

The Body in the Hospital Bed: an examination of the blurred line between medicalization and sexualization in the films of Pedro Almodóvar

Lisa Martine Jenkins

UC Berkeley, Professor Miller

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of Pedro Almodóvar, the human body is not just the human body. His actors are not just actors, and their interactions are not just relationships. The female body, due to a number of factors, is the subject of particular contortions, becoming a canvas for representations of everything from the playful to the sexual to the artistic to the medical. Of course, this diversity of representation is true for many directors, but Almodóvar accomplishes something unique with the way his camera treats the female body. His approach is most pointed in his representation of the incidental physical vulnerability of women, particularly in the strangely blurred space in and between sexual and medical vulnerability. Two of his films, *Talk to Her* (“*Hable con ella*”) and *The Skin I Live In* (“*La piel que habito*”), occur largely in this space, exploring the issues of physical vulnerability and its connection to both real and imagined strength and control. Almodóvar is no stranger to the utilization of the naked female body—he focuses constantly on the extraordinary aesthetics of form, punctuating his films with the nebulous art of sexual movement. However, actively medicalizing the body is a different, but often connected, choice.

While hospital scenes pepper Almodóvar’s movies, lingering on the naked form of the woman on the operating table and in the larger context of the hospital is a more rare decision, with a more complicated conviction. In these shots of the female form, perspective is more complicated and layered than it might appear at first blush. They provide extraordinary insight into the relationships of the characters, both to one another and to the larger themes of female spirit and strength in film. What does this vulnerability mean for the women in the films? In Almodóvar’s plot, is the manipulation of the female

body an assault on simply the form, or also on the spirit? Are the two disconnected in the diagnosis of Almodóvar?

Ultimately, these two films provide unique insight on the difference between focusing on the medical and focusing on the sexual. The aesthetic presentation of women (and of the hospital in general) is one of Almodóvar's central preoccupations, and it is a preoccupation that contorts the agency of women and their ability to ever be separated from their capacity for the sexual. However, he also illustrates that physical vulnerability does not absorb the female identity—his focus on the aesthetic strips them literally, but not necessarily figuratively, allowing them identities that are not manipulated or defined by assault of either the clinical or the sexual kind.

TALK TO HER

While the film has many plotlines, Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* is primarily the story of a comatose dancer named Alicia and the adoring attentions of her caretaker, Benigno. After years of careful care in a long-term hospital ward, Benigno fashions himself in a relationship with Alicia, clearly deluding himself that she returns his amorous affections. Of course, the nature of this relationship is one rooted in the manipulation of the body, as Benigno spends his days cleaning her, painting her nails, doing her hair, and even taking her out of the hospital environment. He “talks to her” as one would to a friend or a lover, but we get the sense that this conversation is as much for him as it is for her. From the film's beginning, their relationship (or lack thereof) is painted in an odd light—one of the first shots we see of Benigno's work with Alicia is of him washing and massaging her hands and feet and chest with another nurse. Almodóvar crops the shot around Alicia's naked breasts, leaving their blurred shapes in the background as the camera focuses on the pairs of hands working over her (Talk 00:04:48). Her

nudity is almost gratuitous, simply a choice made in order to set the stage for Alicia's vulnerability. She, in her absence from her body, has lost her agency even over whether or not to be clothed.

In the next moment, the camera is pulled back and we see the scene as if from Alicia's perspective. We are at her eye level, watching as the nurses prop up her legs and spread them wide (Talk 00:05:09). The time spent watching the nurses clean between her legs is probably triple that which is spent on the rest of her body, illustrating the obsession that the film already has regarding the sexual capacity of the comatose form. However, what is strange about this sequence is the attentions paid by Benigno and even by the camera do not seem, on their surface, to be immediately sexual. They highlight the form's vulnerability, but the gaze feels clinical. In fact, in the next moment, Alicia is even laid out and covered by a sheet in a position extraordinarily reminiscent of a corpse (Talk 00:05:33). The nurses dress her, as one would a doll or even a figure in a coffin. She is alive in only the barest, physical definition of the word, and the camera lingers on her pale, naked form. This shot is the first time we see her body in its entirety, and therefore it is the portrait of Alicia that stays with us as the film explores the increasingly sexual dynamic of Benigno's attentions.

