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Sculpting Women

from *Pygmalion* to *Vertigo* to *The Skin I Live in*

They would be displeased to have anybody call them docile, yet in a way they are . . . They submit themselves to manly behavior with all its risks and cruelties, its complicated burdens and deliberate frauds. Its rules, which in some cases you benefited from, as a woman, and then some that you didn't.

-“Too Much Happiness”, Alice Munro (294)

One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful woman.
One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful girl.
But for today I am a child, for today I am a boy.
-“For Today I Am a Boy”, Antony and the Johnsons

The two images below (**Figure 1**) are from key moments in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Pedro Almodóvar's *La piel que habito* (*The Skin I Live in*, 2011). It is possible that there is a conscious citation here on the part of Almodóvar, but in any case the parallels are striking, and they reveal a great deal about gender as it is constructed in the mid- 20th century and the early 21st. Both shots show a woman gazed at from behind, as she herself is gazing at artwork that is especially significant for her sense of self. In the larger context of the films, both women are haunted by idealized images of femininity, which are necessary to prop up the crumbling masculinity of men who want to reshape their clothes, hair and bodies.

Hitchcock's influence on Almodóvar has been widely noted, not least of which by Almodóvar himself. Dona Kercher argues that the self-taught Spanish filmmaker drew on

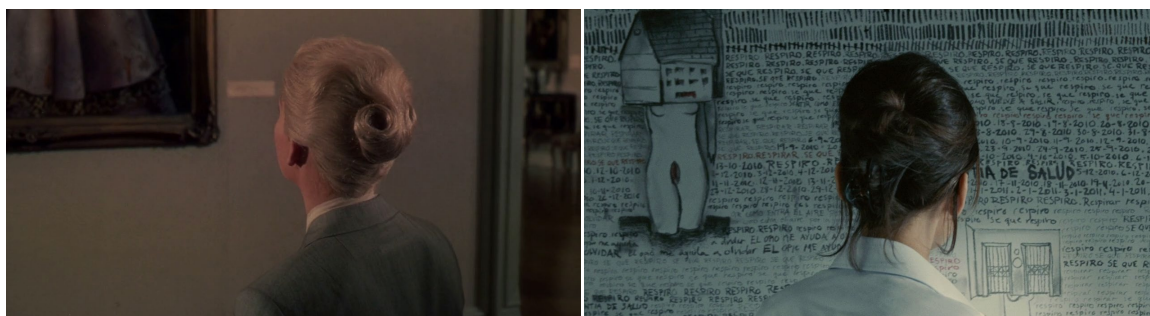


Figure 1. Judy/Madeleine in [Vertigo](#) (1a). Vicente/Vera in [The Skin I Live in](#) (1b).

Hitchcock as a “primary textbook,” a process that is especially blatant and often parodic in his early films (59). The relationship between *Vertigo* and *The Skin I Live in* goes beyond modeling or influence though. Almodóvar’s description of *Vertigo* as “madre de muchas películas” (mother of many films) is telling (qtd. in Kercher 60). Hitchcock’s film—a masterful visualization of the male psyche—is not only about haunting but also has a haunting effect on viewers. It draws on the Pygmalion archetype of the artist who sculpts an ideal woman and brings her to life, funneling this story through Freudian psychology, 19th century gothic narrative, 20th century avant-garde art and the creepiness of 1950s America. The result is a captivating and multifaceted text likely to reproduce itself within our imaginations, giving birth to further musings and artistic works. Several of its tropes grow in Almodóvar’s film to create another masterful visualization of gender, for a different time and from a different standpoint.¹

In terms of textbook lessons, I would point to Almodóvar’s own evaluation of Hitchcock: “Estéticamente es uno de los grandísimos inventores. En su cine todos los elementos visuales son artificiales y deliberados por el director” (Aesthetically, he’s one of the great innovators. All the visual elements in his work are deliberate and artificial, qtd. in Kercher 60). Almodóvar learned from Hitchcock that a film can have a far-fetched plot, with insufficient explanations of characters’ actions, as long as it is visually compelling. Hitchcock shows that striking visual elements can actually become even more enthralling when characters are placed in extreme situations, as if they revealed something profound and not quite articulated about their psyches.

In *Vertigo* and *The Skin I Live in*, which revolve around masquerade and disguise, the calculated visuals are often arranged by characters themselves, making the effect all the more

¹ Pedro Lange-Churrión also focuses on the “internal dialogue” between *The Skin I Live in* and *Vertigo* (442). However, he argues that it reveals Almodóvar’s erotic conservatism. Lange-Churrión aligns the filmmaker’s perspective with that of the character Robert (Antonio Banderas), whereas I will argue that the film exposes the violence behind the male gaze that Robert epitomizes.

poignant. In *Vertigo* they tell a tale of entrenched gender roles that spin around themselves and each other in directionless swirls, which is also one of the film's signature visual motifs. The only vitality the characters find is in the act of taking up these gender positions within elaborate role plays, but it is a fleeting vitality that ultimately tailspins into a cold ground of miscommunication and tedium. While the film offers sharp insights into the workings of the male psyche, female subjectivity is only revealed in fissures and echoes. In *The Skin I Live in*, on the other hand, Almodóvar places us inside the skin of the character that is largely muted in Hitchcock's film: the female object of the male gaze. The Pygmalion narrative—and the gender binary on which it is founded—are thus exploded from within. While *Vertigo* takes for granted that the base of our identity is gender and outside there is only a vacuum, *The Skin I Live in* questions the links between gender, identity and being.

Both films, however, convey the idea that gender is an impassioned performance but also an imprisoning trap, and a reading of the two together can inform our vision of each. *The Skin I Live in* helps us find the female subjectivity that is apparently absent in *Vertigo*, though it comes from a surprising source. Conversely, the continuing fascination *Vertigo* exercises over contemporary audiences shows the durability of patriarchal structures in defining identity and modes of being, a shadow that hangs over *La piel que habito*'s gender bending.

