What Lies Beneath: Fabric and Embodiment in Almodovar’s The Skin I Live In

This paper investigates discourses about fabric and embodiment in Pedro Almodovar’s The Skin I Live In (2011). The aim of the study is to consider how the film’s narrative and mise-en-scene positions fabric as an expression of corporeal vulnerability and subjectivity. Drawing primarily on Warwick and Cavallero’s (1998) notion of ‘permeable boundaries’, in the relationship between clothing and bodies, this paper argues that Almodovar has interwoven motifs of somatic integrity and dissolution in relation to skin, textiles and film. This investigation proposes that The Skin I Live In offers a compelling interplay of surfaces that is a valuable resource to reflect further on the symbiotic connections between corporeal materiality and fabric.

Keywords: fabric: embodiment: surfaces: subjectivity: materiality

Introduction

In her study ‘The Dressed Body’, Entwistle (2001) identifies a need to improve academic analysis of the symbiotic relationship between dress and embodiment. She suggests that the “precise relationship of the body to dress and dress to the body remains unclear and under-theorised” (Entwistle, 2001:37). This paper will consider the role that cinema can perform in addressing such debates, with reference to Spanish film-maker Pedro Almodovar’s The Skin I Live In (2011). Many Almodovar films highlight identity discourses through embodiment, often using transgender as a platform to suggest erosion of binaries (interior and exterior identity). He often underlines the role corporeality and socio-cultural attitudes to clothing and adornment practices play in relation to the construction of ‘the self’ (Law of Desire, 1987; High Heels, 1991; All About My Mother, 1999; Bad Education, 2004). Whilst The Skin I Live In explicitly addresses these issues, (and hence is firmly positioned in relation to an auteur canon), this study’s emphasis will be specifically on the significance of fabric and surfaces in the representation of embodiment.

This paper will propose that clothing interrogates “fundamental approaches to the body” (Fraser, Greco 2005:4) in this film, including perspectives on the objectified body operating at the level of representation. It also considers embodiment and subjectivity, highlighting affectual experiences that emerge within and because of an exterior form. Ultimately, Almodovar’s narrative documents the body “as process” (Fraser, Greco 2005:4), a liminal entity “never either a subject or an object, mind or body” (Fraser, Greco 2005:43).

Warwick and Cavallero (1998) claim that dress has the capacity to ‘question boundaries…to challenge the ideal of a unified identity’ (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998:5) and this lies at the heart of The Skin I Live In. Somatic integrity and vulnerability will be investigated and this paper will suggest that it is in the interplay of surfaces that challenges to presumed binaries demarcating bodies, adornment practices and identity configurations are located. An emphasis on surface materials (fabric) in relation to corporeal surfaces (skin) documented on a celluloid surface (film as a medium) will be the central framework of this textual analysis of Almodovar’s film. It will begin by introducing corporeal integrity as a plot device. The significance of skin will be considered with specific reference to boundaries of the physical body (Bakhtin, 1986; Douglas, 1966, 1973; Kristeva, 1982; Shildrick, 2002). The study will then reflect on clothing as a ‘second skin’ (Warwick, Cavallero, 1998; Lynch, Strauss 2007). A detailed analysis of the Jean-Paul Gaultier designed bodystocking worn by
the protagonist will examine this trope directly. How motifs of somatic containment and dissolution are expressed in his design will be highlighted. The study will progress by dissecting fabric’s function in the suturing of subjectivity and exterior image. The protagonist’s recycling of clothing into abstract sculptures is addressed from a phenomenological perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 1981; Entwistle, 2001; Sweetman, 2001; Ahmed 2006). The affectual interaction between bodies and fabric is discussed as Vincent/Vera comprehends an evolving identity. The symbiotic relationship between interior and exterior embodiment is examined further in the final section of this paper. It is suggested that the effect of a voyeuristic camera objectifying gendered bodies, culminates in the orientation of the central character’s refashioned self.

“Don’t look at the surfaces”: Skin and Materiality

It is from the plot of The Skin I Live In that approaches to embodiment directly emerge. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) is a surgeon whose research is preoccupied with skin regeneration and the construction of a non-penetrable sheath for the body. It is precisely this plot device that encompasses discourses about surfaces in the configuration of embodiment – both psychologically and aesthetically within the narrative. By focussing on the trope of surfaces, Almodovar’s film implicitly reveals tensions between interior and exterior corporeality.

