 2004). The observation in "Fashioning Gothic Bodies" that "[t]he so-called 'natural' body is always filtered through the dual lens of fashion and artistic convention" (3), gains an added layer in "The Skin I Live In" where a garment assumes the role of the skin and the "natural" body is not filtered through fashion and artistic convention but disappears completely and what remains is the artistry or fashion envisioned by the creator. The cosmetic surface thus becomes the self. The previous body disappears. It is replaced or replenished by a new one. Violence occurs only when consent is absent. This again brings us back to the art of taxidermy and the idea of control and ownership of a recreated body in Body Horrors. The dead do not give consent. Nor do captives give consent. Violence, power-play and futility are etched on the very construction of these empty bodies veiled by a skin once lived or, as in the case of "The Skin I Live In", never lived.

2. Skin of the Misfits

Judith Halberstam's discussion on the function of skin in literary and filmic Body Horrors in "Skin Shows" (1995) is relevant in the context of remade bodies as it helps us to

detect an analogy between the texts of Body Horror and the art of taxidermy. Halberstam begins her book with a description of Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme's "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991) donning his "woman suit" (one that he creates by killing and flaying women) and prancing before the mirror:

"Sitting in his basement sewing hides, Buffalo Bill makes his monster a sutured beast, a patchwork of gender, sex, and sexuality. Skin, in this morbid scene, represents the monstrosity of surfaces and as Buffalo Bill dresses up in his suit and prances in front of the mirror, he becomes a layered body ... ". (Halberstam 1995, p. 1)

Buffalo Bill is used by Halberstam as an instance to show the path travelled by monsters from nineteenth century texts of horror to contemporary texts of vulnerable human bodies. According to Halberstam, while the nineteenth century Gothic monsters represent a myriad binaries by becoming bodies that shelter the external and the internal, the male and the female, the animal and the human, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the proletarian and the elite, postmodern representations of monstrosity have become skin deep: "The immediate visibility of a Buffalo Bill, the way in which he makes the surface itself monstrous transforms the cavernous monstrosity of Jekyll/Hyde, Dorian Gray, or Dracula into a beast who is all body and no soul" (Halberstam 1995, p. 1).

Creating a body without a soul is a sure way to represent a social misfit. The body of Buffalo Bill in "The Silence of the Lambs" and the body of Jean Baptiste in "Perfume" are socially stigmatized. Buffalo Bill is denied a sex-change operation quite a number of times. His sewing and donning of a layer of flayed female skin is his way of gaining individual agency as a reaction against socially imposed restrictions. The state-imposed prescriptions that deny him his personhood ironically leads him to capture unsuspecting women and brutally take away their personhood and their very lives from them. He forces his victims to rub a lotion over their skin that would loosen the skin so that he could strip it off easily after their death. The pace of the loosening of the skin determines the number of days the victim would survive. When the skin is loose enough to be taken off, the victim is murdered. The slackening of the victim's skin is akin to her moving towards an asexual body. As the skin sags, it loses its "female" contours, blurring the sexual identity of the victim. Then this skin gets transferred from the female body to the male one, symbolically also transferring its sexuality. The skin works as a site of gendered norms in accordance with which Buffalo Bill performs. The skin that he dons and the vagina that he creates for himself encourages him to "prance" in front of his mirror and perform like a socially prescribed "female" body. The performance however has to be confined within his basement. Even in the privacy of his own basement, his body ironically follows social dictates. His recreated "female self" moves in front of the mirror adhering to the rules of a female "socialized body". Buffalo Bill flouts societal norms by assigning himself a skin that society has refused him, but he conforms to the gendered role that a "female" body should abide by. The easy-to-be-flayed loose skin, on the other hand, petrifies the victim and becomes a chief ingredient of this Body Horror. After all, skin turning against its body is a recurrent feature of Body Horrors.

The victims in Tykwer's "Perfume", on the other hand, are killed for their scent. Scent is an inherent part of the skin. The tight close shots of the skimming of wax from the smooth skin and hair of dead women litter the entire filmscape of Tykwer's "Perfume". The bodies, surprisingly, without being flayed, have the look of flayed ones deprived as they are of hair and scent. The bodies seem shorn of their epidermis, as if scent forms an unseen layer of the skin. The skin is left raw, shaved and exposed in the middle of the streets of Grasse. This invisible layer is what Grenouille craves for.