***Vertigo*: the male gaze and the female phantasm**

Since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Vertigo* has played a central role in discussions on film and gender, especially gaze theory. Mulvey points out the centrality of the look in the film, positing it as the site of two bedrocks of patriarchy: male power, embodied in voyeurism; and the male libidinal economy, which

feeds off “fetishistic fascination” (841).² Much of the film follows Scottie’s (James Stewart) point-of-view as he himself follows the mysterious Madeleine around an assortment of evocative sights in San Francisco. Scottie is a detective who has retired prematurely after an episode of vertigo that caused the death of a fellow policeman. An old college friend Gavin (Tom Helmore) hires him to follow his wife, Madeleine, claiming that she is possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother Carlotta. He is in fact scheming to kill his wife and inherit her fortune. The woman Scottie tails is really Gavin’s lover Judy (Kim Novak), who is pretending to be Madeleine possessed by Carlotta. Scottie falls in love with this false Madeleine and Judy falls for him, but still follows through with the plan. Taking advantage of Scottie’s fear of heights, she runs up the steps of a missionary tower and Gavin throws his wife off, so it looks as if she has committed suicide, just as Carlotta did long ago. Scottie is unable to recover from this traumatic experience, and he is seen catatonic in an institution, afflicted by terrifying nightmares. After an unspecified amount of time he is released and spends his days wandering around the places where he saw Madeleine. By chance he runs across Judy on a sidewalk and, noticing her resemblance to his lost love, convinces her to go out with him and insists on dressing her up as Madeleine.

For Mulvey this whole scenario epitomizes the hegemony of the male gaze in Hollywood cinema. The spectator identifies with Scottie, converting Judy/Madeleine into a mere object of the gaze, and so it is with all mainstream cinema, even when these dynamics are not so explicitly embedded in the narrative and filming. She sets out to deconstruct the erotic imaginary of the cinema and, by extension, the patriarchal structures that govern sex and love: “It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article” (835). Mulvey shows how film narratives and visual motifs neutralize the threat of female subjectivity by objectifying women in various recurrent patterns. Female characters

² Mulvey also discusses Marnie (1964) and Rear Window (1954) along the same lines, though Vertigo is especially well-suited to her theoretical approach.

are in turns investigated, classified, saved, punished or devaluated—processes that reduce them to limited spheres of meaning and activity, making them the object of male actions. Conversely, they may be amplified into a cult object, “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star)” (840).

Mulvey’s essay leaves difficult questions that have been picked up by subsequent feminist criticism. One is that it allows no space for feminine desire, subjectivity or knowledge. As Susan White explains “according to Mulvey’s model we can have no knowledge at all of ‘the woman’ herself, either as spectator or as referent: her desire does not figure in classic Hollywood cinema except in ‘transvestite’ terms and her existence is entirely occulted or constructed as absence” (280). Critics like Tania Modleski, Teresa De Laurentis and Karen Hollinger question the notion that *Vertigo*, and mainstream cinema in general, only offer a monolithic male point-of-view. They examine the power of female figures both mythical (Madeleine and Carlotta) and real (Judy and Scottie’s desexualized best friend Midge) to represent female knowledge and experience. These are problematic figures, of course, circumscribed by patriarchal ideology, but Modleski points to the privileged knowledge of the oppressed, who can extract knowledge and representations of reality from the fissures of dominant worldviews. In fact, the film itself shows that Judy and Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) know much more than Scottie.

Modleski, White and others have also questioned the idea that Scottie—and by extension the male spectator—is a stable locus of power and control. Scottie epitomizes anxiety over a fragile masculinity, unable to do his job and unable to climb the heights to see reality from the birds-eye view of the stronger sex. He tries to conquer his fear rationally in Midge’s apartment, which significantly offers an expansive view of the city, but he is engulfed by fear on the second step of a small ladder—just as he is later unable to see behind

Gavin and Judy's hoax because he is engulfed by emotion and desire. Scottie is emasculated by what could be considered a female-coded emotionality, and many critics have posited a subconscious feminine identification with Madeleine, Carlotta and the images of helplessness they represent (Modleski; Linderman). He overcomes his fear of heights at the end of the film when he discovers the ruse and forces Judy to climb the missionary tower again to confess what really occurred. A nun then comes out of the shadows and, taking it to be Madeleine's ghost, Judy jumps to her death. It is she who ends up falling rather than Scottie, and so he is able to project his guilt, fears and unseemly emotions onto this sacrificial figure. In this light, as Deborah Linderman argues, the film seems to be constructed as a mechanism to ward off the inevitable "collapse of sexual difference" (52).

Scottie is finally able to stand at the top of the tower, but from there he only can look down at the result of his failure to have done this on time. He has failed to save Judy or Madeleine or to discover who Judy and Madeleine were. He has failed to overcome his unruly passions and fears that equate him with their weakness. Masculinity (the dominant subject) and femininity (the object to be dominated) are both chimeras, and Scottie stares into the abyss, which has been prefigured by the images in the opening credits and in Scottie's nightmare while at the mental institution. The opening title sequence, designed by Saul Bass, begins with an extreme close-up of the lower right side of an unknown woman's face, then pans left and zooms in on her still lips, before tilting up to her eyes, which move left and right in a deliberate fashion. The camera finally zooms in on one eye, from which emerges a swirling maelstrom (**figure 2a**). The woman is silent (unmoving lips) and apprehensive (watchful eyes), and her mute gaze contains a whirlpool of passions, which will engulf the man. Later, in his dream, Scottie sees himself walking towards an open pit in front of Carlotta's gravestone and then his own disembodied head flies through a psychedelic vortex (**Figure 2b**). It disappears and reappears at regular intervals, each time coming closer to the

camera, until the shot cuts to a nearly all black frame. The blackness turns out to be a silhouette of his body, which falls away from the camera (and away from the missionary tower) towards the Spanish roof tiles below. The image around his silhouette then turns to all white, his limbs spread and for a split-second he appears to begin to hover, suspended in a vacuum. This image is what wakes him up in terror. It is not the impending crash that strikes fear in his heart but a looming sense of nothingness. If we read *Vertigo* as a grand allegory of gender relations and identities, perhaps the fear is not that there is no real difference between the sexes but that outside gender roles there is nothing at all.

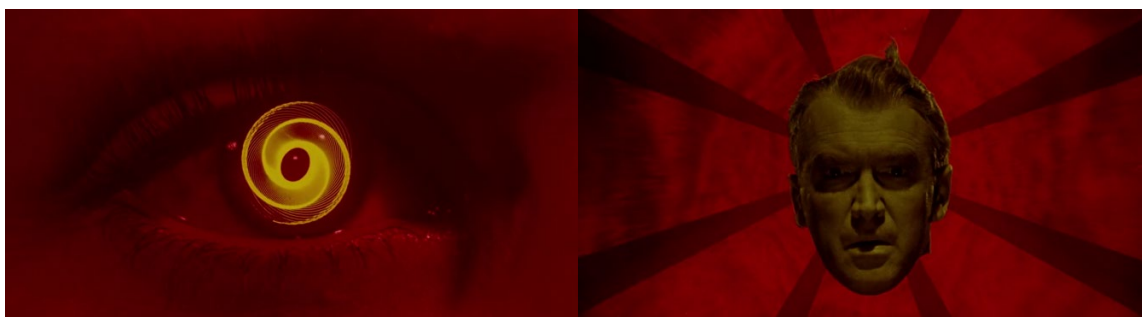


Figure 2. Opening titles (2a). Scottie's nightmare (2b).