Robert’s occupation focusses on the body as organic matter. The function of skin in his research reveals tensions about interior and exterior corporeality. These pivot on the understanding of the body as reliant on surfaces that shape an exterior form. A civilised, ordered body is comprised of surfaces that demarcate and protect somatic boundaries (Douglas, 1966. 1973; Bakhtin1986). Surfaces and margins are addressed in Bakhtin’s work when he defines differences between classical and grotesque bodies, the former distinguished from the latter by perceptions of an “impenetrable façade” (Bakhtin, 1986:94). The regulatory function of surfaces shielding and ‘closing off’ the body’s marginal spaces is a reminder that corporeality is inherently disordered and its boundaries are regularly transgressed. Bodies that leak are viewed as polluting agents that disturb and threaten. The abject body is therefore defined by its inability to be contained and demarcated. It lacks a fixed form and definition, privileging unruliness and ambiguity (Kristeva, 1982; Halberstam, 1995; Shildrick 2002). An understanding of skin can be located in relation to these perspectives on the body as organic matter. Skin provides a surface that envelops and safeguards the interior of the body (Juhan, 1987; Benthien, 1999; Connor, 2004). Its central purpose arises from recognising the body as vulnerable, thereby requiring an exterior layer.

The tension between the abject qualities of corporeality and its disavowal emerges directly as a central plot device exposing Robert, the cosmetic surgeon’s psychological disorder and subsequent violence inflicted on Vincent. His psychosis can be attributed to his fear of vulnerable corporeality. His wife’s suicide as a result of suffering extreme facial and body burns is the motivating factor of his experiments with “transgenesis” (The Skin I Live In, 2011) – the skin mutation procedures that he develops and orchestrates. He desires to develop a skin that transcends somatic materiality and instead serves as a literal protective barrier that withholds contamination, initially evident in the mosquito tests he conducts. Through flashbacks we learn that despite her car crash survival, Gal could not endure the aesthetic destruction of her face. The trauma of burnt flesh and the ineffectual gauzes that fail to sheath and protect the skin from further contamination motivate Robert’s research into the illegal development of artificial skin.
The foregrounding of materiality and the biological function of skin as a sheath that contains inner organs and serves as a protective membrane is addressed in Robert’s conference lecture. He outlines the musculature of the face that lies beneath the exterior definition of the self, the idea that “our face identifies us” (The Skin I Live In, 2011). This encapsulates the psychological need to be restored somatically after corporeal trauma so that we remain recognisable as ‘ourselves’. This lecture signposts the direction of the narrative in its recognition of the synergies between subjective embodiment and exterior physical form. Cosmetic surgery and skin implants that surgeons routinely perform to ‘complete’ a sense of self are investigated in the film as Robert’s research pushes the understanding of a permeable skin membrane prone to dissolution and deterioration to extreme.

Robert’s neurosis encapsulates a traditional perception of the skin’s function as a barrier that shrouds and protects the body from exterior threat. This illustrates a psychological need to restore what Benthien (1999) claims is a “classical distinction between internal and external” (Benthien, 1999: 10-11). Skin’s identity as a surface that provides a stabilising form that completes and maintains corporeal unity is an essential motivating factor for Robert’s research. His scientific interventions are born from the recognition that the ‘natural’ epidermis is unsuccessful as a protective armour for all that lies beneath its surface. His surgically enhanced version that shapes Vincent’s somatic form erases the understanding of skin as a permeable membrane.

A prevalent view of skin’s function is that of a container that sheaths and safeguards the integrity and form of the inner organs, giving shape and offering a structure to the soma, providing an exterior casing that ‘houses’ our insides. Juhan (1987) suggests skin can be perceived as “effectively containing within its envelope everything that is ourselves, sealing out everything that it is not” (Juhan, 1987: 21) highlighting the premise of a symbolic wall/dividing mechanism that demarcates and protects the body from exterior threat. This notion suggests a solid impenetrable safeguarding armour, a “static condition of closure” (Connor, 2004: 22) that insulates other components and encourages connotations of wholeness and entirety. It is this notion of an enveloping exterior barrier that generates our traditional labelling of skin as a surface. Discourses surrounding surfaces and the demarcation of interior and exterior are problematised in Almodovar’s film.

