

**Pedro Almodóvar and the Professions:
The Case of *La piel que habito***

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In order to understand love/hate relationships in the Almodovarian universe, it is necessary to explore the role played by professionals, especially the liberal professions (commonly enumerated as doctors, lawyers, educators, architects, dentists, civil engineers, and a few others) and religious vocations. In particular, the figures of the physician, psychiatrist, and surgeon have been conspicuous throughout his works, alongside recurring medical themes.¹ As Vicente Rodríguez Ortega maintains, Almodóvar-as-brand is characterized by the sheer variety of filmic genres he negotiates, while “reworking the distinctive markers of an auteurist imprint he has long consolidated in the global cinematic imaginary” (60). Markers such as the *chica Almodóvar* and the director’s alter ego have been studied previously at length. Part of his auteurist imprint also consists of representing life as highly medicalized, through the deployment of medical sites, practices, and professionals.

Some age-old roots of the love/hate relationship with medicine and doctors can be traced to the traditional devaluation of semi-professional through professional work associated with *hidalguismo*. This attitude developed in Spanish culture conditioned by anti-Semitic intolerance of professions and trades previously held by the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. The satirical discourse on doctors in Francisco de Quevedo is one example of many. Quevedo has Death itself thank doctors for being examples of how to kill efficiently, and he equates them with Nature’s scalpels in the epitaph-like poem “A un médico.” A profession is distinguished from other occupations by the power its practitioners possess to define the producer-consumer relationship and to supervise the education of future practitioners (Johnson 43). Furthermore, the term “liberal professions” connotes the idea of working for the public good with a specific code of ethics. The

version of the moral status of the liberal professions extends to the religious vocations in Almodovaria and is colored not by traditional *dalguismo* and xenophobia, but by postmodern skepticism towards social categories of authority that purport to affix a stable identity to the person, as well as by the postmodern penchant for conspiracy detection. Professionals are apt to incite suspicions of conspiracy with their social hesitiveness and the confidentiality of their activities. People who do not belong to these groups may perceive professional cohesion and confidentiality as self-serving or ill-intentioned secrecy. In addition, these pillars of society are inevitably associated with the vestiges of a Francoist past that haunts the present.²

The figures of the gynecologist (*Laberinto de pasiones*), the psychiatrist (*¿Átame!*), the dentist (*¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*), the nun (*Entre tinieblas, Todo sobre mi madre*), the attorney (*Matador, Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*), the judge (*Tacones lejanos*), the nurse (*Hable con ella*), the priest (*Entre tinieblas, La mala educación*), and the surgeon (*La piel que habito*) hide behind false social identities that mask their personal motives. In ways that hark back to the unsettled trauma of Francoism, they often abuse their positions of authority. Since the fraudulent professional appears in the majority of his movies, it is a figure that helps in defining the Almodovarian universe, imprint, or brand. Whether the genre is comedy, melodrama, thriller, the fraudulent professional is a constant, and plays a pivotal role in Almodóvar's single foray into horror to date, the 2011 medical thriller *La piel que habito* (released in the U.S. as *The Skin I Live In*).³ In addition to being a thriller and horror picture, it includes elements of science fiction. Francisco Zurián has summarized its plot to perfection in his essay on the film in *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, so I will excerpt from his synopsis:

The story begins with Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), an eminent plastic surgeon who, following the suicide of his wife Gal due to the extensive burns suffered in an automobile accident, has invented a new form of skin using [. . .] transgenesis. We also encounter Vicente (Jan Cornet) who meets Ledgard's daughter Norma (Blanca Suárez) at a wedding. [. . .] They have a sexual encounter that results in Vicente raping or nearly raping Norma. In avenging the attack on his daughter Dr. Ledgard kidnaps Vicente [. . .] and carries out a sex change. As a result, Vera (Elena Anaya) is born. [. . .] Vera spends the ensuing years under the watchful eye of Ledgard's faithful

housekeeper, Marilia (Marisa Paredes). Nevertheless Vera never forgets her identity; Vera is Vicente and Ledgard will pay in tragedy for his madness (262-63).