Jean-Baptiste in "Perfume" has a skin that lacks the only thing that he covets the most - scent. His body is odorless and his only obsession is odor. He creates a perfume by scraping and extracting the scent of murdered women's skin and hair, a scent that has the power to enslave the entire world. Shaved, naked female bodies provide fluids for his coveted perfume. And in the end, he pours the perfume on his own body, and the people around him, unable to resist the lure of the scent, tear him to pieces. The scent

that he sought throughout his life pervades his body and liberates him from his loveless forlorn world.

The first film which blatantly brings out the chilling aspects of skin as raw material way before “The Silence of the Lambs” or “Perfume” or “The Skin I Live In” is “Psycho”, a film based on Robert Bloch’s novel “Psycho” (1959), which in turn is inspired by the actual findings in the obscure house of Ed Gein in Wisconsin. The story (or the actual event) runs as follows—after the mysterious disappearance of a local woman, investigators searched the house of Ed Gein and discovered:

“[a] human skin purse and bracelets . . . A tom-tom rigged from a quart can with skin stretched across the top and bottom . . . The eviscerated skins of four women’s faces, rouged, made-up, and thumbtacked to the wall at eye level . . . A rolled-up pair of leggings and skin ‘vest’, including the mammaries, severed from another unfortunate”. (Rebello 1990, Loc. pp. 208–13)

Ed Gein, the creator of this carnal nightmare, had used skin in wide-ranging ways to create his own kind of female anatomy.

Hitchcock’s film “Psycho”, based on this bodily nightmare, brought and situated the idea of a borrowed skin firmly within mainstream cinema. Norman Bates in “Psycho” stuffs birds to “fill” his “empty” time (Mondal 2017). His hobby, taxidermy (an art that deals with hollow structures and skins that were once alive), is a perfect art for a man with a hollow life, a life that he seeks to stuff with the dead skin of his mother. “Psycho” not only speaks of the skin that is monstrous, it also speaks of the skin that is vulnerable, that is helpless to defend itself from being sliced, spliced and spiced. Mrs Bates’ preserved body becomes a specimen of how far we can go to conserve a body we want to possess forever. Since it is a taxidermized body, the skin has to undergo the conventional processes of being cut, dissected and treated with preservatory materials like borax, salt, alcohol and tanning oil. The head is kept intact as in the case of bird preservations (in “Psycho” there are numerous instances where women are likened to birds), without the eyes, the brain and the tongue. The ambivalence of the skin wrapped over the skeleton of Mrs Bates thus evokes both fear and sympathy when we confront it in the basement scene of the film. Skin in “Psycho” (in cases of both Norman and Norma) is too human, too alive.

Robert Ledgard in “The Skin I Live In” parallels Norman Bates as he seeks to fill his empty life with created dead skin mortared on a live body. Unlike a taxidermist who rearranges a corpse skin, Robert Ledgard in “The Skin I Live In” “recreates” an-already existent live “derma” by fusing it with an artificially constructed one. Vera’s skin is not her own. It is a product of transgenesis, a mixture of animal and human blood. By being immune to external threats, burns or insect bites, the skin is dead. So, in Vera’s body the biological narrative that taxidermy relates is reversed. Here a live body is dressed with a skin which is not real, a skin which has not been “lived”. Robert keeps the body alive but changes the skin, makes it tougher, desensitized, and immune to the ravages of time. Unlike a taxidermist, who “arranges the skin”, Robert Ledgard replaces the old skin with a new one that he artificially creates in his laboratory. Thus, the anatomical death of Vicente leads to the birth of Vera.

Both Robert in “The Skin I Live In” and Norman in “Psycho” strive to make their recreated skin look alive. Norman’s longing to see his mother alive is so acute that he himself becomes his mother at times. It is only through the parched dead skin of his mother that Norman lives. Robert, on the other hand, creates a whole new customized body that he can command and control. He thrives only through the perfect, unblemished, artificial skin of a forcedly created lover. Thus “live” skin derived ironically from dead bodies, and “dead” skin coated ironically over live bodies supposedly complete these “monsters”, and skin becomes a crucial object of obsession that the creators want to preserve at any grotesque cost. Both “Psycho” and “The Skin I Live In” speak of the skin that reflects their creator’s monstrosity. They focus on bodies that are helpless to defend themselves from the very materials that give them unfamiliar shapes. Consequently, both Mrs Bates and Vera Cruz (though anatomical opposites) turn out to be grotesque trophies of their creators.