The concept of skin as a sealing surface reinforces a somatic ‘need’ to be contained and protected. However, as understood in the development of medical research, skin’s function as armour is particularly unsuccessful. Far from dividing interior and exterior, it is in fact a membrane that on closer inspection permits a fluid “traffic of substances and qualities” (Connor, 2004: 22). It can be argued that this recognition elicits psychological concerns about the body’s boundaries (or lack of), the plot motivator within this film. Scenes of Vincent/Vera’s evolving artificial skin substantiates this. As Robert notes, “now there won’t be any more burns” (The Skin I Live In, 2011). Robert’s neurosis about somatic vulnerability is primarily manifested in its lack of boundaries. Far from preserving a clear demarcation between interior and exterior, skin is an entity that offers dissolution of these. It is certainly not an opaque material that cannot be penetrated. Instead it contributes significantly to our understanding of corporeality as vulnerable and its permeability thereby directly threatening body integrity.

“I’m Made to Measure”: Fabric and embodiment
Clothing’s relationship to the body is primarily assumed to provide protection from exterior forces that threaten it. Flugel (1950) addresses how fabric sheaths the body - a protective layer that safeguards against the dangers of the elements, animals and socio-cultural constructions of modesty. The concept of clothing’s role as protection suggests an understanding of the body as a vulnerable entity requiring the assistance of additional material/layers (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998; Entwistle 2001). Its precarious status is socially and psychologically accepted in relation to threatening exterior forces but clothing and adornment practices also play a role in regulating (through a layering process) the unruly nature of our corporeality. Clothing can be perceived as assisting in ‘containing’ flesh and blood – an additional protective barrier that reinforces skin’s function separating inner and outer. (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998). This section will offer an analysis of the bodystocking worn by the protagonist post-surgery with the aim of addressing how fabric performs as an insulating surface. It will consider how Gaultier’s design questions clothing’s function as a successful second skin (Warwick, Cavallero, 1998). Beyond the relationship in the film between skin and fabric as guardians of corporeal integrity (successful and otherwise), this section will also outline how socio-cultural perceptions of clothing nurture subjective expression.

The scientific procedure of regenerating a second skin and somatic form introduces a symbiotic relationship within the film between the materiality of the body and fabric/textiles. At the heart of this relationship lies the symbolic significance of the nude bodystocking that Robert fashions for his patient, a ‘skin suit’ designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier. Robert sutures artificial skin components to his patient’s body, gradually enveloping the somatic form with fragments of newly generated skin. As this material formation of a literal second skin is highlighted, the procedure is completed with a fabric bodystocking providing an additional third surface during the post-surgery recovery period. These layering fragments reinforce the motif of a protective sheath shrouding the body.

Clothing’s function is to protect Vincent/Vera’s newly designed form and the experimental skin that has been scientifically fabricated. It literally serves as a secondary layer protecting the embryonic skin. According to Robert, the bodystocking will “protect your skin. It will also give you support and mould you” (The Skin I Live In, 2011). The notion of supporting and moulding the body is a reminder of clothing’s function as an additional ‘container’ to that of skin. If skin offers a function of hiding/erasing inner organs in order to establish a semblance of unity and exterior wholeness to the somatic form, clothing provides an additional layer to secure and protect against vulnerable corporeality. Clothing’s relationship to the body would therefore appear to quell anxieties and shroud areas where inner and exterior coincide.