Starting early in the Transition to Democracy, Almodóvar has been concerned with subverting both definitions and redefinitions of Spanish national identity. From the false constructs of the Franco regime of sacred Spain followed by the sunny Spain of late Francoist tourist propaganda, to the mannered reclaiming of progressive and dissident traditions during the Transition and the years of Felipismo, Almodóvar has cast an equally suspicious eye on these enterprises that seek a fixed, legitimizing, and marketable identity. As an artist with pop avant-garde roots, he has tended to see any effort at "institutionalization of culture" as a continuation of the Francoist nationalist rhetoric, as noted by Vernon and Morris (6). The Spanish conquest of high-tech medical fields such as transplantology would inevitably attract his attention. In *La piel que habito*, he conflates medical achievement and prestige with the older sacred Spain by having Vicente kidnapped from his hometown of Santiago de Compostela, the main medieval site of Christian pilgrimage. Most urban shots are of this holy city, although Dr. Ledgard's surgical compound El Cigarral lies on the Tagus River across from Toledo in Castilla/La Mancha. Some of the exteriors are of the Pazo de Oca in Pontevedra and others are of the Ponte Ulla in Corunna, both in Galicia (Muñoz Lara). Most of the medical compound scenes were filmed at El Cigarral de las Mercedes and the Quinta de Mirabel, on the outskirts of Toledo. The mélange of Galician and Manchegan locations establishes the sense of place, with the medieval Christian pilgrimage site and the Moorish mansions outside of the city that was the kingdom's capital in the Middle Ages contrasting with the clinical and antiseptic shots of transgenesis and transplantation.⁴

Hence, there is at the outset a double aura of holiness around Dr. Ledgard's activities. The Spanish medical establishment has been a source of national pride and redefinition in the 21st century, after emerging from a less than prestigious profile in the 20th century, of which the many criticisms in the novel *Tiempo de silencio* provide testimony.⁵ Increasing numbers of milestones each year have highlighted Spanish technological advancement and medical precision. Spain has led the world in the number of organ transplants performed each year (in 2013) and in the percentage of citizens who have agreed to become

organ donors in the event of their demise. Spanish hospitals and surgeons have been involved in several worldwide “firsts” involving the performance of pioneering organ and tissue transplantation surgeries such as the face-tongue-and-jaw, and double-leg procedures. Spain was also among the first nations to implement the full facial transplant, double-arm, and transfer of fetal stem cell tissue into the brains of patients with Parkinson’s. The financial crisis has not affected Spanish leadership in the transplant field; the lower cost of transplant operations in Spain (roughly one-tenth of the cost of similar procedures in the United States) ensures that the Health Ministry will continue to devote resources to developing more centers (“Spain Remains World Transplant Leader”). Preeminence in the medical field is now cited in order to counter vestigial negative stereotypes of Spain as lacking in modernity. The writer Elvira Lindo did this when she asserted that “la vehemencia médica española” is on the same level as the Spanish “sentido del espectáculo,” which she characterized in the course of the same discussion as the best in the world (“Conversaciones”).

However, there is still a shadow of suspicion looming over the Spanish medical establishment. One cause of this is the discovery in the first decade of the 21st century of widespread illegal adoptions, in which unwed or marginalized women had their babies taken away from them by medical personnel in hospitals affiliated with the Catholic Church. These adoptions by abduction, a form of human trafficking, occurred during and after the Franco dictatorship, persisting into the 1990s. They could number in the thousands; the affected birth mothers were told that their babies had died and would be given a proper burial (adler). In addition, Spain is one of only five nations in which the organ and tissue donor status of citizens is assumed; the families of the spontaneously aborted fetuses used for stem cell harvesting technically could not have objected if they had wanted to. Instead of a donor card, the Spanish citizen who wishes to opt out of donation in the event of death must effectively carry a non-donor card. All five of the presumed donor status countries have a strong Catholic tradition and were at one time officially Catholic: Italy, Brazil, France, and Poland, in addition to Spain. The involuntary surrender of babies born out of wedlock and the automatic status of organ donor by virtue of citizenship, appear tied to a Catholic tradition of conformism and enforced morality. The high rate of organ donation and transplantation occurring within Spanish borders has been deemed altruistic by medical authorities, but dissident voices