Their bodies become wish-fulfilling spaces where the past can be visited and altered at will. In "The Skin I Live In" the monster does this by creating a liminal sexual identity out of his victim. In "Psycho", the wish-fulfilling is more complex, where the monster not only transforms the victim into an unfamiliar shape, but also transforms himself into a state of sexual liminality to take on, at times, the role of the victim.

What problematizes the monster-victim discourse is the blurring of the monster-victim dichotomy itself. Monsters like Norman Bates, Buffalo Bill, and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, are themselves victims of social marginalization. It is usually a "lack" that the "monsters"/"victims" try to fill. Buffalo Bill's failed attempt to become a transgender person (because he is not "not-man-enough" to meet the requisites of the sex-change operation) leads him to create his own hide by stitching the skin of murdered women to get himself a body he craves for. His penis is a "lack" that he hides behind his created vagina as he poses before the mirror in his basement to fulfil his desire of a coveted anatomy. For Jean-Baptiste Grenouille the "lack" is absence of scent in his body, for Norman Bates, the "lack" is the would-be absence of his mother.

Robert Ledgard too is a lonely soul tormented by personal failures, a recluse living in a villa cut off from the stream of life outside. But Vera Cruz, his victim, stands out in that her skin should be labelled as too alien, a skin she would rather be without. It is true that Body Horrors from "Psycho" to "The Skin I Live In" bring about the ambivalence of skin in relation to power. Skin may act as mediums of control by ironically bearing the brunt of such containment, as in the case of "Psycho" (where the taxidermized body of the much-maligned Mrs Bates acts according to the dictates of her sick son), "The Silence of the Lambs" (where the skin of the victim and the extent of its suppleness determines her longevity), "Perfume" (where the skin is drained of its odor) and "The Skin I Live In" (where the skin lends an alien sexual identity to the wearer's body). However, that they may also be redefined and transformed from a means of subjugation to an effective weapon of retaliation is a statement that is unique in "The Skin I Live In". It is the female skin of Vera/Vicente, nurtured and designed by the obsessed plastic surgeon, that turns against him. Unlike "Psycho" or "The Silence of the Lambs" or "Perfume", Vera/Vicente could use the newly forged body to lull Ledgard into a false sense of security before killing him. He could somewhat reclaim his old life by returning to his mother and his love interest who is a lesbian. The final scene carries the hint of a sexually redefined body with a possibility of renegotiating with the society at large.

3. Masculine Female/Feminized Male: Resisting from the Margin

Films like "Psycho", "The Silence of the Lambs" and "The Skin I Live In" are pre-occupied with a simultaneous defiance and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Fear of emasculation and/or the lure of it are explored through their treatment of the female body. The objectification of female bodies takes myriad forms in these films. For instance, Buffalo Bill and his real-life counterpart Ed Gein's stitching of a woman's skin suit to be donned by them, apart from being their attempts at erosion of their masculinity, are also acts of extreme savagery, which, again, they would like to think, are a male preserve. Their possession of a female body to be remodeled and preserved is not enough. They desire the female body to be a part of their very identity. Their own bodies become spaces to be objectified and recreated that are in line with the body modification in vogue at present. Hence their masculinities (as well as their bodies) are layered unlike Robert Ledgard's ("The Skin I Live In"). Yet the narrative of the female body as a site of desire, objectification and control runs through all of them. Robert's desire and control of the female body is based on three processes: destruction of a natural body, its reconstruction into an idealized object, and its ruthlessly relentless preservation. But all these separate and yet overlapping strands of objectification and coveting of the female body (both as a source of identity and as a concrete property) cannot escape the conventional route of "male" fear, desire, and futile anger. The destruction of a female body is necessary, both in the fulfilment of various desires and in objectifying them. The purpose may be different but the process

remains the same. A female body needs to be literally or figuratively flayed: to be worn or to be redesigned.

“The Skin I Live In” differs in that it has the opposite starting point but the same destination. The transformations that Vicente’s body goes through are both a marker of a mad scientist’s urge to dominate an unattainable body and a site of deformity, liminality, alterity, grotesqueness and rebellion. Transgenesis and vaginoplasty may be seen here as sculptural mediums through medical invasion, which gives rise to a number of queries regarding the ambiguous status of Vera’s body. Is she/he a masculine female or a feminized male? How can her/his body be classified as a sexual category? The camera that keeps Vera under constant surveillance records her struggles to both come to terms with, and yet resist, the sexuality imposed on his/her body. By shredding the skirts and frocks to pieces and by returning the cosmetics given to him/her, Vera/Vicente continuously revolts against this process of forced gendering. Finally, it is Vicente’s helpless succumbing to his own invisibility, the gradual erasure of the parts of his body to be supplemented by completely different ones that petrify us: a body where death and life, man and woman, rebellion and surrender co-exist. This very surrender, the hopeless yielding of one’s sexual identity, is used as a weapon at the end. Vicente, trapped in a body he cannot escape from, uses it as a mask (the skin that hides) to lull Robert into a false sense of security before finally killing him.