This abyss also prefigures discussions on gender inspired by the film and its multiple layers of signification, which as White argues mirror the problems of epistemology in feminist criticism in general. If we do not have access to the Real outside a system of representation configured by patriarchy, how are we to deconstruct the gender roles it perpetuates? (290-92) Two recent articles offer a potential starting point by examining aspects of the social context of 1950s America and their subtle bearing on the film. Colleen Glenn discusses Scottie's status as a World War II veteran likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and its connections with Stewart's star persona as a veteran himself. Many have noted how Stewart's physicality and mannerisms were effective at conveying male vulnerability and anxiety, and Glenn points out that after the war he increasingly deployed these qualities in characters that were often given to hysteria and debilitating

obsessions. She argues that his persona functioned “as a particularly appropriate body through which anxieties surrounding psychological trauma after the war could be channeled” (38). Randall Spinks takes up Virginia Wright Wexman’s arguments that class and ethnic tensions abound in the film’s subtext and must be recognized in order to understand the complex reality in which gender is constructed. Spinks points out that Gavin, Judy and Scottie all seek romantic attachments involving upward mobility in a highly stratified society. Gavin belongs by marriage to the ruling class that manipulates and exploits middle-management figures like Scottie, who once harbored ambitions of rising to police chief and is now enthralled with the aura surrounding Judy’s portrayal of the upper-class Madeleine. Both Glenn and Spink’s analyses work to contextualize the hypnotic power of *Vertigo*’s swirling images, anxieties and gender roles within the concrete experiences and social imaginaries of those who made and watched the film.

Marilyn Fabe offers a different sort of grounding in her interpretation of the psychological roots of Scottie’s fixation with ghostly women, which she then extends to Hitchcock and the film’s overall portrayal of masculinity. Though we know nothing of Scottie’s background, Fabe points out that Scottie offers classic symptoms of someone who has suffered insecure attachment as a child, particularly to a depressed mother who was only available intermittently. She argues that the first scene, where Scottie slips on a rooftop and grasps onto the gutter can be read as a “symbolic rendering of a foundational event: a trauma in which an insecurely attached child is abandoned by a helpless adult, and is left hanging” (350). In the film we learn that Scottie was once engaged to Midge and it is clear that she still loves him but he has no romantic interest in this pragmatic and caring woman. Instead, he fixates on the “impossible” and “insecure” love object embodied in the ghostly and unhinged Madeleine (351-53). Fabe points out that children of depressed mothers often seek attachments to similar people as adults whom they can rescue, having internalized the sense

that they failed at rescuing the wayward parental figure (355). Madeleine's suicidal tendencies and abrupt disappearances replay the childhood trauma of insecure attachment to a maternal figure that is always on the verge of vanishing, either physically or mentally. Fabe's reading of Scottie's personal trauma provides an intriguing backstory to the modes of suppressing female subjectivity described by Mulvey. To overcome his boyhood trauma and become a man as it were, Scottie must investigate and squeeze the debasing truth out of Judy—the real woman that inhabits his idealized fetish image of women—and this act ultimately squeezes the life out of her, making her fall into the abyss that he has feared. Fabe suggests that Hitchcock, well-known for his sadistic treatment of female leads, carries out a similar process through making the film: “Hitchcock, by shocking us with Judy's precipitous death, perhaps transfers (projects) into the audience his own terror of devastating loss, mixed with uncontrollable feelings of aggression against the women who elicit his passion” (365).

Fabe's analysis may be archetypal in that it takes one man's perceived personal trauma as a model for the pathologies of men in general. But it is also grounded in the historically-located analysis of Hitchcock's psychological profile, one that might not be so uncommon in men of his time period. In fact, we might speculate that children of Scottie's generation were typically raised by mothers who were depressed to some extent—the haunting of unrealized potentialities and affect seeping through domestic spaces into the broader cultural landscape. This reading also offers a bridge between Scottie's male-coded trauma and the female-coded trauma of Carlotta/Madeleine/Judy. But to realize this bridge requires some further speculation, because however much we can read subjectivity into the film's female characters they remain rather spectral—mechanisms of male projection, identification and manipulation. For this reason I turn to Almodóvar's reworking of *Vertigo's* Pygmalion scenario in *The Skin I Live in*, which forces the male psyche to inhabit the female body.

The Skin I Live in: from Pygmalion to Orlando

Vertigo is by no means the most explicit intertext in *The Skin I Live in*. The plot is taken from the French noir novel *Mygale* (Jonquet) but with significant alterations (similar to *Vertigo*'s adaptation of the French thriller novel *D'entre les morts* [Boileau and Narcejac, *The Living and Dead*]). It also draws inspiration from the 1960 sci-fi horror film *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*).³ When Almodóvar was asked whether he had the figures of Pygmalion and Frankenstein in mind when making the film, he responded that he did not consciously draw from these references but they did form “part of a deep cultural pool of resonances that I have . . . So, yes, ‘Frankenstein,’ yes, ‘Pygmalion,’ ‘Vertigo,’ ‘Prometheus.’ . . . I think the spirits of culture would arrive on the set every day to say hello” (Zhuravsky). As this list of “resonances” suggests, the film combines the theme of sculpting an idealized woman with the theme of creating new life. The woman fabricated in this film is not merely a copy or falsification but a new creature.

The bearer of the male gaze here is Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), a much darker and more deliberate shaper of women than Scottie. Robert is a wealthy plastic surgeon who is keeping a subject captive in his large estate outside Toledo, as he experiments on developing a skin that is resistant to fire and other dangers. As in *Vertigo*, in the first part of the film we see him observing from afar this sculpted object of beauty, a woman named Vera (Elena Anaya) whose true identity is hidden from us. However, unusually for Almodóvar, Hitchcock's rich narrative and visual elements are stripped down to a bare minimum. These sparse elements are certainly deliberate and evocative though: Vera inhabits a grey colored room and wears a flesh-colored body stocking, a “second skin” in Robert's words, which emphasizes her body shape. He watches her on a screen from a different room, a framed

³ In this film a surgeon kidnaps women and attempts to graft their faces onto his daughter, whose own face was disfigured in an accident of his doing.

image of feminine beauty that parallels the Titian Venus paintings displayed in his hallway. In *Vertigo* the objectifying gaze is naturalized through the detective pretext, and the fetish object is adorned with poignant clothing, accessories and settings. Almodóvar focuses our attention on the gaze itself, on Robert's act of shaping a woman as both a scientific project and a work of art for his viewing pleasure.