This pattern is exemplified by the fact that Alicia begins to appear to us as more and more fussed over. For example, in the scene where Benigno (before raping her) describes to Alicia the film he has recently seen, she appears to be wearing makeup (Talk 00:59:00). Her lips, which began the film pale, and almost blue, have taken on an artificially pink sheen, her eyes are shimmering, and her hair is tied up with matching pink elastics and a hair clip. The camera quite literally undresses her, zooming in on Benigno's fingers as he fiddles with the ties of her dress, then removes it entirely. It is unclear, in this scene in particular, why her nudity is necessary. Benigno seems to have begun taking more and more liberties with his role as caretaker, moving from the duties that are medically needed (cleaning her, etc.),

to those that are aesthetic, and more for his pleasure than his patient's—applying makeup to a comatose woman serves no purpose but for those observing her, which in this case is principally Benigno. After he recounts the movie, the camera pans out, so that we see Alicia's naked form with Bengino arching over her and massaging her torso. These moments are eerie, because her face and makeup appear very much conscious, or at least alive, but her position is that of a corpse, surrounded by white and covered, at least partially, by a sheet. This moment interrupts Benigno's recounting of the story, and as he moves his massaging hands toward her hip bones rather than her waist, we are left with a disturbing picture of where they are headed while the audience is distracted by the short black and white film.

This film, reportedly, is the tool that inspires Bengino's rape of Alicia. In the film, a man takes a potion that causes him to shrink to the point where he can fit in his girlfriend's purse. At the end of the film, they are in bed together and, as the woman falls asleep, the small man walks over the contours of her body in a way that is very reminiscent of the way the camera's movement has treated Alicia thus far. Having traversed her hipbones, he crawls inside her sleeping form, evidently both curious and hoping to elicit pleasure from the woman. The story ends on a positive, though ambiguous note, stating that he stayed inside her for the rest of his life (Talk 1:05:57). Clearly, Benigno identifies with this narrative—as the caretaker of a sleeping woman, he believes that she has had a generally positive response to his adoration. In fact, a shot of Alicia's face immediately follows a shot of the film actress moaning with ecstasy, showing that Benigno connects the two. Alicia, in Benigno's eyes, is capable of experiencing pleasure, and therefore his hands rapidly massaging up her thighs are not those of a rapist, but rather those of a responsible caretaker.

Strangely, in the year following this assault, Alicia wakes up from the coma. She is put in a position of vulnerability in her hospital bed, and through the violent and nonconsensual actions of a man,

emerges from that vulnerability. At the end of the film, she is really the only character whose position has improved, despite her victimization. Which is not to say, of course, that Benigno's actions were the catalyst for her recovery. Even if these displays of love or affection will heal her, the moral figure will allow a certain female independence in both the context of the medical and the sexual—the responsibility for her recovery does not hinge on the man's stripping the woman of her consent or agency. Being attracted to a comatose woman, and especially acting on that attraction, is unacceptable in the lens of the film. Despite the fact that Alicia ultimately survives her coma, the trauma of this rape is the film's lingering image.

THE SKIN I LIVE IN

Almodóvar's 2012 film *The Skin I Live In* stretches this notion of physical manipulation even further, telling the story of a plastic surgeon kidnapping his daughter's rapist and performing a range of surgeries (including a sex change) to perfect the female form. In this way, medical manipulation and sexual manipulation become intimately related in and of the body of Vicente-turned-Vera. What starts as an act of revenge evolves into a full-scale endeavor of perfectionism, in which undue emphasis is placed on the sexuality of the post-operation Vera, and in which the doctor (Roberto) ultimately takes his daughter's rapist to bed with him. Of course, the nature of much of plastic surgery involves both the medical and the sexual, as doctors contort flesh for the purposes of aesthetics. However, Almodóvar's film is not so much a meditation on the profession itself as it is a meditation on vulnerability under the perfectionist's gaze. This, evidently, is an expansion on the comparably simple notion of vulnerability under the male gaze that he explores in *Talk to Her*.