“The Skin I Live In” is one among many Almodóvar films where the filmmaker shows that projection of gender on screen strengthens the shared cultural definition of sexual identity. Films help manufacture the process of “gendering”. And it is the body that becomes a space for the staging of that process. Bodies are sites where gender identities are created. Judith Butler in “Gender Trouble” defines the body as “a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 2012, p. 189). In the film, the gender hierarchy is well-established at the beginning. There are two sets of male adversaries: Robert and Zeca, and Robert and Vicente. In both these conflicts, the female body becomes a pawn. The body of Robert’s wife becomes a trophy to be acquired/preserved by Zeca and Robert in the first half of the narrative. In the second half it serves as a mask used by Vicente to win over Robert and then kill him. It is the female body that bears the brunt of this struggle for possession. It is burnt, revived and then annihilated; it is again recreated, stitched, patched up, operated on, watched over, raped, incarcerated, and finally used as a weapon to kill.

However, the sexually fluid bodies so frequent in Almodóvar films may also be read as his way of injecting confusion within the very notions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, this “gender hierarchy” is problematized in the sexual encounter of Vera/Vicente and Robert. The love-making of Robert and Vicente/Vera is a scene where the sexual identity and sexual orientation of both Vera and Robert are troubled. It is a scene where heterosexuality and homosexuality co-exist. The sexual intercourse between a male body and a female body, culled out of a male one, is an ironical dig at both “compulsory heterosexuality” and “gender hierarchy” as sexual identity is rendered transient and provisional. “The Skin I Live In” is thus one of the rare instances where body, identity, gender and sexuality get so enmeshed that when Vera at the end utters the words: “I am Vicente”, it becomes perfectly believable. Halberstam’s idea of a fluid body is applicable to both Vera and Vicente and the entire aesthetics of physical transmutation: “Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals or contains, it offers itself up as a text, as body, as monster” (1995, p. 7), and we may add, as a biological narrative that has liberated itself from the limiting bounds of sex and/or gender.

4. Femme Fatale

Films have played a major role in bringing corporeality center-stage in academic discourses. A medium that literally shows us virtual bodies, many films make sure that the corporeal body is not reduced to dematerialization. Body Horrors like “Psycho”, “The

Silence of the Lambs”, “Perfume” and “The Skin I live In” draw our attention not only to the vulnerability of a material body but they also offer commentaries on what Turner calls the “social skin” (2008). Based on Bourdieu’s socially informed body, Turner speaks of human subject, the “socialized body” and the connect between the two. Building on G.H. Mead’s questions related to self, body and society he focuses on “the performance of the self through the medium of the socially interpreted body” (Turner 2008, p. 41). It is the sustained effort of Vera/Vicente to resist this “social skin” that the film records. The tearing of skirts and frocks and their use as materials to create patched ragged models, the conversion of cosmetics (like kohl and lipsticks) from cosmetics to pens that record Vera/Vicente’s writings and sketches on the walls of her room are Vera’s way of resisting the social skin to take over. The very materials (clothes and cosmetics) that are forcedly imposed upon Vera by Ledgard are used by her to bring out the stifling experience of having to reside in an alien membrane and a gender identity that she is being clothed in. She tears the dresses sent to her to bits. In fact, once she even puts on a torn dress, takes a nail file and shreds it further. This is a stark depiction of her equating the dress to the skin she is clothed in. Here the dress acts as a surrogate skin for Vera, and her shredding it to pieces is a symbolic act of tearing the skin that covers her.