raise various objections, to the effect that a profit motive is also at work: transplant recipients can consume as much as ten percent of the pharmaceuticals prescribed in a Spanish hospital while only accounting for one percent of the total number of patients. Transplant surgeons earn almost twice as much as other types of surgeons, and donor detection teams are given high financial incentives for finding organ and tissue donors, with the bonus for identifying a multi-organ donor reaching nearly 1200 euros (Verdú et. al. 2520).

The transsexual operation as performed in the late 20th century had already been problematized by Almodóvar in *La mala educación*.⁶ The post-operative body of Ignacio is a butchered mess that is hard to contemplate. Ignacio’s penchant for female transformation is aligned in the film with other self-destructive tendencies such as heroin use and masochistic attachments to his exploitative brother and to a sexual predator from his past. The film insinuates that his road to femininity began when his self-esteem was crushed by childhood sexual abuse. His childhood friend who did not go through this trauma grew up into healthy gay masculinity. Hence, the body morphing process as well as the desire for gender reassignment are often associated with illness in Almodovaria. Even the heroic transsexual Agrado in *Todo sobre mi madre* mystifies the crowd in her monologue with the crippling costs of her many operations, all in an effort to please others. We first see Agrado in a situation in which she is being physically abused; her wish to please is tainted with masochism. Although transplantation surgery is represented as mainly benign in *Todo sobre mi madre*, it leads the donor’s mother on a fruitless quest to recover something of her son’s essence in the recipients of his organs.

Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz highlights the presence of transvestite, transsexual, and even part-cyborg characters in the director’s films from *Laberinto de pasiones* through *Kika* as emphasizing “the human body as one of the locales of negotiation, tension, and trauma, suggesting the body itself as a sign of the ‘social contradictions’ of a country involved in a process of profound cultural transition” (3). In many of these films, this effect was achieved through the performance of the most famous Spanish transsexual of the time, Bibi Anderson; a milestone in gender-bending (or gender-identity fusion, for Acevedo-Muñoz, 87) results in *La ley del deseo* when a biological woman plays a transgendered one and the transgender plays a biological woman. *La piel que habito* brings a more radical and complete transformation of

the male subject into a female one in dermatological and outwardly genital terms by developing timely notions of transgenesis. Through transgenesis, the genes of a pig are used to culture and grow a new skin to cover Vicente's body. Not only is this not approved by medical societies, but the involuntary context of the operations intensifies the criminal insanity of the doctor even as it exalts his pioneering discovery. The "mad doctor" surgeon in the two precursor movies, *Les yeux sans visage* and *Gritos en la noche*, is legitimized by making his doctor occupy the very pinnacle of his profession. Before attempting transgenesis with a human subject, Dr. Ledgard was a recognized forerunner in his field, universally respected.

