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Pedro Almodovar's *La Piel que habito* : a psychoanalytical case study.**

I

The first idea, the first words that occur to me when asked to express my appreciation for Almodovar's movie is a plain exclamation about the beauty of the heroine : « *Quelle est belle !* » And since one of the rules of psychoanalysis is to let one's associations run freely, this outburst of admiration leads me to wonder whether Almodovar hasn't caught me in his trap, inciting me to recognize that it is much better to be a woman than a man, which leaves me with the only comment I could think of : that I was considering the young lady as an *object* of admiration and desire therefore probably not identifying with her.

But there are other reasons for my interest in Almadovar's film, and I must list several intuitions that came to me as a psychoanalytic critic. Looking at the « facts » of the narration and at the obvious meaning of the apparently central interrogation in the work, namely : « Male or female ? », I felt the discussion needn't stop there, and also that much was said in the film which revealed a concern with what we now call, specifically, a « subject ». For me, in short, the title chosen by Almodovar was saying much more than it may have seemed at first and led me to questions not only related to appearance in front of the mirror or even to me as a subject, but to a problem on which I have been working for some years. It is indeed a question which I think should be at the heart of any psychoanalysis : « To what determinations can I ascribe the nature of the subject in me ? ». This, in turn, led me to a second fundamental question : « When can an analysis be said to be terminated ? ».

II

And now, what I understand of my « response » made clear, let us *look* at the movie ; for our pleasure, first, no doubt, but also as material which may illustrate several fundamental points in modern psychoanalytical theory. It won't take us long to realize that we are dealing with an extremely rich discourse, a discourse which tells us what a « subject » is, but which also reveals—although this is a far more delicate area—a subject's discourse about himself and his « Other ».

I shall begin with the « material ». The first thing I notice is the emphasis on *watching*, not only on what is given to us to see, but on what is seen by some of the actors of the drama. Indeed, in *La Piel que habito*, « The Skin I live in », thanks to cameras, monitors and glass panels, one is incited to watch, and what is being watched is a woman (Elena Anaya), together with, as in passing, several famous nude paintings by Titian. This is the first « object », the starting point of the fantasy, as it were, but there is much more, and in the garden scene, at the reception attended by Roberto (Antonio Banderas) and his daughter Norma (Blanca Suarez), through the eyes of Roberto, we witness several couples making love, no doubt as an introduction to what will then be presented as Norma's rape by Vicente (Jan Cornet). That such rape didn't actually take place—for the young man was unable to « perform » because of the drugs he had taken--is irrelevant since *what we see* does look like a rape. Before this, in any case, we were given to watch a « real » rape, when Marilia's son (Maria Paredes), Zeca (Roberto Alamo), the obvious villain of the play, disguised as a tiger, raped the heroine.

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It doesn't take much psychoanalytic knowledge to see in these rapes and on the insistence on watching a representation of the classical « primal scene », a scene witnessed, imagined or reconstructed by the child and describing his or her parents in a love scene. This introduces us to the triangular structure of the oedipal drama and constitutes the first step in our analysis of *The Skin I live in*.

Almodovar's movie, however, is far more complex and cannot thus be reduced; the « facts » of the narration will soon reveal we are dealing with a structure that is far more complex than a plain triangle. Duality, indeed, is also a central architectural pattern, and I suspect that if we manage to bring to light the articulation between these two designs we shall have advanced in our interpretation of the film.

What I call « duality » naturally finds its source in the fact that the film stages both sexes and the transformation of the one into the other, an « operation » of which the play on doubles which we cannot help noticing as the story develops is the perfect aesthetic translation. In *La Piel que habito*, everything is repeated twice, and the main characters are given two rôles to play, are « doubles » indeed, their image easily divisible by two : Norma/Vera and Vicente/Vera or, in the case of Roberto : victim/tyrant, which we can also write : the one who watches and the one who aggresses. (1)

This--the nature of what seems the original fantasy--is no doubt the reason why the narration can easily be divided into two parts, two Acts in fact, plus an epilogue if we wish to be precise. What took place in the first half of the film, Act I (and this can in turn be divided into two episodes, since the flight of Roberto's wife (2) precedes Vera's rape), is repeated in Act II, when Norma is raped in the garden scene. The triangle, at this point, makes its appearance, comes into action in the structure as it were : two persons engaged in a love scene with a third one watching and interpreting the scene as a rape, an interpretation which causes him to want to intervene. Hence the general lay out of the narration : I, aggression and then, II, revenge (the operation performed on one of the participants in the « scene »). The oedipal nature of the tragedy thus makes no doubt : through the surgical operation, the triangle loses one of its corners, 3 is reduced to 2.

Although only gradually revealed to the spectator, the relationship of cause and effect becomes apparent when examining the chronology of the narration. Indeed, the use of flashbacks permits a movement back and forth which proves a convenient way of explaining what the spectator has just witnessed, and this, interestingly enough, is not unlike what happens in a psychoanalysis, where one starts from the present and endeavors to bring one's past back to memory in order to understand that present.

The articulation between these two structural elements of the narration takes place when the film goes from the scene where Norma (Ana Mena), Roberto's young daughter , witnesses her mother's death (once again : a child and the « scene ») to the rape of the same daughter a few years later, which easily reads like a child's memory in the adult. In the garden scene, after the rape, it is significant that Norma, terrified and delirious, mistakes her father for her aggressor : « No ! No ! ». Here, Roberto is no longer the « son » watching his parents, but the father as an actor in the scene. Just before this, however, as he was looking for Norma in the garden, Almodovar makes him find his daughter's shoe...a shoe which has lost its heel, and it is difficult not to interpret the passage as a representation of what the child imagines when she or he reconstructs the primal scene, the castration of the mother in other words. At this point, of course, Roberto is still the child looking for his lost mother, while in a moment, *through the eyes of Norma*, the child, he will have become the aggressing tyrant, only to occupy the place of the oedipal son again at his daughter's funeral later on. Yes, just as in a dream where the meaning of the various signifiers can change so easily. After the funeral, Roberto, rather the revengeful son than the bereaved father, starts his quest for the

« culprit » and will not be satisfied until the « operation » is carried out. The oedipal son has taken the place of the tyrannical father.