Vera’s constant struggle to rid herself of her membranous identity leads her to self-mutilation. She slashes her breasts, her stomach and her wrists with the sharp corners of Cormac McCarthy books and she slices her throat after a failed attempt to escape. Vera’s slashing of her own throat and her self-bruising are her ways of resistance and retaliation—her attempts to botch Ledgard’s reconstructive surgery. It is only through the annihilation of her redefined body with its redefined sexual boundaries that she could avenge upon her maker. Vera is keen on destroying the art that she has come to represent. She engages in a tireless battle against this recurrent biological censorship and biological reforging by engaging her body’s subversive powers to weave a counter-narrative in line with contemporary radical feminist artists who use their corporeality as a space of protest. Her attempts at self-mutilation and her creation of patched-up plasticine sculptures inspired by the works of Louise Bourgeois, align her with Gina Pane’s tears of blood (“Psyche” 1974), Ketty La Rocca’s hands that speak (“Hands” 1975), Suzanne Santoro’s photographs of withered female genitalia (Towards New Expression 1974), and Silvia Giambrone’s stitching of an embroidered collar on her own skin (Teatro anatomico 2012)¹ in a shared struggle to reclaim representation of their own bodies usurped by male creators. It is this zone of vulnerability that becomes the zone of resistance, rebellion and strength. Vera’s act of inflicting pain on her body may be compared to the female artists’ practice of using their own bodies as canvases. Pain, violence and claustrophobia are often depicted through their violated and violating bodies. In order to challenge and interrogate the conventional representation of female bodies, female artists refrain from depicting the female body in a “positive” way. The bodies are tortured and mutilated in order to unveil the reality of such bodies in a patriarchal structure.

In “The Skin I Live In”, Vicente, a womanizer who is seen on more than one occasion as voicing very strong heteronormative patriarchal opinions, is given a female anatomy by another fiercely patriarchal male. Vicente, thus being trapped in a female skin, could only protest by mutilating that skin. It is ironical to witness a man (Vicente), who admired female beauty and who went to lengths to lure women, keen on destroying a beautiful female body. It is only after living in a female skin that he understands the anger that a woman feels when she is designed and choreographed by male makers. Vicente thus becomes a part of an artistic continuum from the early 1970s that saw the rise of female artists reinventing and re-articulating their bodies through the aesthetics of pain and torture. In this film it is a man trapped in a female body who is reinterpreting that female body that he is circumscribed in. The male “self” and the female “other” gets enmeshed in this

¹ For more details on these radical female artists, read Sam Johnson’s article on female body, art and performance (<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/7942/five-radical-female-artists-who-used-their-body-as-a-canvas>) (accessed on 2 March 2020).

multilayered highly complex representation of gender, violence, sexuality, self and desire. Ironically, however, her ultimate triumph is achieved only after she pretends to succumb to the socially expected denouement for a femme fatale. Her acceptance of designer clothes and cosmetics that she had previously rejected paves her way to win Ledgard's trust. It is through an assimilation of her remade body with the socially sanctioned role of that body that she becomes lethal for Ledgard. Ledgard could only be killed after Vera resorts to an apparent surrender to Ledgard's charms. It is her "social skin" that gains Ledgard's complacency and helps her in her last act of rebellion—the killing of both Ledgard and Marilia (Ledgard's mother) and an escape from the walls of El Cigarral.

5. Canvases and Operation Tables: From the Dematerial to the Corporeal

"The Skin I Live In" may be read as a "flesh journey" (Atkinson and Young 2001, p. 118) where Vera's skin becomes the canvas on which Ledgard, like a Titian (whose works adorn the walls of El Cigarral), etches his own art. Vera's body is reduced to a salvaged object (the body of Ledgard's dead wife, Gal) that can be preserved in Ledgard's menagerie. The volatile and fast-changing treatment of female anatomy on screen may find its parallel in a series of artwork that embellish the walls of El Cigarral. The nude Venus in the Titian paintings "Venus of Urbino" (1534) and "Venus with an Organist and Cupid" (1555) that fill the vast corridor of El Cigarral, are testaments of bodies well-created, touched by eroticism, replete with an artist's thorough knowledge of human anatomy. The paintings are significantly placed in the passage that leads to Vera's room. The paintings serve as an index of what to expect once one opens the door of Vera's cell: a body created by a genius—perfect, beautiful, but untamed. The paintings in Robert's room and study include Henri Rousseau's "Eve" (amidst a mysterious dark jungle in "The Snake Charmer", 1907), and Guillermo Perez Villalta's Ariadne (a face without features, a face deprived of its sensory organs in "Dionysus Finds Ariadne in Naxos", 2008). Both these portraits highlight the obliteration of physical features. While Venus attracts us with her detailed anatomical beauty and symmetry, Ariadne attracts us with her complete absence of facial features, and Eve with her sinister eyes fascinates the viewer with an unknown dread.