Transgenesis is posited in the movie as an unethical and risky enhancement to the usual series of transsexual operations. If done correctly, it would facilitate an extraordinarily complete transgender transformation. Its implementation plays upon prevalent anxieties concerning genetically altered organisms and their unknown consequences in the long term. Genetically altered food crops are already a staple of the American diet, but European markets have proved more resistant to these products. Introducing genetic material from different species into the human genome is still the stuff of science fiction, and constitutes a more radical use of cutting-edge technologies. The pig genes Dr. Ledgard uses in order to grow new human skin that will be grafted onto his patient touch upon a sensitive Iberian dietary area. This practice inflates the ban on eating pork products in the diets of the two historic groups who constituted, along with Christians, the medieval *convivencia* in Toledo, where the doctor's *cigarral* is itself a reminder of the lavish constructions of the Muslim elite for leisure and recreation. Neither the Jews nor Arabs consumed pork because of its perceived uncleanness. This ban would later prompt *cristianos viejos* to ostentatiously display their own consumption of this meat, with many *conversos* following suit to prove their new Christian identity. Now Ledgard's experiments take this introduction of the pig into the human body to a new and monstrous extreme. When he becomes Vera's lover, he is in a sense committing bestiality with this taboo animal. However, the pig cells prove less problematic to the success of his experiments than the assistance of the human guinea pig himself or herself. The human element is the chaos factor upon which he had not counted.

Transgenesis is an added element of science fiction in Almodóvar's film with respect to the two precursor movies in the Euro Horror genre

that form part of the inspiration for *La piel que habito*. The grafting effect of a newly-grown skin is parallel to the grafting of mad-doctor elements from these precursor movies (Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* / *Eyes Without a Face* and Jesús Franco's *Gritos en la noche* / *The Awful Dr. Orloff*) and of erotic plot twists from the French thriller novel *Mygale* by Thierry Jonquet (first published in English as *Tarantula*, but now retitled *The Skin I Live In* to benefit from its connection to the Almodóvar production). In effect, this pastiche not only recycles two Euro Horror predecessors from the 1960s, but also an 80s novel in turn inspired by these filmic texts. The grafting only begins with these intertexts. A long-running visual intertextuality with the wall hangings and sculptures in the doctor's home is conspicuous. The paintings quoted range from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and *Venus and Cupid* and Ingres' *Odalisque* to the expressionism of Sandra Wahlbeck; from the anatomical naturalism of Argentine artist Juan Gatti, to the egg-headed neo-surrealist figures in a painting by Guillermo Pérez Villalta. The latter two are contemporaries and friends of the director. In addition, the gauze-covered sculptures of Louise Bourgeois are present as models for Vera as she seeks wellbeing in her new form. A yoga program also provides advice in this regard. There is accentuation of surgery as "performance" aligned with gender as performance. Last but not least, the artistry of Jean-Paul Gaultier in constructing the stylized skinsuit Vera wears to shape her new skin shows art converging perfectly with the human figure. These intertexts are all grafted into the film in a way that calls attention to the processes of transgenesis and transplantation. In fact, what Javier Herrera has noted concerning the director's filmography prior to *La piel que habito* is very relevant here, for he alludes to Gérard Genette's preference for the terms *travestimiento* or transvestism, "which is not an act of imitation but of transformation in which the author takes control of a text and transforms it according to a formal rule of coercion or with a specific semantic intention and transposes it uniformly and mechanically into another style" (351). Ledgard's trans-genetic grafting performs self-reflexively as a metaphor for Almodóvar's postmodern mode of creation of something new out of pre-existing materials.

In gender terms, it may seem alarming that in the Almodóvar movie, as in the Jonquet novel, a female sex change functions as a kind of punishment. The word "vaginoplasty" camouflages the more phallogocentric consequence of the operation, castration, which is the implied

reason that the sex change is a heinous *ajuste de cuentas* for the alleged rapist. The revenge enacted is a high-tech reinvention of the traditional eye-for-an-eye retribution inflicted on rapists, which persists in the more sanitized procedure of chemical castration. Vicente must recover from his castration by resorting to the contemporary wellness remedy of yoga.⁷ In tandem with the conversion of male to female physicality achieving the status of a fate worse than death, all the instances of male-female intercourse in the film are rapes that leave a very disquieting afterglow as well. Marilia's son Zeca returns in a tiger disguise to rape Vera, whom he mistakes for his dead lover Gal. He is then assassinated while still on top of Vera. Vera must endure painful use of her new vagina with her captor too in order to gain his trust. However, the ironic "happy ending" in good measure undoes the representation of becoming female as a fate worse than death. Vera may actually be able to have a relationship now with the lesbian who had rejected him before, when she was a man. Since Vera retains the psychological identity of Vicente, any potential relationship they might have would be in some sense heterosexual, but without male-female penetration.