III

This brings us to the core of the story : the change of sex, the transformation of a man into a woman. A very serious matter this. Just a moment ago, we saw how *La Piel que habito* could be, without any exaggeration, considered as a verification of Freud's theses on the primal scene ; now, we have what amounts to a very serious reflection on what is implied in the desire to change one's sexual identity, and the whole thing almost looks like the report on a clinical case. So far, except for the obvious « primal scenes » and the missing pointed heel, I have refrained from interpreting and have endeavored to remain faithful to the facts of the narration : mainly, the dynamics of a movement from 3 to 2, and the chronology adopted; but if we want to understand what is at stake in this « case », I think interpretation is needed, and this entails the construction of several hypotheses.

We can start with the analysis of the movie title. Obviously, the word « *piel* », skin , is a central signifier here and, to begin at the simplest level, the skin « I live in », or even *I* lives in, is a plain assertion about the narrator's physical appearance, a factual observation touching what can easily be verified, and it includes the speaker's anatomy : male or female. This statement about the appearance of the author of the title, however, because of what happens in the movie to the character's skin, precisely, makes us realize that the signifier « skin » cannot be reduced to someone's simple appearance . (It seems as if from the start we are past the « mirror stage », and I would like to point out in passing that the distinction implied by the latent signified *Piel* reminds us of Lacan's articulation between *imaginaire* and *symbolique*.) Almodovar's film is in fact an interrogation on our status as unconscious subjects, « subjects of an unconscious ». For in the end, although « the skin I live in » has the appearance of an affirmation at first, the phrase is not without leading to a fundamental question, the one and only question in a psychoanalysis : « Who am I ? ». In a way, this is what the surgeon says when in one of his lectures he explains that in skin transplant operations the problem is to *connect* skin and muscles to nerves. As I shall try to show, Almodovar's symbolic enterpriseit goes much further than what is implied in an interrogation on our sexual identity. This is what I meant when I spoke a moment ago of the subject in us. Roberto, in his rôle of the (mad?) scientist says it quite well in one of his lectures :

« *El rostro es nuestra identidad* », our face is our identity.

Yes, identity, this is what the film is about.

And now, after « the » question, the answer. This is what attracted me in Almodovar's film and encouraged me to look into his « discourse » for a plausible explanation : *The skin I live in* as a clinical case, Almodovar's work as a practical—and poetic—illustration of psychoanalytical theory, such is the final aim of this paper.

As I pointed out when examining the chronology of the narration, what we can see and hear when studying Almodovar's film and considering it as « discourse » is not without suggesting what takes place in a psychoanalysis.

But the script of the film has a source, and, to begin with, we must carefully distinguish what belongs to Almodovar and what came from the novel he set out to adapt. *Mygale*, the book which directly inspired the film director is a thriller by Thierry Jonquet (Paris : Gallimard, 1984 and 1995). Novel and film have the same main theme : a surgical operation—a vaginoplasty—as a vengeance for a rape, and that the idea strongly attracted Almodovar is not difficult to understand. But his treatment of the theme is clearly different and, to begin with, book and film do not have the same

plot at all, we are not dealing with the same story. Even though we must recognize that several details present in the novel found their way into the film, I do not think it is appropriate to speak of *La Piel que habito* as an adaptation of *Mygale*. (3)

As is well known, the « day's residues » which contribute to the construction of a dream *are not* the dream ; in the same way, borrowed fragments from other works should be considered as similar « residues », elements whose insertion in the new work more often than not gives them another symbolical meaning.

Most significant in these « day's residues » are of course the surgical operation and the change of sex (« *La création d'un néo-vagin* », p.137), together with the revenge motive, but I think the real « source », the real influence the book may have had on the script-writer is the way Jonquet separated his narrative into a factual narration and the prisoner's inner voice reliving his past and commenting on what was happening to him. (4) Except for this, the final movie script, the film as we see it, hardly resembles the novel and cannot in any way be considered as a cinematic version of it : there is much indeed in Almodovar's scenario that is personal and original and this is what I intend to analyse.

But who is going to be our « patient » ? The central theme, the core of the fantasy, we know, is the surgical operation and the change of sex ; the movie represents Almodovar's variations on this theme. Ultimately, then, the only valid subject to be considered will be the author of the film ; but to get some understanding of this subject we need signs. The characters in the film constitute part of those signs, and we can begin with them, especially since their symbolical meaning is so well observed--clinical cases already.

Roberto Ledgard, the surgeon famous for his research on skin transplant, will be our first subject, the *representation* of a subject, that is. Our first subject, because, as we shall see, there are other representations of a subject in the film. Already, we have been able to observe that the surgeon, as a character, that is to say as a sign, occupied two places in the general symbolical organisation of the work. Apparently, the place he occupies first is that of the outraged father, which leads him to then become the avenger ; before this, however, he was the betrayed husband and also the disconsolate lover who wanted to reconstruct his lost love object (his wife almost died when her getaway car caught fire). Loss is obviously common to both parts of the plot and this makes it easy for us to define Roberto's ultimate place as that of the oedipal son. It is this oedipal son whom the movie describes, at least on two occasions, as the witness of a rape. This is first shown when Zeca, in his tiger disguise, aggresses Vera. At first sight, of course, Zeca is a son : Marilia's child and Roberto's half brother, but in the triangle he forms with Vera and Roberto, the place he occupies is that of the « possessor » of the love object and this makes him an image of the tyrannical father.