These three women may be read as the three stages of Vera's transformation. While Venus is what she appears to be, a perfect blend of beauty and eroticism, designed and choreographed with a perfect recipe by a meticulous maker, Ariadne (the mythical figure abandoned by one man and about to be accepted by another) is Vera in transition. Her masked face, her shaved head, her body tightly fitted in stockings and bandages is the visual equivalent to Villalta's Ariadne, and finally the dark Eve, the charmer Eve, the Eve whose sexuality is obscured by the darkness of the surrounding jungle is what Vera actually becomes, a menace who destroys her Frankenstein and, unlike his "Creature", triumphs.

Yet, unlike the lifelessness of the paintings, a number of bird's-eye-view shots of Vera's body lying prostrate on an operation table completely at the mercy of a mad scientist bring forth her corporeality. There are numerous close shots of Vera's naked skin—smooth, perfect and untainted. But when Ledgard applies a burning lighter on her skin, or when Vera, in an act of defiance, slashes her throat with a knife, and when Ledgard stitches her slashed throat, or wipes off blood stains from her breasts, we are painfully made aware that we are dealing with real material skin, not a metaphorical one—the splicing of the throat, the stitching of the throat, the treatment of the sliced membrane and the burning of the skin are all shown in close shots, ensuring our embodied participation. Thus, the paintings of Venus, Eve and Ariadne can be read as foils to the real flesh and skin of Vera kept captive. They can only serve to represent symbolically the journey of Vera from Venus to Ariadne to Eve.

Titian's Venus, Villalta's Ariadne and Rousseau's Eve may be seen as a tapestry of bodies that finds a parallel in the contemporary art of body modification that plastic surgeons (of whom Robert Ledgard is a representative) and cosmetologists perform. Plastic surgery as an invasive medical practice reminds us of all the mad scientists and doctors like Dr Moreau and Dr Heiter that populate surgical horrors like "The Island of Dr Moreau"

(Wells 2005) and Tom Six's *The Human Centipede* (2009), with their obsession of anatomical mutation of humans/beasts. They bring forth the ultimate reduction of humans/beasts to their basic anatomical and scatological terrain.

The post-1990s world of body modification, cryoplasty and Hagen's Body Worlds have given birth to the contemporary clinical culture of which Almodóvar's "The Skin I Live In" is an example. The dread of this surgical art horror film stems from a complete disregard of the victim as an individual. Robert's Vera is a work of art, an imitation of a body he could not control. And the fact that he had to transform a male body into a female one in order to inflict the lowest forms of humiliation on it goes to show that mere violence and pain is not enough, the body has to acknowledge its subjection by accepting its position in the age-old gender hierarchy that the mainstream prescribes. As Mulvey-Roberts (2018) in "Dangerous Bodies" states, "The most sinister reason for carrying out sexual surgery on men and women is to control sexuality" (p. 92). Mulvey-Roberts reads "Dracula" as a text where vampirism is a "trope for an invented female pathology" where Bram Stoker prescribes "surgical solutions" (p. 93) for aberrant sexual behavior. While Mulvey-Roberts speaks primarily of female castration in her reading of "Dracula", Almodóvar in "The Skin I Live In" explores the crisis of self-identity, masculinity and femininity by bestowing "perfect" breasts and genitalia on a male body.

However, by transforming Vicente's/Vera's skin into an art form or an installation, Ledgard cannot dematerialize her body. The pain that the body feels, the way its past contours and shapes are gradually erased and replaced by new ones constantly remind us of its concrete presence. The symbolic death and a cursed rebirth, the readjusting of the self with a newly assigned sexuality that in turn calls for a readjustment of the self with the society are all brought out through the materiality of the skin.

6. Skin, Clothes and Problematized Identity

The imagery of clothes runs throughout the film: they are bought, sold, resold, exhibited, torn apart, stitched, and used as raw materials for artwork. Clothing is the most basic form of deception as it hides who we are and also, by functioning as a tool of "repeated stylization of the body" it moulds the body "within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 2012, p. 45). Kaja Silverman argues: "Dress is one of the most important cultural implements for articulating and territorializing human corporeality—for mapping its erotogenic zones and for affixing a sexual identity". (Silverman 1996, p. 83)

