

## “THE SKIN I LIVE IN” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
Friday, 14 October 2011 15:39

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There are a number of moments in *THE SKIN I LIVE IN*, Pedro Almodóvar’s first thriller since 1986’s *MATADOR*, that express the playful side that has flowered in his films in the ensuing decades. Yet its heart is cold, dark and dangerous, sometimes seductively and sometimes thrillingly so, and it’s everything you’d expect from a genre work by this (very) particular director.

Almodóvar specialized in women’s stories throughout the ’90s and ’00s, and *SKIN* (beginning its U.S. theatrical run today in New York and LA) is another, even though its central figure is a man, Dr. Robert Ledgard. The filmmaker brought back his once-regular star Antonio Banderas (from *MATADOR* and others) to play this role, and the result proves once again that the two were born to work together, like James Stewart and Alfred Hitchcock. The latter duo’s classic *VERTIGO* is a touchstone for *SKIN I LIVE IN*, which is also about a man attempting to mold a woman into the form he desires.



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In this case, it's a little more literal. Dr. Ledgard is a plastic surgeon in Toledo, Spain who clearly has a successful practice, as he lives in a lavishly furnished mansion tended to by his housekeeper Marilia (Marisa Paredes). But the most important woman in his life is Vera (Elena Anaya), a mysterious young beauty he keeps sequestered in an upstairs room, often clad in a flesh-colored body suit. At times the relationship between Dr. Ledgard and Vera appears to be that of lovers, at others it's a more impersonal doctor-patient dynamic, or worse; her isolation drives Vera to the point of attempting suicide.

All is not right, and while Almodóvar makes it tantalizingly hard to put your finger on what exactly it is, he keeps you engaged and fills the eye with the opulent setting and teasingly odd sights—like a guy in a tiger suit who turns up to indulge in some unhealthy actions. If that sounds bizarre, just wait; Almodóvar, fracturing the chronology of the story (loosely based on Thierry Jonquet's novel MYGALE), jumps back in time at around the 40-minute mark to explore the origins of Dr. Ledgard and Vera's association, which involve some seriously perverse twists.

The director doesn't play “Gotcha!” with the story's major revelation; he's not after a SIXTH SENSE or FIGHT CLUB-esque moment of discovery. Rather, he parcels out information so that the audience gradually understands the truth, and the dawning awareness elicits both shivers and black-humored smiles. The more we learn about the duo, the more we sympathize with Vera and view Dr. Ledgard as a twisted monster, yet while she becomes the object of the audience's identification, he never loses his fascination, and neither does the story. That's a tribute to the complete conviction Banderas brings to his performance, playing the role's dementia under the surface and neither indulging in mad-scientist histrionics nor camping anything up. Anaya is a perfect foil, wordlessly conveying Vera's many conflicted emotions with her big, expressive eyes and perfect (and frequently uncovered) body language.

When Dr. Ledgard covers Vera's face with a pale mask, there are visual echoes of Georges Franju's EYES WITHOUT A FACE (released a year after VERTIGO), which may be a tease on Almodóvar's part—encouraging knowing viewers to make assumptions about the situation that aren't actually the case. As opposed to the still-graphic black-and-white surgical bloodletting of that classic, Almodóvar holds off on the gory details here, getting plenty of cringeworthy mileage out of suggestion while suffusing THE SKIN I LIVE IN with lush colors courtesy of cinematographer Jose Luis Alcaine. Alberto Iglesias' eerie, violin-suffused score is another throwback to Hitchcock, recalling Bernard Herrmann's compositions for VERTIGO and others, and the film in general is shot through with a sense of melodrama that recalls the movies of a bygone era.

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Yet THE SKIN I LIVE IN transcends its homages; it's very much a film of the here and now, and not just because of its vaguely futuristic/science-fictional trappings (the plot turns on Dr. Ledger's development and use of a revolutionary synthetic skin). Mostly, it's an Almodóvar film, one which demonstrates he's just as comfortable making you squirm as he is making you laugh and feel—and at different points in this devious scenario, he makes you do all three.