Hence, as an oedipal child witness of the « scene », Roberto's behavior in Almodovar's film makes sense. Abandoned, deprived of his love object, the « son » twice interprets his mother's fate as a castration, and will for this reason pursue and chastise both rapists. First, he kills Zeca and saves Vera, then, in the second part of the story, he punishes Vicente by doing to him what he thinks he has done to Norma. This interpretation, at any rate, highlights what link there exists between the two halves of the plot. And more and more it also suggests that the structure of the film resembles that of a dream, where the same *motif* is often repeated several times.

But we still have to analyse the core of the fantasy : the surgical operation and the sex change, and this prompts the question : « Why the skin ? »

Early in the film, as in a dream precisely—or was it one of those « miracles » of medical science?—, Roberto re-creates life, giving a new skin to his wife who had almost been burnt to death when she

ran away, and this can be interpreted as a reconstitution of the mother--Louise Bourgeois' cloth dolls form an adequate part of the decor here-- ; it is a reconstruction necessitated by what the mother had been submitted to in the « scene ».

An introduction to the story, the car on fire clearly designs what started the tragedy ; then comes the first operation, when the surgeon tries to save his dying wife, and this is followed, as in a dream again, yes, by the shift to Norma to Vicente to Vera, when we realize that the burnt up skin is forgotten and that the operation has become a sex operation. All this rearranged for the sake of our analysis, for the chronology of the narration, as we saw, resorts to flashbacks and is arranged differently. In the end, to properly understand the significance of the signifier *sky* in the film, we must return to the two aggressions and to the rapes. Zeca dead, we can now consider the second triangle.

In this new figure, made of Roberto, Norma and Vicente, Roberto still occupies the place of the forlorn infant. What follows is well-known : Oedipus kills Laios. Exactly as in the first triangle, Roberto becomes the avenger. This time, however, there is a difference and the punishment of the rapist is no longer death but castration, a change of sex, literally ; the talented doctor will perform a vaginoplasty on Vicente, who will thus become Vera and replace dead Norma. From Norma to Vera, the signification of this change of name is obvious, implying no doubt that the subject's new sexual identity is closer to his or her true nature.

IV

Such is the fantasy which, almost openly, organizes the details of the film. Thanks to Almodovar's talent, it was not too difficult to bring this to light ; no horror or science-fiction movie, *La Piel que habito* resembles the presentation of a clinical case and can be read as such. This is how, at any rate, I interpret the two scenes in which the President of the Institute of Biotechnology (José Luis Gomez) and Roberto's friend Fulgencio (Eduard Fernandez) warn the surgeon about the unreasonable and even unethical nature of his enterprise. Through their eyes, Roberto appears as the mad scientist and as a very sick person.

Does this make Almodovar the interpreter of his own creation ? The film director as Roberto Ledgard's psychoanalyst and, like Freud, the analyst of his own discourse ? The question expresses the most delicate part of my enterprise. I am not Pedro Almodovar's analyst and he is not expecting any explanation from me. On the other hand, there is no reason why I should refrain from interpreting the *signs* he has left us in his film. In as much as his two/three characters appear as convincing representations of persons whom we may come across in real life, « subjects », they deserve an interpretation. Primarily, as I have already pointed out, these characters are signifiers and although their signification vary as the film develops--this is mostly true of Roberto-- they nevertheless represent aspects of possible human models, and there is much in these portraits or, rather, fragments of portraits, which seems realistic and can as such be considered valid information. This cannot of course be done without interpretation ; we are no longer dealing with brute facts, as I think we have been doing so far, but with what, in a sign, is symbolical, and here no verification is possible. In short, what I am offering as commentary of these characters' behavior only has the value of hypotheses. Once again, a verification could only be possible if--as it might be in a real psychoanalysis, for example--these hypotheses were to be presented to a real living person. In the end, the reader shall be the only judge.

Analysing Almodovar's « text », several questions come to mind, and the first one concerns Vicente's change of sex. I have sufficiently spoken of an evident desire of the « subject » to reconstruct a mother whom, in the film, he saw, or imagined, being destroyed, castrated by the rapist (that is to say by the « father » in the triangle : Zeca, Vicente) : to bring to life a new wife, and

then, after Norma's death, a new daughter. this recovery of *the lost object* easily explains the obvious resemblance there is between Norma as a young woman and Vera. But what we still have to find out is the significance of the surgical operation in the fantasy ? As we saw, this effective castration of the rapist may be considered as a vengeance which imposes on him what he inflicted on his victim ; in a way, the oedipal son takes away from him what he thinks he took away from his mother, and this amounts to an exchange, an exchange which enables us to understand what relationship there is between the two halves of the film.

As we have just seen, Roberto tries to save his badly burnt wife by inventing a new skin for her. It is not too difficult to see in what happens in this operation, where an old skin is exchanged for a new one, a prefiguration of what happens in the second part of the film, namely the exchange of one sex for the other. The same exchange of skin will be repeated when the surgeon gives Vicente/Vera a new skin, a skin that resists « fire ». No doubt this emphasis on metamorphosis gives the film great coherence, but is this sufficient to make us forget that other emphasis on *skin* ?

