

A review of Pedro Almodóvar's "The Skin I live In"
Carlos Motta

Pedro Almodóvar's "The Skin I live In" proposes a significant inversion of the societal violence associated with sex change and gender transition and it reveals the deep rooted invisibility and the ongoing process of —consciously or unconsciously— rendering invisible the discourse concerning trans politics within mainstream culture.

Almodóvar approaches the social construction of sexual and gender identities like a queer theorist—exposing in the rawest form— the systemic violence imposed on the perception of sexual transition and gender self-determination. The film exposes the unwilling sex change of a man, Vicente, who has committed a rape and how he is made a prisoner in a female body—"a skin"— that he hasn't chosen to "live in." This move is extremely interesting and somewhat deceiving: At first the film would suggest it *is* about the construction of a female body, but upon closer viewing, the film is actually *about* depriving the white, masculine, and heteronormative body of its ruling agency. Forced to find ways to cope with this violent imposition, Vicente, now Vera, finds in yoga and in art vehicles to hang on to "his" true self—the male trapped inside beautiful female skin. Vera plays out her new female identity as a way to save herself from the expectations of her new gender role, she tricks her captor into believing she has accepted the transformation, only to kill him later to find her freedom. The film is not about a trans woman, it is about a man trapped in a female body, which is unable and has been forced not to express her male identity.

"The Skin I live In" has been criticized for its lack of humor, for its over-stylization, and for not being "Almodóvar enough," but what critics has failed to see is the subtle ways in the filmmaker is criticizing the transphobic society we live in, which imposes binary gender roles and fails to see or recognize the multiplicity of ways available to express one's gender and sexuality. But more importantly, these critics channel the perverse invisibility of trans issues and hence replicate it. This is, I believe, one of Almodóvar most sophisticated reflections, and it may be the first time that his gender and sexually variant characters are not depicted purely as caricatures, but actually as agents of piercing intellectual and physical power.

My only complaint is that to arrive at this reflection, the story is based on a traumatic and extremely violent plot. But then again queer and trans lives are constituted by this systemic violence.

Almodóvar has done it again! I welcome the new filmmaker, less funny, but more profound.