The clothing as second skin trope is made visible in the Gaultier designed bodystocking worn by Vincent/Vera. The initial black fabric that shrouds in the early stages of the treatment shields the surgical scars from exterior contamination and is subsequently replaced with a flesh-coloured version when Vincent/Vera is transformed. The fabric completely sheathes the body exposing only facial skin. Its function as a protective barrier is therefore clear and it suggests a second skin directly in its flesh-coloured tone and lack of embellishments. The stocking’s function as a surrogate skin is alluded to in the very first scene in which Vincent/Vera overlays the stocking with additional items of clothing (and fails to cover her backside, thereby implying nudity).
Whilst the bodystocking’s flesh-coloured tone replicates skin, Lycra is also a significant feature of Gaultier’s design as it perpetuates the film’s investigation of somatic boundaries. It is a fabric that nurtures bodily movement through its elastic properties successfully clinging to and defining body contours. Lycra exposes the form of the body, undesirable areas are rarely disguised and in this respect, it acts as a second skin because contours are as visible as if without clothing. This of course is heightened in the film because a lycra bodystocking is a visible indicator of somatic mutilation. The fabric identifies the protagonist’s exterior form as no longer biologically male. The concept of the lycra ‘containing’ and enveloping Vincent/Vera is a reminder of the newly fashioned gendered identity inflicted upon him/her. This isn’t after all, only an experiment in skin materiality but biological reconstruction.

Despite sheathing his/her format it reveals explicitly biological sex post surgery. O’Connor (2011) claims lycra has permitted women to “wear their own bodies…a second skin for a new life” (O’Connor, 2011: 125) Lycra does indeed become a second skin for Vincent, symbolic of a new life as Vera, and a chilling revisiting of the motif of containment with connotations of entrapment. Lycra is therefore an appropriate fabric that reveals and objectifies the contours of the body.

The nude bodystocking offers a seemingly stark contrast to Gaultier’s earlier inner-made-outer attire for Kika (1993). This gory exposing of flesh and blood invading the hardened exterior of the bustier is standard horror fare in the spectatorship of somatic violation. The permeable boundaries of corporeality are excessively and comically documented in that film, worthy of a Cronenberg gore-fest. Rather than exaggerating the organic essence of embodiment and its “instability and leakiness” (Shildrick, 2002: 54), the lycra apparel in The Skin I Live In construct the somatic form as a smooth entity that resembles the texture of porcelain in its light reflecting properties. The bodystocking as a one-piece rather than separate items of clothing suggests a cohesion disavowing any marginal spaces that are evoked in Gaultier’s Kika costume.

Whilst the lycra fabric and flesh toned hue of the stocking evoke the trope of impenetrable second skin, the inclusion of visible stitching around the breast area challenges this. As Almodovar has commented, “I asked Jean-Paul Gaultier to provide a design where the stitches could be seen as if they were scars on a second skin” (Sight and Sound, 2011: 21). Stitching literally interrupts the unblemished surface hinting at a place that could be penetrated should the stitches unravel. Gaultier’s design therefore establishes the illusion of body integrity through the contouring of his chosen fabric, colour and surface impressions, only to destabilise this premise in the motif of visible stitching. Whilst the lycra stocking reveals Vincent’s missing male parts, the contours of a biological female form are further accentuated in the stitching motif. This is a reminder of Gaultier’s familiar designer auteur signature of foregrounding breasts. Unlike the weaponry of earlier conical bras that punctuate his corsetry, the breasts are merely outlined with visible stitching marks.

The stitching motif on the exterior of the bodystocking would traditionally be visible inside the garment and hence functions as a motif that exposes a tailoring technique. The inner mechanics of constructing a garment assume a symbolic function therefore of equating the process of making a garment as ‘second skin’ and making a new corporeal form through surgery. We witness the different stages of Robert’s surgical reconstruction of Vincent into Vera, marked by surgical ‘tacking’ marks on the newly formed somatic structure layering the skin. Throughout the process, material refashioning resembles processes of overlocking seams and tailoring procedures. It is in the stitching motif on the bodystocking that organic matter and dress are symbiotically interwoven. Vera has been “made to measure” (The Skin I Live In,
2011) and the second skin sheath exposes this trope directly. The stitching works with the lycra fabric in foregrounding a female physicality that has been refashioned beyond ‘natural’ biology. Stitching marks specifically positioned as ‘tacking’ outlines for breasts polarises the refashioning as gender specific. It is a visual signpost that Vera’s breasts are ‘fake’ - a more subtle evocation of a transgender discourse than All About My Mother (1999)’s Agrada who theatrically exposes her own body modification and newly acquired female parts. Unlike Agrada, Vincent/Vera is tragically not the agent of his/her own transgendered surgery and the sight of the bodystocking in the mirror is an aesthetic reminder of this corporeal violence.