And in Almodovar's film, one cannot speak of skin without mentioning *fire*. Indeed, Roberto Ledgard is first described in the film as the brilliant scientist who can restore burnt skin, almost recreate life in fact. As he explains in his lecture and to the President of the Biotechnology Institute, he manages to do this through « transgenesis » and « cell mutation », and the idea of *transformation* is already present here no doubt. My impression, however, is that at this stage of the story the emphasis is rather on skin than on sex difference and we shall have to explain the relationship between the two and the passage from the one to the other.

Meanwhile, what can we do with fire ? It appears several times on the screen, and three times very vividly, namely in the description of the car crash, and soon after when Roberto burns the blankets in which he carried Zeca's dead body. In both cases, fire is associated with death or destruction, but can we be satisfied with this obvious, tautological explanation ? Could the answer to my question lie in the symbolic significance of fire for little boys and men alike ; after all, we all have heard of urethral eroticism. Almodovar himself has mentioned his love of fire, even though this is no proof that my hypothesis is valid. Another association suggests the idea of incineration and a desire to do away with one's past—I am thinking of the burnt blankets--, something in the nature of mourning. In the end, and this may be too general, *fire* may simply express our need for warmth and love, as sung by Concha Buika : «*Necessito amor* ». (5)

Skin, in any case, does remain the master signifier. Almodovar's film is the story of the reconstruction of a skin, a skin that is exchanged for a new one, which of course reminds us that the notion of *exchange* is also a central element in the fantasy. As we saw, the metonymy is obvious : *from skin to sexual identity*, while there is also something of a metaphor in the proposed example where *a* is exchanged for *b*, which reads *a vagina for a penis*. Before we can come to the conclusion of our « case », however, the secret and unconscious focus of the aesthetic enterprise, we have some other important images to dispose of.

The notion of skin prevails so much over the composition of the film—over its very conception indeed--, that it commands the production of at least one other sign in the author's discourse. Right from the beginning, Vera is shown tearing apart *women's dresses*. Later on, when we first meet Vicente, we find him dressing up a dummy in his mother's fashion shop and also, which I find of even greater significance, offering a new dress to beautiful Cristina (Barbara Lennie) who refuses explaining she is a lesbian. In short, if we have not quite encompassed all that is unconsciously implied by « skin », women's dresses will help us to take one more step (even though, as I shall try to point out later, the relationship to this particular sign is more than ambiguous).

In *La Piel que habito*, the dress signifies the woman, but it does so in an extremely subtle and

contradictory way. For it is also a disguise, a mask, and as such says : « What you see is not me, this is but a second skin, the real me is hidden. ». Norma, in her psychiatry clinic, cannot bear clothes on her skin. Isn't this also a way of saying : « What you see, the clothes I am wearing, enables me to hide what must not be seen, more a veil than a mask. ». In short, it permits to give an ambiguous, undecisive answer to the interrogation touching the character's sexual identity. Such a lacanian parenthesis needn't worry us too much, though ; it simply emphasizes the author's femininity.

This seems to be the appropriate place to explain in passing the insertion of images of carnival into the film, and also the fact that Zeca, Marilia's other son, is just returning from Brazil, a land famous for its carnival, precisely. There are indeed plenty of masks in *La Piel*, and this tallies with the desire of putting on another appearance,(6) the wish to masquerade being of course only second to the wish to actually transform oneself. Thus are we gradually approaching the heart of the fantasy, the *primum mobile* of Almodovar's creation.

In that respect, can the material women's dresses are made of represent an even more decisive clue than mere dresses ? I think so. There is a lot of tearing about in *La Piel que habito*, and also some interest in sewing, it seems. In one of the opening scenes, this is what Vera asks Marilia : thread and needles, and this will soon lead us to Louise Bourgeois' cloth dolls in the background, all this very likely illustrating a desire to reconstruct the mother.

Besides, Roberto also sews. As a matter of fact, we could say that this is what the surgeon in the film does best. See how carefully he places a new patch of cloth/new skin on his dummy in one of the first images of the film, how he smoothes it, almost amorously. What we attend is a scene of resurrection and I must here mention the extreme scientific realism with which the surgeon's enterprise--the skin transplant--is represented. Thus does Roberto reconstruct a woman's body, and in a way *toutes les femmes* : wife, lover, daughter... When Vera first cuts her wrists, and then her throat, twice, very visibly on the screen, he re-sews her. I have already pointed out the relationship between the two parts of the plot : in both parts we can observe a reconstruction : of the skin first, then of the whole woman. An oedipal vengeance, the« castration » of both father figures (rapists) is also, and I think primarily, the rehabilitation of a wounded mother.

« Skin », « *Piel* », now appears as the ultimate signifier ; our analysis of Almodovar's text has almost reached its conclusion. For the fantacized reconstruction of wife, lover and daughter is not only the rehabilitation of a woman, of her face and body, but the restoration of her sexual identity, and this means of a particular organ, the vagina that is, as we can see on the screen at least on one occasion. Part of the vagina, inside, is her *hymen*, « a membrane stretched across the vaginal entrance », the dictionary says. It was that membrane which was damaged, destroyed during the « scene » and which must now be rebuilt, *resewn*. For indeed, it is a very fragile membrane and this is what Roberto remarks on examining Vera, something like : « I didn't think your *skin* was so fragile. » In the end, Almodovar's film can be analysed as a denial of the primal scene , a denial of the castration of the mother. Restoring her hymen is a way to de-castrate her no doubt, but even more than this it is a way to deny the scene itself : it never happened. Roberto Ledgard was indeed well named, he is the one who keeps guard over the mother's virginity.