"The Skin I Live In" usually shows Vera either naked or wearing her "second skin" to "mould" and "protect" a body created by her twenty-first century Frankenstein. The skin-dress is smooth, seamless and surprisingly asexual. Although it acts as a surrogate of human skin, it brings forth a body where the breasts are without nipples and the genitalia are absent. It is a body in the making, or a body that remains unfinished. The skin-dress is a metaphoric rendition of Vicente's sexual identity gradually undergoing metamorphosis as he is forced to abandon one skin and put on another. Vicente/Vera's body is a living stage where momentary sexual identities are violently played out. The core identity that Vicente desperately tries to cling to clashes with the body assigned to him. Like Louise Bourgeois' patched-up sculptures shown in the film, Vicente's body is also patched up with snippets of artificially constructed female anatomy meticulously etched on his male body thereby negating the very notion of sexual fixity. Thus Vera/Vicente's body is a performance of contradictions where we find a simultaneous birth and death of gender construction and a repeated surfacing, smudging, and resurfacing of sexual identities that oscillate between how Vera appears and who Vicente is. Clothes happen to be a significant marker of that vacillation. It acts as a veil to conceal the rebellion seething within and it also acts as a material of compulsory incarceration.

There is an unmistakable dramatic quality in Vera's clothes that include her skin-suit. The uncanniness of Vera's skin-suit rises from its close resemblance to a recognizable female body and its simultaneous absence. Clothes function as masks that both protect

one's privacy and yet aid one to communicate with others. They act as shields, as forms to cloister oneself from others. They concurrently help one to hide behind intended identities (Spooner 2004, pp. 124–25). Vera's skin suit in the film performs as a mask. But the mask is contradictory to the identity of the wearer. The clothes alienate the body that it covers. Rather than protecting Vera's privacy, it makes Vera's body surface-centric where the exterior, constructed by Ledgard, does not conceal, but rather exposes. It does not aid in communication, but rather alienates Vera from her surroundings. Vera's mask has three layers—the transgenic skin plastered on her by Ledgard, the skin-suit that molds that artificial skin, and the clothes that hide the skin-suit. This three-layered mask projects Vera as a constant exhibit where there is neither concealment nor communication. Her clothes do not lend her an intended identity, but rather an absence of identity. The biological features imposed on her by her maker, despite being flawless, brings forth her featurelessness, her void. Vera, later, transforms these imposed features, along with the accessories of clothes and cosmetics, into a performative mask to destroy Ledgard.

7. The Inescapable Body

It is the systematic, forced reconceptualization and reconstruction of a body through transgenesis, vaginoplasty, created layers of artificial skin and a well-fitted skin-suit through which a sense of claustrophobia and incarceration is created in the film. Vicente's post-surgery female body is both a material and a psychological trial of his subjectivity. The room where Vera remains confined not only reminds us of the coffins of Lucy Westenra and the Vampire's sisters in *Dracula* but also carries memories of all the nineteenth-century basements and attics where aberrant women were kept in confinement.

The women in Robert Ledgard's life meet catastrophic fates whenever they venture out. Gal is burnt when she elopes with Zeca and is consequently consigned to a space in a bed from which she rises only to fall to her death, in front of her daughter, Norma. Norma, again, ventures out of a wedding hall to meet Vicente and the result is her complete loss of sanity as she returns to the sanatorium and the last we see of her is when she tries to escape from her father (whom she takes to be her molester) and shuts herself inside a cupboard. Murder and self-annihilation are the only available routes of escape from stifling spaces for Robert Ledgard's hapless women.

In case of Vicente/Vera, the space of confinement does not limit itself to his/her room, but shrinks further to the confines of his/her body. The film opens with the outside view of El Cigarral and as the camera pans from the Villa board to the gate and into the room of Vera, we get four consecutive shots that suggest a gradual narrowing down of space: a close shot of the iron bars of the main gate, followed by another close shot of the wired mesh behind window bars with a blurred image of Vera within, succeeded by an extreme close shot of a camera looking at Vera in her room, and finally a medium close shot of her body tightly fitted in her skin-apparel. These four establishing shots of the film introduce the idea of restriction through surveillance and confinement, through literal and metaphoric images of a prison coming closer and closer until it invades the very body of the protagonist, from iron gates, to wired mesh, to window bars, to cameras, and finally to a body-hugging suit that acts as a surrogate skin, controlling and shaping the body within.