The motif of visible stitching encapsulates the trope of identity reconstruction, furthering the analogy of identity and clothing as a second skin that is worn. The duality of Catwoman’s female identity for example in Tim Burton’s Batman Returns (1992) is foregrounded in a similar vein. As Selina Kyle tailors her performative alter-ego Catwoman, so we witness her constructing her pvc catsuit - a bodystocking that is an exterior manifestation of her newly-constructed self. The new suit is really a new skin for a new feminine identity. This refashioning is once again signposted through her creative decision to make visible the garment’s seams. Large white stitching punctuates and interrupts the shiny otherwise unblemished pvc fabric.

Stitching highlights a ‘make and mend’ motif and draws attention to the precariousness of the suturing procedure. If stitching binds fabric to form a unified garment, it also serves as a reminder of a possible unravelling of each segment. Stitching marks therefore accentuate the notion that with all tropes of restoration andreassembling into a completed form, there is always a threat of disintegration and the potential for gaps to emerge that challenge wholeness. If the bodystocking is a second skin that protects against a vulnerable corporeality and safeguards abjection (Kristeva, 1982), the stitching motif threatens this. It exposes the instability of Robert’s remaking and remodelling procedure. Stitching evoking the threat of corporeal dissolution is of course reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s (1818) Frankenstein’s surgical reconstruction of the monster from the remnants of corpses. This piecing together of body parts is illustrated in crass stitching that is often emblematic of horror identity refashioning. Halberstam (1995) suggests the abject body in Shelley’s novel is attributed to the monster’s “propensity…to deconstruct at any time.…[the monster’s body] constantly threatens to unravel, to fail to hold together” (Halberstam, 1995: 37). Visible stitching therefore belies a coherent unified form, encapsulating the central premise of Shelley’s narrative and horror films since.

The trope of visible stitching on the bodystocking suggests that the body is only “precariously bounded” (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998: xvi) after all. Gaultier’s work has regularly experimented with designs that suggest the transgression of boundaries between inner and exterior. If Vincent/Vera’s bodystocking hints at a potential unravelling of what lies beneath the skin’s surface, his nude print strapless dress from A/W 2004-05 ‘Puppets’ collection, and the skeletal corsets from the 2010-11 ‘Parisiennes’ collection directly expose physical materiality. However, it is in the familiar bodystocking that the designer frequently disrupts motifs of somatic integrity. His AW 2003-4 ‘Morphing’ collection showcases a gauze bodystocking complete with bloodstream motifs and a lyca jersey sheath that is reminiscent of blood-soaked flayed skin exposing interior organs. Gaultier claims that “the inside of the body interests me as much as the outside. Like the inside and outside finishes of a piece of clothing” (The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk, 2014)

Vincent/Vera’s bodystocking with its visible stitching motif is somewhat subtle in comparison to Almodovar/Gaultier’s previous investigations of this theme. This is evident when positioned in relation to the violent, bloody breasts puncturing Andrea
Caracortada’s dress in *Kika* (1993) and Angel/Zahara’s sequined dress replete with motifs of pubic hair and nipples in *Bad Education* (2004). Whilst Bruzzi (1997) suggests that the former serves as “exaggerated conventionalised mechanisms for making the female form into an objectified spectacle” (Bruzzi, 1997: 11), themes equally applicable to Vera’s bodystocking in *The Skin I Live In*, Gaultier’s work continues to encapsulate and playfully challenge any sartorial disavowal of ontological materiality.

The possibility of bodies unravelling also highlights the relationship between inner and outer selves. Fraser and Greco (2005) outline these as culturally perceived correlations, “looking like what you are” (Fraser and Greco, 2005:12) Surfaces of bodies generate “truths of what lies beneath” (ibid) and clothing substantiates this, “that which covers our bodies becomes part of who we think we are” (Lynch, Strauss, 2007:14). Holliday (2001) research highlights an aspiration to feel comfortable in one’s own skin permissible when dress codes signpost subjectivity, cla\iling a “harmony of self-explanations and self-presentations” (Holliday 2001:228). In *The Skin I Live In*, the motif of a potential dissolution of corporeality hinted at in the design of the bodystocking, questions further notions of somatic unity in the film. The central plot device of Vincent/Vera’s physical transformation destabilises the perceived direct correlation between interior and exterior identity. Vincent/Vera’s new somatic form so visible in the clinging fabric of the bodystocking that s/he observes in the mirror, requires a process of subjective re-orientation as s/he comprehends an unfamiliar objectified form.