Dr. Ledgard is exposed not only as a criminally unethical plastic surgeon and serial killer (previous victims of his experiments who did not survive are mentioned), but also as a drug addict and fraudulent heterosexual. His presumed love for his deceased wife is clouded by the revelation that she was involved in an accident while trying to flee their home with her lover, Robert's half-brother Zeca. Zeca returns dressed as a tiger in a quotation from *Island of Lost Souls* and other adaptations of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells, in which a mad doctor experiments with turning animals into human beings using blood transfusion and vivisection. Gradually Vera becomes the doctor's lover in addition to his captive, and the deepening of his feelings for the involuntary transsexual, whose femininity is only skin-deep, means that he is in effect in love with a man. Vera does not hesitate to use deadly force to gain freedom from the doctor's embrace; she sheds a tear afterward as the one concession to the femininity of her new form.

In a related Almodovarian medical note, the miraculous cure of the HIV-positive baby in *Todo sobre mi madre* was for years just that, until two different youngsters, one in Italy and the other in Mississippi, seemingly cleared the antibodies from their systems after aggressive early treatment. However, both children unfortunately suffered relapses (McNeil A7). This one salient point of uncharacteristic medical optimism,

introduced as a glimmer of hope in the context of HIV/ AIDS, briefly appeared to come true only to recede into science fiction once more. One wonders what Almodóvar might make of the recent and tragic Ebola pandemic, and of Spain's visibility as the first country of transmission outside of Africa. The looming suspicions about the Spanish medical complex quickly came to a head in this crisis, with petitions for Health Minister Ana Matos's resignation circulating the Internet within days.

The bleak picture of the liberal professions presented by Almodóvar leaves one field nearly unscathed. Other than educators who are also clergy, I have not found an example of a fraudulent lay teacher or professor as yet. Diego in *Matador* may be a bullfighting instructor, but his sexual predation appears linked to his past as a bullfighter, an occupation to which he cannot return because of a goring injury. Just as Padre Manolo of *La mala educación* is sinister on account of his clerical status rather than because he works in a school, Diego's blood lust is tied in with the definition of exaggerated masculinity represented by the matador. We can perhaps be proud that the teaching profession, especially with regard to higher education, has not been satirized or made suspect by the director's work. This may explain academia's readiness in awarding Almodóvar honorary doctorates, as the University of Castilla-La Mancha did in 2000 and as Harvard University did in 2009. This incidentally made Almodóvar only the fourth director to be so honored by Spanish higher education, after Luis Buñuel (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Carlos Saura (Zaragoza), and Luis García Berlanga (Valencia).

In summary, what I have highlighted about Almodovaria is the self-conscious nature of the grafting process, or transgenesis, and how this relates to postmodern recycling and pastiche. The questioning of identity stability based on false labels extends to the liberal professions. The identity of such a professional should be grounded in ethics. Ethics are lacking in most depictions of the liberal professions in Almodovaria, as well as in the religious vocations. The vocations and professions are linked in a corruption that always threatens to bubble up through the surface, sometimes in a grotesque fashion reminiscent of Buñuel and Goya. The dream of medical reason in *La piel que habito* produces an attractive monster prepared to kill in order to assert his true identity. Paul Ilie suggested a philosophy behind manifestations of the Spanish grotesque, comprising Gracián through Valle-Inclán, and it can be

extended to Almodóvar: "Perhaps it is the idea that metamorphosis is a metaphor for rational disintegration. There is a gradual change in thinking as to the natural and moral worlds: from their objective equilibrium to their subjective disorientation to, finally, their relativist rational absurdity" (284). What distinguishes the grotesque in Almodovaria is that it is haunted by the Franco dictatorship and the Pact of Silence, the traumatic recent history of which his films provide eloquent memory and testimony.