While this difference shows a more critical perspective, it also reflects a time period when the female body is not primarily fashioned through decorative clothing and hairstyle but also in more penetrating ways that sculpt the skin. Likewise, the female body is revealed more fully and examined millimeter by millimeter in a media landscape full of pornographic and semi-pornographic images, as well as in public spaces, where dress codes are ever more permissive, and form fitting women's clothing hugs the skin ever closer. In conversation with Truffaut, Hitchcock recognized that when Scottie dresses Judy as Madeleine, it functions like a form of coerced striptease (Fabe 363-64).⁴ The *Skin I Live in* is made in an era when directors no longer need to resort to coded narratives to show men aggressively stripping women. The casting of Elena Anaya is significant in this respect, as she is known for playing highly sexualized characters in extended nude scenes, particularly in Julio Medem's *Lucía y el sexo* (*Sex and Lucía*, 2001) and *Habitación en Roma* (*Room in Rome*, 2010). It could be said that Almodóvar continues Medem's fetishization of Anaya's body in close-ups of Vera's unblemished skin. As Carla Marcantonio points out, Vera's skin has not only been perfected by Robert but also by Almodóvar himself through digital enhancement (49-50). However, the scenes of Robert applying layers of synthetic skin and testing their resistance to flames and mosquito bites in the antiseptic setting of his laboratory work to de-eroticize images of Anaya's body. The first of these scenes begins with a headless mannequin divided into

⁴ There is also, of course, the striking ellipsis in *Vertigo* between when Scottie pulls a supposedly unconscious Judy/Madeleine out of the San Francisco Bay after a faked suicide attempt and when she wakes up naked in his bed. Presumably, he has removed her wet clothes in the meantime and she was only pretending to be unconscious.

sections over which he applies pieces of skin. Two dissolves place Vera's head on the model, then transform the model into her body (**Figure 3**). This Pygmalion moment is reminiscent of a famous dissolve from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) where a woman's likeness is transferred to a robot, but it also recalls Mulvey's intention to destroy beauty by exposing its construction. Anaya's body is not shown in a soft light, warm and stimulated like in Medem's films, but rather appears machine-like and impenetrable, numb to the touch. As Rob White points out, Vera's pain-resistant skin also seems to extend to a loss of pleasure that makes the film distinctly un-erotic, in sharp contrast to previous Almodóvar features.

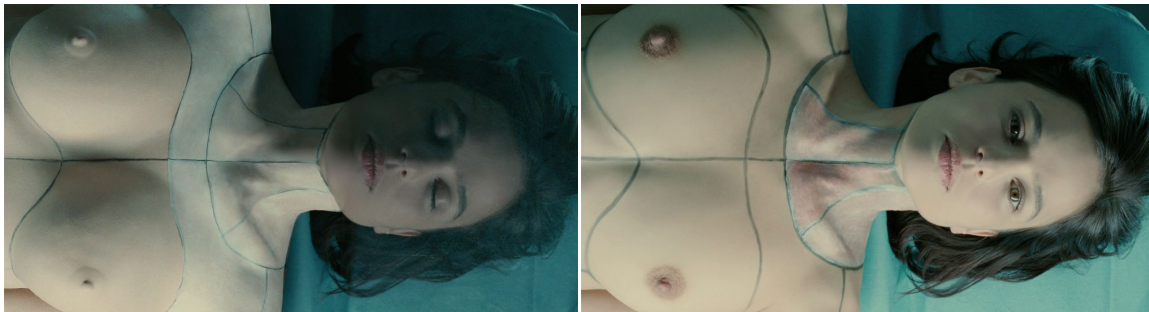


Figure 2. Vera's head on top of the mannequin (3a). Vera and her skin come to life (3b).

In addition to exposing more explicitly the violence behind the male gaze than in *Vertigo*, *The Skin I Live in* also shows the female object returning the gaze from the beginning. After announcing his invention of an impermeable skin to a group of colleagues, Robert returns home and visits Vera's room with an opium pipe. At first he appears to be in control of the situation, distant and cagey as she asks if she is now complete and what he plans to do with her. But quickly the tables are turned when she suggests they live together as lovers, unsettling him. He gets up to leave and she quickly positions her desirable body between him and the door, breathily intoning her words: "Soy tuya. Estoy hecha a tu medida . . . sé que me miras" (I am yours. I am custom made for you . . . I know you watch me). He escapes, nervously locks the door and returns to his room, edging up to the television, where she is seen staring flirtatiously back at the camera. As Dongsup Jung points out, the close-up of Vera seems to overpower the medium shot of Robert (622). Jung also notes how the return

of the gaze echoes Titian's *Venus de Urbino*, where unlike previous Venuses she looks right at the viewer, aware of being observed and unashamed of her nudity (621). When Judy plays Madeleine for Scottie, she is of course aware of his presence but neither he nor the audience knows that at this point in the film. She therefore never returns his gaze and allows Scottie to watch undisturbed. Robert attempts to achieve the same position by locking his fetish object in a bare room and placing a screen between himself and her, but from the beginning she threatens to cross the threshold separating the dominant subject from the passive object.

Of course, the most striking difference in *The Skin I Live in* is that behind the idealized woman we do not find the ordinary girl Judy but rather the ordinary boy Vicente (Jan Cornet). His identity is revealed midway through the film, when Vera manages to seduce Robert and they sleep in the same bed. A close-up of Vera's sleeping face cross-fades to a medium long shot of a young man dressing a straw mannequin in the shop window of his mother's small Toledo boutique. If in some respects Vicente plays Judy to Robert's Scottie, in others he is more like Scottie and Robert functions within the film like Gavin, the evil ruling class patriarch who masterminds Vicente's suffering. Like Scottie, Vicente appears dissatisfied and bored with his life. There are echoes of Scottie dressing Madeleine in the introductory shot described above and when he attempts to persuade his lesbian workmate Cristina (Bárbara Lennie) to wear a feminine dress he has designed. He also jokes that he wishes to modify her desires so that she will be attracted to him. Scottie's fascination with Madeleine stems in part from the tedium of his daily life, and Vicente flees the tedium of his own through drugs, bringing about the sequence of events that lead him into Robert's operating theatre. He meets Robert's daughter Norma (Blanca Suárez) at a party and takes her out to the garden for a rushed sexual encounter, unaware that she is mentally unstable and has been hospitalized in an institution since seeing her mother jump to her death as a young girl. Intent on possessing her body, Vicente does not notice her growing alarm and when she

begins to scream he slaps her unconscious. As I have written elsewhere, Vicente is like Robert in that he “is also trapped in a cycle of displaced frustration and the compensatory desire to mold and possess the female body” (Barker 132). In this sense they both echo Scottie’s condition.