A first verification can be found in what I call the « scene with the dummy », a short piece of science fiction in the film. For the operation that will restore Roberto's lost object to life, a dummy, apparently, is needed, and it is a dummy without a head. I interpret this as an obvious sign of castration. The face will prove to be Vera's, but Almodovar keeps the spectator in doubt for a second : indeed, although the operation could or should concern Roberto's wife (we haven't met Vicente or Norma yet), it is difficult to decide whose body we are really looking at. The meaning of the scene is of course elsewhere : in the feminine shape of the dummy and in the absence of a head. Following this oneiric moment of uncertainty, the dummy receives its head and its face, a face

which is said by Marilia to look too much like that of the dead wife. Of course, at this stage of the story one does not understand what the connection is between a skin operation and a vaginoplasty ; only later will we understand what unites the two. For the time being, we must be satisfied with the interpretation that it is a reconstruction of *a woman* whom we may associate with the wounded mother. This is no doubt the place to mention Roberto's dead wife's name : GAL, which is also the name he has given to the new skin he has « created » and is not without some resemblance with *girl*, a generic substantive Almodovar certainly knows. It is at least an hypothesis worth considering.

Should we need another verification, I think we can find it in the scenes in which Vicente is held prisoner in a cellar before his operation. The idea was borrowed from Thierry Jonquet's novel, although, as we are going to see, the author of the movie gave it a very specific dimension.

As it is filmed by Almodovar, confined, dark and humid, the cellar in which Vicente is kept strongly resembles a grotto. And because of the importance given to water in the scenes shot in the cellar—Vicente is brought water to drink, and this is later followed by food--, I find it very difficult not to « see » a representation of the mother's womb here. The « skin » in which the subject lives thus receives a second acceptance. In the end, before the surgeon proceeds to the operation—and this could also represent a coming into the world—, he submits Vicente to a very powerful shower. I found the scene striking, and it brought to mind some of Freud's observations about a child's sexual fantasies. (7) Not a specific parallel to the case of the « Wolfman », I still think the episode in the film can be interpreted as a representation of the encounter of infant-to-be-born and phallic father. All this within the mother's body. Such a fantasy of life-in-the-womb is completely coherent with the desire to reconstruct the wounded mother. Both unconscious desires amount to deny the scene ever existed. On one hand, we have the insistence on « sewing » and on « skin »--a reparation--, and on the other, we are transported, and the subject, in his fanticizing, is transported to a time before the scene. Early on in the film, when the skin transplant on Vera (whom we didn't quite know then, and who is a complex character anyway) (8) is considered successful, Roberto, not without some pride, exclaims :

« [Tu tienes] la piel la mas fuerte del mundo. » (You have the strongest skin in the world)

This is a first fantasmatic victory over the mother's imagined past, an attempt at denying the existence of the primal scene. The meaning of the two operations becomes clear : in both cases, the aim is to reconstruct a feminine body, the mother's primal sexual identity, an identity the child thinks was damaged. First, this body is made whole again, untouched, like new, and then, as if it were not enough, to complete the fantasy as it were, one imagines it as it was when mother and infant were alone together. « Before the scene », indeed, could well be a good subtitle for *La Piel...*, and is at least a perfect title for the cellar sequences. Should we need another, extra verification, we could remember that Norma, in the garden scene, wasn't actually raped and has remained a virgin.

The problem, of course, is that the cellar, alas ! is no paradise. For Vicente, who spends all his time there in chains, the place is more like hell ! This is because Vicente, as a signifier, first appears in the film—in the « dream »--as a representation of the mother's torturer. And also because, in the construction of the fantasy, he is the necessary element—like a child's toy building block—which will permit the change of sex, a « sign » whose value will pass from 3 to 2. (What is somewhat more difficult to explain is that he is also a victim, since the rape he is accused of never actually took place ; this is where the Other appears, an issue I shall try to discuss below.)

For the time being, then, Vicente is still a young male, if a male in chains. And because Almadovar seems to insist on this, it has to be interpreted, however personal and delicate the matter.

The first idea that comes to mind is that Vicente's chains are a representation of the umbilical cord. This is the optimistic view and cannot be set aside. But the next idea is that this union with the mother is at least of an ambiguous nature, and this is less optimistic. In his cellar-body of the mother, Vicente clearly appears as a victim, a very rebellious victim at that, while Roberto, the surgeon who is preparing him for « the » operation, has been turned into a very dangerous aggressor. Not once does Vicente accept the treatment that is inflicted upon him, to the end he will rebel...exactly in the same way as Vera does once the sex change has taken place.

This is the central ambiguity of the work and it can best be witnessed in the last images of the film. Towards the end of the story, then, when the success of the operation is well established, we see Vera and Roberto about to make love. They are in bed, harmony seems to reign in the couple. After a short while though, Vera, still feeling fragile, asks her companion to wait until the morning. Naturally, he complies, he seems quite in love. The first result of this delay is that, once again, the mother is « saved », the front entrance remains closed and her « skin » is preserved. What I have called the core of the fantasy is totally in control of the situation. All is not lost, however, if I may say so, since an alternative seems to have been found, another way ; as Roberto suggests : they could try « *por detrás* », from behind, and to this she seems to agree.

But she will need some cream, and she leaves the room to get some. When she returns, instead of cream, in her hand she has a gun, and with it kills Roberto, first, and then Marilia. *Exit* the father figure, the rapist of women. The mother's sexual integrity is safe, it is all very coherent.

But then, what are we to make of Marilia's murder ? Running to the bed-room when she hears gun shots, she is killed too, and this is not so easy to understand. For Marilia is a mother figure, this is clearly established : she looks after Roberto's house and feeds him ; she also feeds Zeca, although with less zeal ; both men are her sons. What are we to think of the last scene of violence in the film ? Couldn't Marilia, since she is a mother, be saved too ? Can we decide there was a « good » mother who had to be rescued, and this would be Vera, and a « bad » one, who had to be punished and this would be Marilia? This is difficult to say, but it is very tempting to interpret Roberto's and Marilia's murder as the punishment inflicted on bad parents. Where is the unconscious logic here ? Why kill father *and* mother ? To what an extent is this conclusion (I am leaving the « Epilogue » aside for a while) compatible with the rest of the tragedy ? Are we no longer watching the unconscious representation of a desire to go from 3 to 2 ?