This phenomenon is addressed most explicitly toward the beginning of the movie—Vera attempts to seduce Roberto in an effort to escape from her oddly luxurious prison, pressing up against him and murmuring, “I’m made to measure for you” (Skin 00:20:52). While this could be interpreted as the language of a vague, but deep, Platonic connection, the progression of the film so far makes it clear that this statement is uniquely complex. Our introduction to Roberto’s profession is a relatively long scene, set to dramatic, symphonic background music and focused on his basement laboratory (Skin 00:10:30-00:13:20). He enters the glass-encased chamber, and the camera essentially ignores the headless, segmented female mannequin on the table behind him. We watch as he, with eyedropper precision, mixes blood with an unnamed liquid, places the test-tube within a centrifuge, and then examines the separation with minute precision. The extremely cropped shot of the layered liquid within the test tube forces us to focus upon the scientific process before we have any real conception of the film’s plot—for all we know, Roberto is a typical, well-meaning researcher. Next, we observe (in an even more extremely cropped shot), the lazy, liquid movement of drops on a microscope slide. It is a moment’s manifestation of life in quietness. Considering Almodóvar’s well-documented preoccupation with the movement of liquid, we expect him to zoom in even further (as he does in a later scene), on the throb of the cells themselves. Instead, Almodóvar cuts to two shots of insects in quick succession—they each focus on a tight swarm of bees and beetles, respectively. The relevance of this move becomes clear later, as we find out about Roberto’s creation of skin that resists everything from flame to bee-sting. However, in this instant we have no idea of the context of this move, and it perverts the expected narrative of the scientist’s work. The insects feel like a scourge upon the otherwise white, glass, and sterile backdrop of the scene, leaving a bad taste in the viewer’s mouth. From this moment forward, his work takes on a strangely

sinister sheen, so that when, mere moments later, Vera's form appears on the operating table, it is in anticipation of something perverse.

In the next shot, we finally zoom in on the headless form on the operating table. Black lines, as if of a marker, crisscross this flawless, sterile, pale figure, segmenting the body as one might a dress pattern or even a doll. Some of the lines are dashed, measuring the contours of the figure as though it were a topographic map and defining the edges of the female form in a way that is distinctly aesthetic, rather than clinical. It is an attempt to make the body comprehensible, as Roberto slices pieces of fabric-like skin to fit these segments. Of course, this seems initially to make sense, considering it is not a live body, but rather a visibly solid figurine, a horizontal dress form. However, in what is perhaps the creepiest transition of the film, Almodóvar uses a cross-fade technique to place Vera's very-much-alive head upon this dress form, fitting her body to the form with seamless precision (Skin 00:13:14). In this moment, it becomes clear that the clinical obsession with the female form is, in fact, aesthetic. And while the aesthetic is not at this point necessarily sexual, this focus too becomes perverted.

Almost exactly an hour later, when the narrative has taken on more complexity, we return again to the operating table, this time as Vicente wakes up from his unasked-for vaginoplasty. The surgery itself is focused once again away from the form on the table, narrowing instead upon the slow process of doctors donning their scrubs and slipping hands into sterilized gloves. Considering the viewer has no idea why Vicente is there, this distraction is frustrating, drawing attention away from the drugged and unconscious focus of the plot. Oddly, set next to the rubber gloves is a speculum, hinting at Vicente's fate. However, Almodóvar spends an inordinate amount of time on the preparations for surgery, rather than the surgery itself. Once again, once focused on Vicente's face at the head of the operating table, he uses a fading technique, this time fading to black and fading back in on practically the same view.

We see his eyes widen at the news of his surgery, but otherwise, as before, the horror of his situation is kept below the surface.