But while Hitchcock made the likeable all-American James Stewart the locus of the male gaze and its corresponding psychological pathologies, in *The Skin I Live in* that role falls to the evil Dr. Robert Ledgard, played by an Antonio Banderas who purposely tones down his own likeability to create a hard and cool exterior. In Almodóvar’s words: “I wanted to drain his face of expressivity and leave him totally aseptic and detached, a blank facade” (19). The childhood attachment issues that Fabe reads between the lines in Scottie are made explicit in Robert when the maid Marilia reveals to Vera that she is actually his mother. She had an affair with Robert’s father and Mrs. Ledgard, who was unable to conceive, claimed the child as hers. However, Mrs. Ledgard neglected Robert and he was effectively raised by Marilia, though he never knew she was his true mother. The abandonment and deception that characterize his maternal figures seems to have carried over to his wife Gal, who left him for his half-brother Zeca (Marilia’s other son). The two were in a car accident and Zeca fled, leaving her nearly dead and burnt beyond recognition. Robert cared for her and worked tirelessly to find a way to repair her skin, but one day she caught sight of herself in a balcony window and committed suicide. Like Scottie, then, Robert mythologizes the woman whose jump to her death he could not prevent and reproduces her on the body of another. These eerie cycles of repetition in both films allegorize how those damaged by trauma often revive their original suffering by unconsciously seeking similar situations in an effort to make them better, only to fall into the same old traps. This unavoidable return occurs in *Vertigo* when Scottie unwittingly fixates on the same woman that was already used by Gavin to deceive him; in *The Skin I Live in* it plays out when Zeca reappears at the estate, mistakes Vera for

Gal and rapes her. The Pygmalion narrative of men attempting to mold women into fantasy images makes these pathological obsessions emblematic of the male need to dominate—which manifests in recurrent anxiety, aggression and projection.

The Skin I Live in offers hope that these cycles can be broken, though, through the figure of Vicente/Vera. As discussed above, in *Vertigo* Scottie is an everyman trapped in the machinations of the ruling class, which controls the beauty, glamour and power that is all rolled into the captivating and illusory image of Madeleine. There is no way out because in the world of the film women can only be appealing if they are made over into a reflection of male desires and anxieties. Robert exhibits similar pathological tendencies but he is far from the everyman that Scottie represents: he is the ruling class that produces machinations to control others. Vicente, on the other hand, is closer to an everyman figure. He is well-intentioned but ruled by his egocentric sense of unease. He has a warm and caring mother and is younger than either Scottie or Robert, with more potential to change. This change comes about in a cruel manner when he is forced to inhabit the skin of a woman. After his ill-fated encounter with Norma, she relapses into despair and eventually commits suicide. Robert blames him and kidnaps him to carry out his revenge. Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that Robert's project also demonstrates the horror of patriarchy's control of women: "Almodóvar can be seen to be questioning the perils of a society that has quartered and dissected womanhood to exhaustion in order to satisfy the requirements of individuals with specific physical fixations" (820). The process in the film underlines the self-afflicted manipulation and violence involved in women inhabiting male fantasies: after his vaginoplasty surgery, Vicente must insert progressively larger dildos to keep his vagina from closing. As Vera, she is then exposed to the external violence of male aggression in the form of Zeca. Her imposed outside body may be numb but her insides are repeatedly penetrated and violated.

Vera's room is also symbolic of enforced domesticity and other enclosures and limitations suffered by women under patriarchy. Her only connection to the outside world is through a television and the items sent up in a dumbwaiter. She rebels against the feminine-coded objects she receives, tearing a dress to shreds and using eyeliner to write and draw on the back wall. She also reads novels, practices yoga and engages in art projects, inspired by the Louise Bourgeois documentary she sees on the television screen. Vicente formerly sculpted mannequins and dressed them, but now as Vera she has become a sculptor of herself and her world. While these activities show Vera developing and choosing her own subjectivity, they are also framed by the ever-watching eye of the camera and delimited by the items she is given to view and read. The development of her individuality takes place in a box created and surveilled by the patriarchal figure. Her yoga postures practiced in the body stocking are elegant and aesthetically pleasing for whoever may be watching through the camera, as well as for the film audience. Significantly, the wall she chooses for her writing and drawing is the one facing the camera. Her self-shaping responds in part to internal needs and in part to performative gestures. This dual sense of self-expression and entrapment is epitomized in Vera's drawings of her own body with a house covering her head, imitations of Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* series from 1946-47. Bourgeois shows women's faces annulled by their roles as housewives, even as their physical body is exposed to the world and exploited, forced to shoulder the maintenance of the domestic sphere. At the same time, these works are powerful examples of self-expression and, as Deborah Wye points out, the women stand "very upright with a certain dignity." Moreover, she explains that for Bourgeois architectural figures are not only a trap but also "a place of refuge." Vicente's identification with these figures suggests that by being forced into a woman's body, and all that it entails physically and socially, he has come to comprehend—or inhabit—the complex subjectivity of those he had formerly objectified.

The film marks a similar evolution within Almodóvar's evolving oeuvre. Despite the strong female characters that populate his films and their recurring gender-bending characterizations, Almodóvar has often been criticized for his treatment of women characters and has sometimes made patronizing public statements. While promoting *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988), he made the following comment on the state of women's liberation:

De seguir así, la mujer llegará a controlar la sociedad pero dudo que, afortunadamente, consiga controlar sus nervios. Y este descontrol las honra porque significará que no han perdido su espontaneidad [If they continue their current path, women will eventually control society but I doubt, fortunately, that they will be able to control their nerves. And this lack of control is honorable because it will mean they have not lost their spontaneity, Qtd. in Saz, 6]

Ostensibly praising women's strength, he plays on the stereotype that they are unable to manage their emotions, setting up the classic dichotomy between rational-minded men and hyperemotional women. In films like *Women on the Verge*, perhaps those strong female characters are deployed, in part, as screens for projecting male anxieties and affectivity, their nervous breakdowns expressing an open emotionality and vulnerability that is not entirely possible in masculinity.