V

To understand this « mother's murder », we must first turn to another striking ambiguity in the film. I am thinking of the rôle given to Vera, or rather, to be more specific, of the variations to which this character-signifier is submitted. And here we are facing the difficult task of harmonizing the unconscious threads we have found at the origin of Almodovar's creation, its very roots. By « roots », I mean the movement from 3 to 2, that is to say the acquisition of another sexual identity —probably a source of *jouissance* for the producer of the tale--, but also the suffering of a young man who is shown as having no desire to undergo a sex operation, is forced and is indeed a victim. I use the word « victim » knowingly for the simple reason that the film script is explicit on this point : at no time is Vicente compliant with such an operation ; quite on the contrary, from the very moment he is kidnapped he becomes an innocent martyr in the hands of his executioner. From apparent rapist to rebellious prisoner, such is Vicente's fate in Almodovar's fiction, and one must admit that the logic which prevailed over the conception of this character is not so easy to grasp.

I hope it is now obvious that we shall not be able to disentangle the contradictory threads of our story unless we bear in mind that fiction characters can be assigned various symbolical roles, roles which, as in dreams, can happen to be contradictory. « Pawns » in the hands of the author, because

their function can vary, they should be interpreted as signs, as I have written above, and not necessarily taken at the realistic face value of their image.

In fact, the shift from Vicente to Vera in the film perfectly demonstrates the incidence, and I should write the prevalence, of the symbolic dimension of human behavior and discourse. Below the realistic surface of the cinematographic image something of Vicente remains in Vera. We are facing the same entity : both characters refuse the fate that is forced upon them, even though Vera cleverly hides her game almost to the very end. But when she kills Roberto and Marilia, a *passage à l'acte* which can be defined as : « Vicente-in-Vera revenges himself on what we can consider as parental images », her action defines her as a rebel. For she may well ask calmly for thread and needles when she first appears on the screen, (9) from the start she is described as a prisoner ; just as much as Vicente, she is deprived of freedom. « A victim and a rebel », this should help us to find an answer to our question : « Why the mother ? »

There are two mothers in *La Piel que habito*, and one of them is the image of a good mother ; about this there is no doubt. For four years, Vicente's mother (Susi Sanchez) has been worrying the police and she is still hoping her son will return. But things are more ambiguous with the other mother--even though Almodovar managed to make the two women look remarkably alike--, and if we study Marilia's portrait carefully we have some doubts as to her « goodness ». Devoted to Roberto, she can be considered as her accomplice, but I am not sure this is enough to gain her the qualification of good mother. Ambiguity again, of course! In the rôle given her in the triangular oedipal drama, she is rather on the side of the castrating father, and this may help us to understand why Vera kills her at the end. We also remember she more or less abandoned her two sons : one left for Brazil, and the other she gave to Mr and Mrs Ledgard, her masters at the time of Roberto's birth. (10) At one moment, near the beginning of the film, Almodovar has her say that her sons must be mad, « *locos* », and that perhaps it is her fault : « *culpa mia* ».

Not a good mother, then, if only because of her participation in Vicente's castration, and this points out her determining rôle in the young man's fate, an observation which I hope will help us to close our « case » and enable me to conclude my research on the genesis of *La Piel que habito*.

This takes us back to the symbolical signification of the surgical operation and the change of sex in the film, which I interpret as the expression of a desire to save the mother's virginity, her hymen, and to reconstruct this damaged skin if needed. What remains, now, is to explain away the contradiction I have just mentioned above between such a desire for femininity and the suffering involved not only in the surgical operation itself but in its consequences. To do so, we must resort to the hypothesis of an identification of the son with his mother, an identification unconsciously desired by the mother as her infant's Other, the child being asked, required in fact, to symbolically take the place of his suffering parent, that is to say not only defend and reconstruct her lost virginity, but also endure the same pain as her when, in the sexual act, she felt castrated. (11)

Naturally, this hypothesis about an identification of the son to his mother, and especially that other hypothesis which makes an Other of the parent, cannot be verified ; at best, it could perhaps find a beginning of verification on the couch. It will therefore remain an unproven hypothesis with us, even though the presence of many words and images in *La Piel que habito* could find an explanation with the help of such an assumption.

In any case, Other or not, the fantasy of « life » in the mother's womb seems accompanied by the sentiment that it presents many advantages, and I think this justifies the production of the cellar scenes, whatever the ambiguity implied, as we shall see in a moment. These « advantages » (12) are easy to understand. For such an ideal life does away with the possibility of a difference between the sexes, away with castration ; it is a life *before* any loss whatever, a life before the Fall as it were. In

a way, the benefit of such a « life » *before conception* is double : it gets rid of the father's presence—or at least reduces it to a minimum—and, avoiding the obligation to have to choose one's sexual « side », permits the fanticized enjoyment of both sexes, a perfect dream indeed !

But this imaginary life of bliss in paradise, on the other hand, is not without some disadvantages, and the film seems to say so; at least this is how I read Vicente's suffering in the cellar and how his carefully photographed *chains* can be interpreted. His rebellion, his refusal to be « enslaved » makes no doubt.