The following section is where we see more clearly the escalation of the medical manipulation for the purposes of sexual control. Roberto comes into Vicente's room as Vicente examines, with trepidation, his vagina (Skin 1:20:15). We see this shot through the round mirror, which is reminiscent of the round microscope slide from the beginning—Vicente is a sexual spectacle, both clinical and (considering the mirror) aesthetic. Subsequently, Roberto enters and implores Vicente to take care of his “new orifice,” and “manage bit by bit, to make it deeper” (Skin 1:20:56). In fact, he tells Vicente to act “as if his life depends on that orifice,” which feels like more of a sexual threat than a piece of medical advice, considering Vicente did not want the surgery to begin with (Skin 1:21:04). The tools (or “dilators”) he extracts in order to accomplish this are lined up in order of size, the first ones quite pointy but otherwise innocuous. However, as he extracts more and more, they become large and dildo-shaped, pointing to the very real possibility that Roberto is actively turning his medical project into a sexual one. Especially considering Roberto's attitude toward Vicente/Vera, this project feels incredibly sinister—he is turning his daughter's abuser into his lover, in an act that continues to build upon Almodóvar's portrayal of the physical vulnerability of women in the medical and the sexual space.

CONCLUSION

To a certain extent, we can understand Almodóvar's work as dealing with some of Western society's most deeply entrenched philosophy—he plays with René Descartes' idea of the separation of the body and the soul in a very particular way. When control over the body (and especially over the female body) is compromised, where does that leave one's identity at its root? Does this necessarily compromise

the power of the individual? At first blush, it seems the answer would be yes—the women in *Talk to Her* and *The Skin I Live In* are horribly manipulated and taken advantage of in ways that are both medical and sexual—the caretaker or the doctor becomes the rapist, removing the agency of the patient in a very disturbing way. Many of the scenes discussed above are largely seen through a manipulative (and largely male) gaze, focusing on the aesthetic beauty even of the hospital environment. In fact, the hospital is always portrayed in a startlingly beautiful light, with dipping blood, throbbing cells, and the slow-motion movement of even the hospital equipment. The medical world is a place of beauty, never separated from aesthetic preoccupations.

In this way, the body resting in the hospital bed seems to go against the view of Descartes and become a physical manifestation of the ways in which the victim's identity is predicated upon the control of another. They are never simply forms in need of care—their medical reality is predicated entirely upon their existence within a place of beauty. The bodies of Alicia and Vera are as vulnerable as their characters, and the gaze upon them takes advantage of this vulnerability in a way that is almost pornographic.

However, when we take a step back from the shots themselves and look instead at the plots of the films, we see a very different picture. Rather than remaining saddled with the vulnerability imposed upon them by their caretakers, Alicia and Vera both emerge from the films in a position of ultimate power—they are alive, and their caretakers are not. Benigno commits suicide (primarily in reaction to his relationship with Alicia), and Roberto is shot point-blank by Vera herself. Both women return to the spaces in which they began their stories—the dance studio and the consignment shop, respectively. In this way, they manage to illustrate the ways in which the body and the soul are, in fact, separate. They both emerge from the horrors of their respective assaults and take back their own

identity—the final shot of *The Skin I Live In*, in fact, is of Vera returning to her mother and stating “I am Vicente” (Skin 1:53:50). In this way, Almodóvar escapes from the focus on the aesthetic or sexual, finally illustrating that perhaps the victims are the real heroines, despite the abuse their forms have endured.

In Almodóvar’s world, the universe of the body is never isolated from harm or manipulation. Particularly for women, the body is the subject of constant sexualization that remains at the forefront of many of Almodóvar’s films. However, what is less obvious is the connected medicalization of the body—in the hospital bed or on the operating table, the female body is stripped nude and laid bare in more ways than one. While it may seem like a neutralized form in this context, the way the other characters view this nude form perverts the narrative, allowing the body to never be simply a body. It is, as Roberto points out, an “orifice,” ready and waiting for sexual advances. Almodóvar films the female body as a form stripped of its agency and ripe for the abuses of men. However, within the context of the greater plot, he paints a rather more empowering picture of women—they are creatures experiencing enormous assault, but physical vulnerability does not necessarily translate to a vulnerability of the soul. Ultimately, through Almodóvar’s lens, the medicalization and sexualization of women necessarily overlap, but the women get the last laugh, rising above the focus on aesthetic power and relying instead on their power to endure.

Work Cited

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