One of Almodóvar's feminist critics, Susan Martin-Márquez, sees a turnaround in *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999). Like *Women on the Verge* this film traces a web of women characters, but the web is not built on emotional outbursts. It is rather woven around maternity, both as biological reproduction and a general principle of caretaking. *The Skin I Live in* continues this more insightful examination of womanhood, and it recasts the questionable abduction scenario from the last film Almodóvar had made with

Antonio Banderas—*¡Átame! (Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, 1989)*—where he kidnaps a porn star (Victoria Abril) and gets her to fall in love with him. Here Vera only pretends to love Robert in order to escape. Paul Julian Smith also points out that the scene where Zeca rapes Vera reproduces the sequence of shots from a highly controversial rape scene in *Kika* (1993), which is exceedingly long and played for laughs (152). Here, in contrast, we are in the skin of the victim, not watching her predicament from a distanced, ironic perspective.

In the process Almodóvar as artist turns from Pygmalion into Orlando, Virginia Woolf's immortal character that shifts between the genders. In her article discussing film "reincarnations" of Ovid's Pygmalion, Paula James explains that "Ovid and Hitchcock have both been perceived as possessing a Pygmalion persona, especially in the sense that they are manipulative artists in love with their own art" (66-67). As discussed at the beginning of this article, Almodóvar is heir to Hitchcock's deliberate control of visual elements and that includes the actors, who have both complained about his demanding work methods and praised his ability to extract vivid performances. Like Hitchcock, Almodóvar appears to be in love with the cinema and his own films. The first person pronoun used in the titles of so many of his films not only reinforces his persistent efforts at constructing an authorial persona (D'Lugo and Vernon, 1), but also conveys a heavy personal investment in his work. His highly personal vision has often drawn from images of feminine subjectivity and sentimentality but, as argued above, they have sometimes been framed from a distance, suggesting a tendency towards projection. It is significant, then, that in *The Skin I Live in's* reworking of the Pygmalion narrative the "I" in the title refers to the statue. Rather than molding the object of desire from without, the artist, like Vicente, enters its skin and shapes it from within.

This process is epitomized in the empty room which is like a blank canvas for Vicente/Vera. Here she absorbs artistic influences that resonate with her sentiments, then exteriorizes them through writing, drawing and sculpting. Her body also becomes a blank canvas and she stretches and forms it through yoga postures, conscientiously learning to breathe through her new skin. Judith Butler's affirmation that gender is a performance seems to be allegorized in Vicente's reinvention of himself as a woman. It all takes place in this theatrical room in front of the ever present camera, conveying how the performance entangles one's own desire and experience of self with the imposed desires and projected selves of others, until the performer herself cannot tell them apart. For Vera is not only creating a new self to heal from her trauma and adapt to her new body: at some point she has decided to create a persona that can match the desires of her creator, in order to seduce him and escape this room.

Looking for Judy

So what if we go back to *Vertigo* and examine how Judy's masquerades may also combine the outer performance of the other's desires with the intimacy of a deep emotional



Figure 4. Judy performs Madeleine

drive? In the introduction I suggested a parallel between the prison room where Vera's transformations take place and the art gallery scene where Scottie observes Judy from behind (**Figure 4**). They are both largely empty rooms, but marked by highly deliberate and artificial visual elements, to borrow from Almodóvar's description of Hitchcock's cinema. They are the laboratory spaces where Madeleine and Vera are created. While the camera is aligned with Scottie, the director's position appears to correspond to Judy: she has fashioned a deliberate and artificial *mise-en-scène* for the detective. Gavin provides the dubious plot, but she makes it a captivating story with a ring of truth through her performance and her careful arrangement of symbolic elements. She reflects scriptwriter Samuel Taylor's evaluation of the film as a whole: "The plot is absurd—so far-fetched—the story is honest and true" (237). We cannot know what Judy is thinking in this or other moments when she pretends to be Madeleine, but from the way she falls in love with Scottie it appears to go beyond the pragmatic act of fooling him in order to please Gavin or to get a part of Madeleine's inheritance. We can also gauge her deep involvement from the intensity and poise of her performance, as well as the artistry of her production design (to put it in film terms). Perhaps she has found some unarticulated part of herself, or her feminine cultural inheritance, in the feigned identification with both Madeleine and Carlotta. She delves beneath the patriarchal structure of Gavin's plot and finds a connection to the profound experiences manifested in Carlotta's story: mortality, childbirth, suffering, social exclusion, loneliness.

Of course, though she pretends not to notice Scottie, she needs his gaze in order to become Madeleine. Her performance is slowly absorbed by the demands of the male gaze, and she becomes victim to the injunction to repeat the same gestures over and over until they become mechanical, until she becomes a statue of herself and of the other's imposed desires. But there are hints of creativity, or self-expression, which precede the gaze. Slavoj Žižek points out a common mistake in critical analyses of one of the film's most famous shots,

when we first see Judy at Ernie's restaurant. Scottie has been instructed by Gavin to watch him and Madeleine dine from the bar. As they leave she pauses for a moment just behind Scottie and a close-up shows her in profile. Many critics have assumed this image represents Scottie's point-of-view, though we know from the preceding and following shots that he is looking away to avoid being noticed. Žižek posits that the shot represents his imagined vision of her, his "hallucinatory inner vision." The red color of the wall behind her is saturated "as if his passion is directly inscribed into the background." Žižek goes on to argue that this shot represents a pre-subjective eye, with a libidinal investment that is in fact "too intense, to be assumed by a subject" (70). On a first viewing of the film, when we believe Judy is Gavin's wife Madeleine, it is reasonable to think that this image is created by Scottie's imagination. But there is something oddly constrained in her body language, as if she were posing for a picture. She looks something like a Stepford wife on standby. Her self-consciousness is a subtle hint that something is fishy here: Judy seems to know she is being observed and, like Scottie, she restrains herself from looking at the object of her inner attention. She is an actress making her first appearance on stage in character, feeling the heat of the audience's gaze.

Perhaps, then, this is an objective shot of Judy and the red glow represents the intensity of the first meeting of these two observers who both must look at each other without being seen, these two dupes of the ruling class and patriarchal ideology. In fact, though Žižek sees this as a one-sided moment, there is an intricate duo of eye movements in the shot-reverse shots that follow the red saturation. Scottie turns his head towards her in a sideways glance and then his eyes look away. She then turns her eyes to the right, towards him, and blinks (**Figure 5**). He mirrors her blink as he turns his head away and then she continues turning back towards Gavin. All of this occurs in about ten seconds, a brief intricate dance of averted glances that circle around the object of their attention without being able to rest on it. The audience intuits the mutual gravitational pull between these characters. The red passion

that fleetingly illuminates the background could threaten to destroy Gavin's plot, if Scottie and Judy were not so circumscribed by their roles that their passions are immediately absorbed within the boundaries of the parts they must play.