For Vera, the inevitability of confinement comes in the form of a membrane that covers her. The created skin pasted on her body is a tough derma that provides no scope of permeability. It is a skin that is impervious to insect bites and flames. This thick coat of protection serves as an armor. But armors also suggest restricted movement. They are heavy, unyielding and claustrophobic. The skin as a prison is a recurrent motif of the film that finds a concrete visual representation in the scene where we are offered a close shot of Vera's naked body on the operating table. We detect clear lines on the skin of Vera that demarcate the throat from the face, the legs and arms from the torso, the breasts from the abdomen. The lines thus drawn seem a visual equivalent to prison bars. It seems we are viewing the body of Vera through the prism of incarcerating lines that ironically join and separate her. This is followed by a bird's eye view shot of a prostrate Vera, static and

immobile, arrested by lines that neatly tie and yet separate her anatomy and her body appears as one that is carting its prison with it.

8. Conclusions: Reforged Skin—the Art of Violence, Ownership and Resistance

“The Skin I Live In” brings forth the disturbing possibility that medical practices, like body modifications and plastic surgeries which are usually seen as voluntary choices of individuals, may also be used to deny personhood. When consent is absent, a cosmetic surgery, even if it culls out a beautiful body, is no less a punitive measure than scarification, tattoos and brands inscribed on bodies by authoritarian regimes. Cosmetic surgery can also be read as a form of bodily inscription. As Brush suggests, if “the body is—metaphorically—a site of inscription to various degrees for various theorists, then cosmetic surgery can be seen, at one level, as an example of the literal and explicit enactment of this process of inscription” (p. 24). Thus, cosmetic surgery can be made a part of the structures of control and surveillance. Vera’s body is an example where such punitive inscriptions are etched. The surgeries made on her body ensure not only a symbolic but a material yielding of personhood.

The ambiguity of skin stems from its status as a border, as an interface between the external and the internal. Skin thus has the capability of subverting the marks of ownership imposed on it by an authoritarian force. Vera’s initial scarring of her own remade body and her slitting of her own throat are gradually replaced by her strategic use of skin and clothes. The skin that alienates her from her previous body is used as a weapon against her maker. We see Vera in close shots when she meditates or exercises. Her immaculate skin is shown in extreme close shot on the screen that is used by Ledgard to watch her. Ledgard is fascinated by the skin that he has himself manufactured. He ties up the victim, and attempts to tame and mold her as the obsessed stalker does in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989). He then nurtures and replenishes the skin of the victim like the devoted lover Martin Benigno of “Talk to Her”, and, like Benigno, is finally destroyed by that very skin. The maker here is trapped in the unexpected consequences of his own making. Vera, on the other hand, unable to reclaim her previous body, nevertheless attempts to reclaim some vestiges of her previous identity by returning to her old world. She constantly negotiates with her new skin, first by violating it and then by utilizing it. Her apparent subjugation towards the end of the film gives us an inkling of her final revolt. The skin plastered on her body as a penal inscription is reinterpreted by her as the only way of escape. The prison that her skin has become ultimately leads her to her path of freedom. Thus, her skin becomes a site where subjection and resistance coalesce.

A cultural reading of marked and reformed skin in films like “Psycho”, “The Silence of the Lambs”, “Perfume” and “The Skin I Live In” through the use of taxidermy, body modification and body inscriptions brings forth the use of human anatomy as a canvas on which socio-political forces attempt to incise their marks of ownership. These films, along with numerous other slasher films, show how women are absorbed into the object world via their skin. For instance, female skin is related to bird skin in “Psycho”. Norman only stuffs birds, as he himself claims. The frequent visual and verbal references to birds (Phoenix, Marion Crane, the birds mounted on walls and numerous bird paintings) all suggest that Norma Bates is being equated to a different species. Her skin and birds’ skin are the only raw materials of once-live bodies that Norman uses to practice taxidermy. Again, female skin becomes a metaphoric and a literal raiment in “The Silence of the Lambs”. And it becomes part of the landscape of Grasse in “Perfume”. Female bodies splayed on the streets of Grasse is such a frequent sight in the film that they do seem to become a part of its geographical layout. “The Skin I Live In” adds another layer to this objectification through skin. Ledgard here constructs a female skin by merging the human with the non-human via transgenesis. Here female skin is not transformed into something else. Rather, female skin is *created* to be mortared on a male body. Female skin is not only an object but a product of a cosmetic world created by a mad genius that gives a male body a new identity. Therefore, the role of skin in “The Skin I Live In” is to dislocate and render

fluid the idea of a human body and to reinscribe itself as constitutive in the construction of socio-cultural identities and its variances. Vera's body is both enmeshed with, and distanced from, its past anatomy. Her skin, besides being a corporeal biography of Gal written by Ledgard, is also a material autobiography of Vera who once was/still is Vicente.

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