

Film

The discreet harm of the Bourgeoisie



José Haro © El Deseo

The Skin I Live In
(*La piel que habito*)

Pedro Almodóvar, 2011.

<http://www.lapielquehabito.com>

This summer the UK Academy of Medical Sciences issued their report on Animals Containing Human Material. In it the Academy briefly reviewed fictional representations of transgenic creatures, from H G Wells's Dr Moreau, the inevitable Dr Frankenstein, and ending with Franz Kafka's aptly named *Report to the Academy* concerning a humanised chimpanzee. Judging by his latest film, Spain's greatest director, Pedro Almodóvar, needs to be added to the list.

We begin in the art filled home of plastic surgeon Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas). He is a pioneer of facial transplants, and is lecturing to his colleagues about his recent experiments with transgenic pig skin, which not only gives astonishing cosmetic results, but provides protection against burns and malaria. So far, he says, his research has solely been with animals. But at the same time he and his elderly housekeeper are keeping Vera, a beautiful albeit disturbed girl, with astonishing skin, captive in his mansion, which is also his clinic, operating theatre, and laboratory.

Any thoughts that the arrival of a man dressed in a carnival suit who is trying to gain admittance to the house means we are due some of Almodóvar's trademark comedy rapidly disappear, as he turns out to be a bank-robbing murderer who soon rapes the captive girl. Robert returns home, and kills him. In a scene out of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, the elderly housekeeper now tells the young girl some of Robert's "back story" by flickering fire light. Robert's wife once eloped with the bank robber, only to suffer 100% burns in a car crash. She was improbably rescued alive by Robert, but as he was trying to reconstruct her body, she caught sight of herself in a mirror and killed herself. Worse, both the surgeon and the rapist are the sons of the housekeeper, so Robert has just killed his half brother.

The story now goes back 6 years and we meet Vincente, a young lad about town who works in his mother's dress shop. He meets Norma, Robert's daughter. She is recovering from social phobia, although as she recites her current prescriptions, one wonders either about the diagnosis or Almodóvar's psychiatric adviser. Vincente then attempts to rape Norma, precipitating her psychotic relapse and suicide. Robert kidnaps Vincente, holding him captive in the house.

"The mad scientist creating new life is finally a distraction from the main theme of *The Skin I Live In*—that medicine itself is a form of voyeurism."

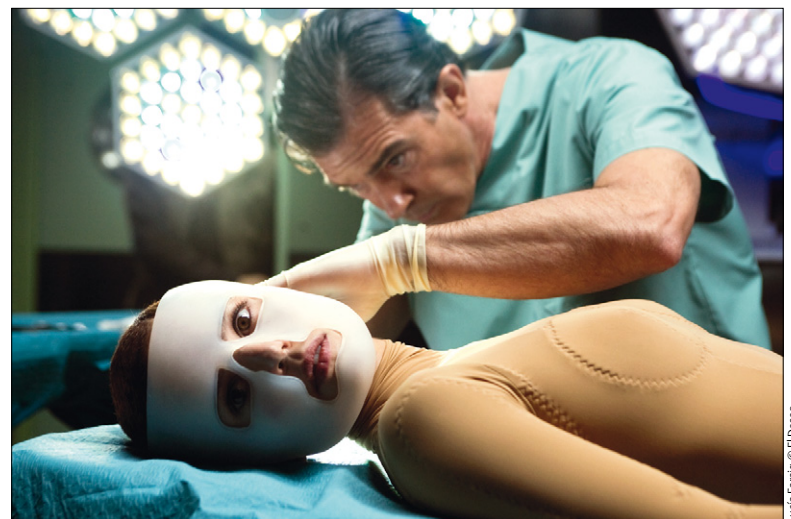
Just when you think the film cannot get darker, it does. Robert tricks his surgical colleagues into believing that Vincente is a patient wanting a sex change, and the operation takes place. Now we realise that the girl Vera is really Vincente after a great deal of transgenic manipulation, and that Robert has fallen in love with his own creation.

One of Robert's surgical team reappears—he has realised that the

person they operated on 6 years ago is the missing Vincente, and accuses Robert of kidnapping the boy for his research. He threatens Robert with public exposure and "the opprobrium of your medical colleagues", although that is likely to be the least of Robert's problems if the story gets out. Things end unhappily.

At the start of the film the camera lingers on a book about the artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, and again as the film approaches its dénouement. Towards the end of her life, Bourgeois produced a series called *Cells*, which she described as being about physical, emotional, and psychological pain. *The Skin I Live In* contains large quantities of each, as well as many references to the paintings of Goya, Bourgeois's favourite artist. Bourgeois said that her work "deals with the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at"—an aesthetic central to much of Almodóvar's work. The mad scientist creating new life is finally a distraction from the main theme of *The Skin I Live In*—that medicine itself is a form of voyeurism.

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