Figure 3 Dance of averted glances

The interplay of passion between the two characters is more explicit in another famous scene towards the end of the film. Scottie has finally convinced Judy to dress as Madeleine. She returns from the hairdresser where they dyed her hair blonde but she wouldn't go so far as to have it tied up in the distinctive French twist featured prominently in the art gallery scene. After more prodding she goes to the bathroom to complete her transformation back into Madeleine. The camera stays on Scottie waiting nervously, rather than showing us Judy in the bathroom. Our attention is focused on the male gaze and Judy's experience is muted, as usual. Scottie looks out the window, turning his back, as we often do when we are anxiously waiting for someone to appear. Finally, the noise of the door is heard and Scottie looks to the left with a sideways glance, one that mirrors his look at the bar in Ernie's. It takes him that split second to gather the courage to look at the object of his passion, but when he does he turns his whole body, delivering himself into the fire, which this time is signaled not by colors but rather by the growing crescendos of Bernard Hermann's score. In the first image of Madeleine returned she is bathed in the green light of the neon hotel sign outside the window and shot through a fog filter to make her presence appear ghostly. She indeed appears to be a figment of Scottie's memory, or purely of his

imagination. Judy stands a bit nervously, self-conscious, but then takes a step forward and a look of calm determination comes over her face. She visibly relaxes in her skin for the first time since we have seen her as Judy. The fog filter is lifted as she approaches Scottie and comes out of the green light, creating the effect of a dream turned flesh. She settles in a medium shot engaging Scottie in an intense eye contact shown through shot-reverse shots. Finally they are able to look directly at each other. Then as she walks even closer to the camera a faint smile emerges on her lips, her head tilts slightly and her eyes illuminate. In a reverse shot we see Scottie's face relax for the first time (**Figure 6**).



Figure 4 Madeleine and Scottie reunited

Judy, even as Madeleine, is a flesh and blood person, not just a product of the masculine imagination. She takes the lead here, approaching Scottie, her face beaming, her eyes soothing and caressing him. Of course, as any woman knows, she must wait for him to take the last step and kiss her, so that he feels he is still in charge. Nevertheless, her Madeleine persona is able to express herself or realize herself in ways that Judy cannot. Many have pointed out that Judy and Madeleine are both largely stereotypes, differentiated by social class (Ravetto-Biagioli). As Paula Marantz Cohen puts it: “Judy is no less a construction than Madeleine. Her behavior is dictated by what predatory urban life requires of the poor shop girl, and her appearance is more overtly designed to attract men than Madeleine’s” (158). Beneath all her roles, though, there is a kernel of authenticity inside Judy. It is she who tells the audience the truth before Scottie discovers it, through a voiceover

as she writes a letter to him. Jacques Rancière describes this as a clumsy and passé device, which “spoils the perfection of the plot by explaining the truth instead of letting us discover it with Scottie” (24). But it is significant as a speech-act because Judy’s words here are perhaps the only ones spoken in the film without subterfuge, ironic deflection (Midge and Scottie’s dialogues) or aggression (Scottie forcing Judy to confess; the judgmental court ruling). However, she soon rips up the letter and then looks through the clothes in her closet choosing a dress to wear to dinner, taking care to put Madeleine’s grey suit in the back. To speak to Scottie—for the woman to speak to the man—she must first choose a character to play and don a costume.

So why does she want to speak to him at all? Why does she love Scottie? Perhaps Madeleine is her fetish object just as she is Scottie’s. Psychoanalyst Joye Weisel-Barth explains that the creation of a fetish is a “process in which the affects of vitality and passion are invested in a symbol from the past . . . [which] occurs initially in response to anxiety and a sense of lifelessness in the present” (181). Both Scottie and Judy seem to experience anxiety and a sense of lifelessness in their daily lives. At the beginning this does not result from personal losses that are related in the film (except perhaps Scottie’s loss of his identity as detective), but rather seems to stem from a social landscape full of restrictions and tedium. The fetish image of Madeleine/Carlotta emerges from both their imaginations and is invested with a sense of vitality and passion. Upon meeting again they feel a burning need to revive her. However, the vitality and passion are actually inside of them and between them in the dances of eye contact and gravitational pulls that occur from their first meeting. This statement may seem to reflect a belief in romantic love of the Hollywood kind that Hitchcock so deftly destroys in the film by tying it to deception, murder and pathological obsession. To the contrary, it is rooted in a belief in the vitality of flesh and hormones and chemically-fired emotions that—especially in times like 1950s America—are diverted and deadened by social

roles, institutionalized romance and fetishized images. Judy stirs up an authentic vitality when she escapes her ordained self into the role of Madeleine, but she also falls under the patriarchal gaze that annuls her being, not to mention that she participates in an act of grave criminal immorality. Such is heterosexual love under patriarchy. But somewhere in this mix lies a mutually felt passion. Scottie senses that Judy's resemblance to Madeleine goes beyond appearances and, when she questions why he wants to be with her, he says "there's something in you that...", but he turns away and can't finish his sentence. That something is always slipping away.

Something in you

Released in 1958, *Vertigo* anticipates the second wave of feminism that redefined gender roles in the 1960s and 70s, and as discussed above it played a significant role in developing feminist film theory. Almodóvar emerged in the Spanish post-dictatorship era of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the country was modernizing culturally at a breakneck pace. His cinema became emblematic of Spain's new social freedoms and postmodern style, and many have commented that his pastiche blending of traditional Spanish iconography with images of modernity reflects the rapid changes of the transition to democracy. In a similar way his indulgence of feminine-coded sensibility combines with a vindication of sexual freedom and the empowerment of both men and women to choose their own paths. This aspect of his cinema coincides with the so-called "girly" feminism that emerged in the 1990s, contending that the exterior trappings of traditional femininity were not necessarily incompatible with women's empowerment. As seen above, though, Almodóvar's films of the 1980s and early 1990s often reflect the superficial view that women's equality had already been achieved or was inevitable, disregarding the issues that remained and perpetuating essentialist stereotypes. *The Skin I Live in* reflects an awareness that the hold gender roles

have over our minds and bodies is still firm, though in many ways they have loosened and changed. The female mind is not only turned to decoration, flowers and clothing and hair as seen in *Vertigo*. It is also cultivated through such things as study, art and yoga. Sometimes men are actively engaged in the same activities and in sculpting their bodies into objects of desire. There is a fine line today between self-exploitation and self-expression or self-development, as can be observed in Vicente's recreation of himself in a woman's body.