In the imaginary construction the film represents as a finished entity, however, we know *Vicente* is only a sign—half a sign—and we must complete this first portrait with *Vera*, that other sign or half sign, and this, in more sense than one, renders the analysis more difficult. As we saw indeed, the signified of the sign *Vera* is not easy to apprehend, and whereas there was no ambiguity in the conception of Vicente as a fully fledged rebel (someone punished for something he didn't do and who refused his « fate »), *Vera* is only revealed as a rebel at the very end of the story, when she kills Roberto and Marilia.

Earlier in the film, we saw her tearing away her dresses and then vacuuming them into the wall. The scene should be carefully analysed ; it might well explain *Vera*'s strange behavior and provide us with an answer to our question, « Why the mother ? ».

At first sight, tearing her dresses apart is not too difficult to interpret : *Vicente*-in-her wishes to do away with his femininity ; *Vera* refuses with rage the sexual identity imposed on *Vicente*. As a second skin, the dresses should be destroyed, and this is why they are reduced to a multitude of fragments and scattered on the floor. But how can we reconcile this to the rest of the scene and why do we see her next, vacuum cleaner in hand, making all those bits of material disappear into the wall ? Or should I write : « *sending* all those bits of material *back* into the wall » ? « Back into the wall »,⁽¹³⁾ that is to say back to the mother's body in an act which complies with her desire and helps in the reconstruction of the parent's lost virginity ?

If this interpretation is correct, however, what do I do with the rebellion of the child ? Have I missed something in the « scene with the vacuum cleaner » ? As for instance the idea that if sending the *torn* bits of material *back* into the wall is the child's way of helping in the reconstruction of the mother, the gesture, *on the other hand*, doesn't seem devoid of aggressivity ? At least this is how I read it. Could the passage also represent a « return to sender » ? The dress as the skin one refuses to wear ? If so, then, we can associate the scene with another short passage when, towards the middle of the film, a man and his son try to sell their wife's and mother's clothes because she has left them. She can go « *nuda* », naked, for what they care, which is perhaps a way of saying that she doesn't deserve to be helped., and what adds to the interest of this short passage is that the actors of the scene are Pedro Almodovar's brother and nephew, Agustin and Miguel. Isn't this a commentary on a mother who doesn't deserve to be loved ?

Vicente's chains in his « prison » may provide us with an answer. A plausible figuration of the umbilical cord, the chains may also be the materialization of the child's dependence upon a desire Other, an unconscious desire of the parent which will in part decide on the child's destiny. Such a dependence is perhaps even more clearly illustrated when, at the beginning of the film, we see Zeca wishing to be recognized by his mother and showing her his backside. What better sign of the inscription of the desire of the Other—his very « letter » indeed—than this black birth-mark on his behind ?

But things are not so simple, and as we saw there is also a good mother in the film, indisputably, in the person of *Vicente*'s mother. Thus are we confronted with a new question : « Submission or

revolt ? », and this reminds us of the ambiguity so often noticed in the film.

Could this lead us to the answer we are looking for? Is it possible to see in the ambiguity prevailing over Almodovar's film *not* the consequence of a contradiction between a destructive desire of the Other and rebellion against it, but rather the effect of a compromise by which what is not destructive in this desire, or is less so, is assumed? Revolt, in this case, would not be absent from the film, but what is rejected would only be that part of the desire of the Other which is felt damaging. Could this herald the « end of the analysis » ? (14) It is a question.

And because it is not for me to say, I shall stay with this question...

*

But we still have a few more minutes of film to watch—the ending I have called The Epilogue—and we cannot leave without looking at these last images. They show Vera returning to the shop of Vicente's mother and wanting to be recognized by this « good » mother ;

« *Soy Vicente* », I am Vicente.

She is wearing the dress which, as Vicente earlier on, she offered to Cristina, a very feminine « skin », clearly. Does this mean that she accepts her new sexual identity ? Possibly, yes. And does it mean that the « bad » mother is forgotten, pardoned ? This also is possible ; compromise would then be the rule.

Between such an ending and the rest of the story, no discordance. Besides, what better way to avoid a radical choice than compromise ? Neither the one or the other, and the proposition applies to the choice, the assumption rather, of one's sexual identity. The mother, whose unconscious desire seems to have been the son's law, will be protected, her virginity saved, and too bad if this has to go along with the necessity of taking her place in the sexual « sacrifice » !

There is in any case always the possibility that *la jouissance* here be still a little more complex. For the distance between « the one or the other » and « the one *and* the other » is not so great. The second formula may indeed help us to account for some small details in the film for which until now I had not found a place in the overall picture.

For the male sexual organ is not totally absent from *La Piel que habito* and shows up, I think, at least three or four times. (15)

Following the operation, Roberto, the surgeon, presents a series of phalluses to Vicente, now a woman, from small size to normal, explaining that she should use them and that this will help in her complete recovery. This is the best example of « the one and the other », and even though one may decide it has a rational and medical *raison d'être*, the possible symbolical meaning of the passage cannot be denied. The other occurrence is slightly more subtle, but the unconscious (?) hint leaves no doubt , I think. When we saw Vera hoovering a multitude of bits of material into the wall, I read the scene as the hallucinatory reconstruction of the mother's « skin », but I said nothing of the instrument she was using. And yet, with its long, flexible and hollow tube, the appliance speaks for itself and we can now give it a place in the general tableau. This is in perfect harmony with the general « mood » of compromise I have highlighted. To possess both sexes, not to have to choose one's side : we have already encountered this fantasy of totality in the cellar scenes ; it forms part of the complex unconscious design which in the end produced *La Piel que habito*, I take the desire of a sexuality which excludes neither the one or the other as one of the unconscious dimensions of the film.

I hope this completes the tableau I have imagined in order to account for the production of *La Piel que habito* : to rebuild the mother's virginity, to take her place in the primal scene, and to avoid to choose one's sexual identity.