NOTES

¹ Paul Julian Smith traces the obsession with medical paraphernalia back to *La flor de mi secreto* (1995), finding it "unnervingly prominent" in each film the director has made since then (135). Focus on the medical professional goes back even further in his filmography.

² José Colmeiro chronicles how the Derridean notion of hauntology/spectrality has come to be applied frequently, beginning around 2002, in analyses of Francoist remnants that persist in contemporary Spanish culture (31).

³ As Antonio Lázaro-Reboll clarifies, the director's only foray into horror prior to 2011 was limited to the opening scene of *Matador* (1986), in which the protagonist's masturbation is accompanied by a sequence on television from Jesús Franco's 1981 *Colegialas violadas / Bloody Moon* (271).

⁴ The location near Toledo also serves as a reference to Luis Buñuel's *Crístina*, another twisted male/female love/hate story that derives in part as this movie does from the myth of Pygmalion. Jonquet's novel *Mygale* revisits plot points from Rachilde's decadent/symbolist erotic novel *Monsieur Vénus*, in addition to reworking Pygmalion.

⁵ The novel *Tiempo de silencio* was written during the Franco dictatorship by a medical practitioner and researcher, the psychiatrist Luis Martín Santos.

⁶ As Smith notes, both *La piel que habito* and *Los abrazos rotos* are dense with self-citations, "approaching an anthology of the director's back catalogue" (134).

⁷ Zurián attempts to lighten the film's message, often perceived as too dark or negative, by emphasizing the success of the protagonist's struggle for autonomy and a new identity.

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Lo que me cuentan los libros de la biblioteca de mi padre, Eliseo Diego

Josefina de Diego
Narradora cubana

Introducción

Durante toda mi vida, desde que abrí los ojos a este mundo, me han acompañado los libros de la biblioteca de mi padre. Ahí estamos retratados mis dos hermanos y yo, delante de esos sabios estantes repletos de maravillas, silenciosos testigos de todas nuestras alegrías y tristezas (. . .). Pero los libros de mi padre no eran para jugar ni para tocarse, según mamá nos había advertido. Nosotros teníamos los nuestros, en nuestro maravilloso closet de tesoros debajo de la escalera de madera. Ya de mayores los pudimos hojear y disfrutar, Rapi, mi hermano, fascinado con las ilustraciones de muchos de ellos. Fueron esos artistas sus primeros maestros: Doré, H. K. Browne, "Phiz", Marie Kirk, Shepard, Tenniel y tantos y tantos otros. No necesitó ir a escuelas, ahí estaban, al alcance de su mano, los grandes dibujantes que en este mundo han sido. En nuestra biblioteca, la de los niños, no faltaba nada: Salgari, Verne, Andersen, los hermanos Grimm, Mark Twain, L. M. Alcott, Stevenson, Dickens. Nosotros teníamos nuestros "ídolos", nuestros padres, los suyos.

Toda su vida mi padre quiso organizar su biblioteca. Siempre fue un hombre muy metódico y, además, tener sus libros ordenados le ahorraba mucho tiempo pues desde muy joven ya su colección era impresionante y encontrar un título a veces podía convertirse en una empresa titánica. Pero nunca logró terminar, completamente, ese trabajo. Los libros los agrupaba por orden alfabético, Andersen, Collins, Chesterton, Dickens, así iban apareciendo. Los escritos en inglés estaban separados de los escritos en español. El año pasado quise hacerle una especie de regalo de cumpleaños y me dispuse a terminar ese trabajo, tantas veces comenzado. Tardé un año completo. Preparé