The scene discussed at the beginning of this article as a parallel to *Vertigo*'s art gallery scene occurs the morning after Vera has seduced Robert and gained freedom from her prison room. Marilia is suspicious of her and warns her that everything can be seen on the house's surveillance cameras. When Vera comes into the room she first observes the expressive words and pictures she has sketched on the wall, more personal and active than the idealized image of Carlotta that Judy imitates. Also unlike Judy/Madeleine, she turns around to face the camera on the wall, returning the gaze. She then looks around the room like Scotty does in the art gallery, observing the *mise-en-scène* she herself has created. She observes her own self-construction, and she is doubled into both subject and object. A medium long shot frames her in front of her words and pictures, wearing Robert's white shirt and bathed in a white light shining through the window, creating an effect reminiscent of Judy's emergence from the bathroom (**figure 7**). These are two women who are self-consciously sculpting themselves but both raise the questions of what they are shaping themselves into and for whom. Are they responding to an interior or exterior gaze? Can they ever disentangle their sense of self from the desires of others?

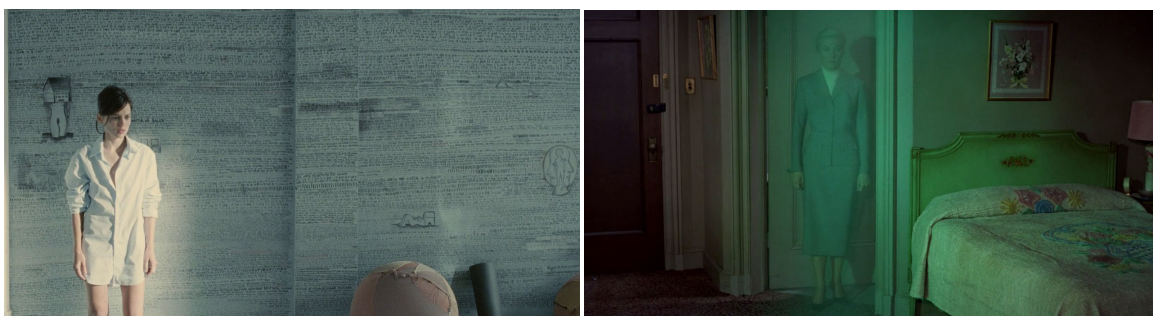


Figure 5. Vera observes her room (7a). Madeleine returned (7b).

Vera's new self is reflected in Louise Bourgeois's 1990 "Self-Portrait," which is copied on the wall behind her in this shot. It is a circle containing a masculine face looking left, a feminine face looking right, and in the center an androgynous child. The traditionally feminine-identified acts of reproduction and caretaking are tied to both woman and man here, and gender difference is reduced to a single biological function that in fact links everyone together. As Almodóvar comments, in this image "all ages and genders merge as an expression of humanity" (Almodóvar 22). Jung points out that it could very well be Vera's self-portrait, as she can be seen as a man or as a woman or as a newborn child. He concludes that it expresses Vera's identity confusion (328), but we might also see it as non-confused affirmation of her identity: she is a man *and* a woman *and* a child. In a poignant moment later that day, Vera sees a photograph of Vicente in the missing persons section of the newspaper and kisses this image of her former self. Alessandra Lemma argues that with this kiss he "reconnects with himself," an important act that precedes him "reclaiming himself" by killing Robert and escaping to return to his mother's shop (1299). This argument is perfectly reasonable if we accept the incompatibility of him being both Vera and Vicente, both female and male. However, if we consider that her recent experiences have made her a woman and that gender is a construct based largely on how you are perceived by others, we can see this moment as akin to when we look at a picture of our childhood selves. It is us but we are also now someone else. Vera engages in the therapeutic act of embracing her 'inner child'—her former less knowledgeable self—providing the consolation he did not receive through his harrowing experiences. Then she goes on to do the equivalent of what Judy in *Vertigo* should have done: throw both Gavin and Scottie off the missionary tower.

We are not able to ask Vicente/Vera whether he or she feels male or female or both, and the film does not give the character the dialogue to clear up the matter, as that is not the point. It is a suspension of disbelief to accept that a plastic surgeon could so seamlessly

convert Jan Cornet into Elena Anaya, as it is a suspension of disbelief to accept that after her harrowing experiences Vera could have the poise and self-control she shows in deceiving Robert. Like in *Vertigo*, the far-fetched plot reaches deep into the symbolic structures that shape our worldview. Hitchcock's film reaffirms the ultimate chasm between male and female subjectivity, though it gives room for feminist critics to interpret it against the grain. Almodóvar, on the other hand, presents us with someone whose external gender identity is reconfigured but who does not lose or regain himself in the process. He rather grows and gains new layers of selfhood along with the new layers of her skin.

Vera returns to her mother's shop wearing the dress that Vicente designed and wanted his coworker Cristina to wear. Vera now reminds Cristina of this conversation to prove that underneath her new skin she is Vicente. As I have argued above, the film breaks down the binary structure of the literary and visual archetypes from which it draws, and Vicente and Vera make us question the necessity of the masculine and feminine as essential frameworks of human experience. But this questioning is not a closed process, and the film's final moments leave things quite open. Cristina calls Vicente's mother into the storefront and she is confused by the scene she finds: her employee and a strange woman in tears. Vera looks at her and says "Soy Vicente" (I am Vicente), then the scene fades to black. Vicente may very well be reclaiming his masculine self, as Lemma argues. But what will that mean? How is his masculine self going to play out in this woman's body and a home where it will be hard for anyone to see him as the Vicente they formerly knew?

When showing *The Skin I Live in* at the New York Film Festival, Almodóvar was asked whether he believed there was an actual difference between the genders beneath the skin and he answered that there is "but I can't explain it to you." He went on to affirm that there is something that "really exists beyond plastic surgery and beyond gender identity . . . The identity, the soul, the spirit, whatever you want to call [it], is something inaccessible, is

something incorporeal” (Zhuravsky). The Pygmalion myth shows how deeply gender is entangled with questions of being and identity. Films like *Vertigo* and *The Skin I Live in* will continue to haunt us because who we are, that something inside us, remains a mystery.

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