But mostly, I also hope my interpretation will do justice to Pedro Almodovar's splendid film. We must be grateful to him for having offered us a material not only of an extreme psychological richness but so true to life, a fine example indeed of a « *parole pleine* ». (16)

NOTES

1. Even Marilia (Marisa Paredes), the double mother (she has two sons), is given a double ; one has certainly remarked that the actress who plays the rôle of Vicente's mother (Susi Sanchez) looks remarkably like her. We can also notice how Roberto's young daughter (Ana Mena) grows to look so much like her mother.
2. This is the original event, the aggression which started the whole tragedy ; and since it cannot be denied that her flight is suffered by Roberto as an abandonment, a loss of his love object, we have the triangle again.
3. On reading Thierry Jonquet's novel it is easy to guess which passages must have inspired Almodovar ; no doubt he borrowed some features from the book, but he inserted them into quite another plot and I think they should simply be considered as echoes of a different story ; this is the reason why I speak of « day's residues ».
4. Among the fragments borrowed, and re-arranged by Almodovar, one will include the capture of the rapist in the wood (p.23 and p.105), the reference to opium (« [...]il vient te voir, prépare les pipes [...] », p.112), Vicente's mother's search for her lost son (« Depuis quatre ans, il n'y avait plus d'espoir », p.54), and last but not least the particular decor in which the prisoner is kept in chains.
5. In *Volver*, the main character's parents die, burnt to death by fire (See *Almodovar on Almodovar*, edit. Frédéric Strauss, translated Yves Baignère, Faber and Faber, London, Boston, 1996. p.103. Also, in French : Frédéric Strauss, *Conversations avec Pedro Almodovar*, (1994) Paris : Cahiers du Cinéma, 2007, 247 pages.). In an early version of *High Heels (Tacones Lejanos)* never completed, a mother is almost burnt to death ; then there is a second fire and this time the mother is disfigured : « [...] like a real ghost from a horror movie [...] » (Ibid. p.104).
6. Disguised as a tiger, Zeca, no doubt constitutes a conscious reference to Dawking's « egoist gene » (mentioned in the credits), and there is no doubt either that the short television sequence watched by Vera where a leopard catches its prey points out of an interrogation on our determinations. Both Vera and Roberto, at one time, are seen wearing a mask.
7. I am referring to Freud's « From the history of an infantile neurosis » (1918) (*The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVII, London : The Hogarth Press, 1955). Among the many passages that could be quoted in relationship to the scenes of the film, see for instance the following lines : « He [the child] wished he could be back in the womb, not simply in order that he might be re-born, but in order that he might be copulated with there by his father, might obtain sexual satisfaction from him and might bear him a child. », p.98. In his long study, Freud also mentions « identification with the mother », and, *in the case we are studying*, I find the latter insight perhaps more interesting for us than the

- desire to be copulated by the father...This is for each reader/analyst to decide.
8. « Complex » because « she » represents Roberto's dead-wife-to-be-brought-back-to-life *and* Vicente.
 9. A request that I think can be explained by the ambiguity of the character, neither male or female. And it is also a request that clearly defines her as the author's, or at least Roberto's, instrument : like him she wants to sew.
 10. The name is interesting : Mr and Mrs Ledgard are the persons who kept—*guardar* in Spanish and *garder* in French—Roberto. Thus will the surgeon's name also design him as the guardian of the mother's integrity.
Touching the ambiguous rôle given to Marilia, we must of course remember that at the beginning of the film she can be said to act as a good enough mother : seeing her in her « uniform », in a flashback a bit later, Roberto makes a remark about the uniform (one sex only?), and she replies that this way, back at work as a servant, *they can be together again*.
 11. This is no doubt the place to comment on the rôle held by Louise Bourgeois in Almodovar's film : her huge spiders are well-known and could perhaps be interpreted as ambiguous images of a mother. Several times, Louise Bourgeois mentioned her attachment to her mother, and I do not wish to comment on this : spiders are said to be good mothers... What is certain, though, is that there is no ambiguity in Thierry Jonquet's *Mygale*. This direct source of *La Piel que habito* whose title evokes the image of a large hairy South American spider leaves no place for hesitation : the parent, here, is wicked. The use of Louise Bourgeois' dolls in the film's decor can naturally receive another interpretation ; the reference to cloth and sewing is probably what mattered most in such a choice.
 12. One also speaks of « secondary benefits ».
 13. ...the wall of the womb ?
 14. Or of a « slice » of it... ?
 15. I mention « three or four occurrences » because the interpretation I give of the other two examples I have in mind may not be accepted : I « read » the luxury white cars which enter Roberto's estate on several occasions as phallic symbols, and I think the name of the building is also very significant, a hint again, almost : *El Cigarral*. (It must be noted however that when Roberto's assistants come to *El Cigarral* for Vicente's operation one of the cars is red.)
 16. These words of Jacques Lacan are well known ; the expression alludes to the fullness of a subject's discourse, a discourse which, however complex or poetic, allows for no idleness. On the walls of her room, Vera counts the days of her imprisonment, and what she writes here and there is not unlike what a patient might say in the first stages of a psychoanalysis. It goes without saying that I haven't commented every single frame of the film, but I found most of them, each of them in fact, significant. Here is a short list of examples : the iron railing in one of the first images (*as in a prison*), Zeca's wish to have a face *operation*, the bed-room key *hidden* in an envelope under *another name* (clips), a skin that will resist mosquito bites (*stings*), a skin that will *never more fear fire*, a skin that is *tender* and *fragile*—this is repeated twice—and therefore in danger, the way Norma, in the garden, *gets rid of* her cardigan, etc. A remarkable coherence, indeed.

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