In keeping with the film’s investigation into the relationship between identity, embodiment and dress, Vincent/Vera’s emerging subjectivity is manifested in a further motif of fabric that develops beyond the meanings inherent in the bodystocking. Whilst the lycra skin-suit encapsulates Vincent/Vera’s passive fate as he is ‘made to measure’ to the requirements of the surgeon/tailor, textiles also serve as a symbolic portal in which the protagonist retains subjective agency. This is most evident in scenes of Vincent/Vera’s sculptural artefacts that s/he compiles from discarded cloth whilst in captivity. This is a creative endeavour clearly inspired by the artist/designer Louise Bourgeois. The camera hovers across a catalogue of Bourgeois’ fabric sculptures that have inspired Vincent/Vera’s work and a TV channel provides the protagonist with vital access to Bourgeois’ formless cloth artworks replete with visible stitching. Almodovar has suggested that Bourgeois’ work was inspirational when conceiving the film, recognising that many different facets of the film connect to her work (Sight and Sound, 2011: 21)

Bourgeois’ creative practice is marked by her reconfigurations of somatic forms, routinely experimenting with material such as clay, bronze, plaster and fabric to craft hybrid shapes. Morris (2007) suggests “her creations begged a vocabulary of evolution, metamorphosis and inter-determinacy” (Morris, 2007: 14). It is not surprising therefore that these tropes have nurtured Almodovar’s narrative and the decision to signpost Bourgeois as an inspiration. Vincent/Vera gravitates towards Bourgeois’ work precisely because the artist’s creative concerns directly mirror Vincent/Vera’s emotional and physical trauma. Storr (2007) maintains that the recurring trope throughout Bourgeois’ work is the “narrative of perpetual protean becoming” (Storr, 2007:35). By probing and subsequently replicating Bourgeois’ work, Vincent/Vera is gradually comprehending his/her own somatic mutation and immersing him/herself in Bourgeois is a cathartic emotional quest upon the refashioning of embodiment. It is Bourgeois’ later works that illustrate prevalent tropes of reconstruction through textiles and clothing that are directly referenced within the film. Her sculptural fabric figures are referenced in Vincent/Vera’s own objects. The act of transforming disparate shreds of fabric to generate sculptural

It is in the act of suturing new forms from ruptured fragments of clothing that the symbolic relationship between fabric and identity shaping emerges both in Bourgeois’ work and Almodovar’s narrative. She is noted for her preoccupation with reconstruction from destruction, her Tate Modern installation “I do, I undo, I redo: (2007) addresses this. Arch of hysteria (2000) utilises gauzes and coarse textiles that betray traditional constructions of femininity reserved for soft and alluring silk for example. Like the trope of visible stitching in Gaultier’s bodystocking, Bourgeois’ sculptural forms are noted for the “grotesque handiwork…deliberate ferocity of bad sewing” (Nochlin, 2007:17) that foreground the act of remaking and remodelling. These works are clearly regenerated and ‘made whole’ having previously been a series of disparate shreds once torn and now seemingly hastily reassembled. In her later work, fabric functions as a second skin but one that is tarnished. Rather than a protective barrier that is psychologically comforting, Bourgeois uses fragments of abrasive fabrics sutured with coarse stitching to challenge perceptions of body integrity and highlights fragmented identity reshaping.

Vincent/Vera’s room is littered with evidence of his Bourgeois-inspired creative endeavours. Large balls that have been generated from fabric resemble her sculptural figures in their emphasis on the aesthetic of patchwork layering of flesh-coloured textiles. It is evident that Vincent/Vera’s designs are utilising the gauzes that are provided to sheath his/her own body – a reminder of the correlation between artistic constructions and identity as an aesthetically designed object. The fabric sculptures directly mirror his/her own somatic mutilation and reconstruction. The aesthetic of patchwork layering with its foregrounding of hybrid remnants of fabric alongside crass visible stitching, offers a visual trope of deconstruction and incongruous reconstruction. New forms emerge from the active reconfiguring of scraps of clothing that Vera has shredded in a statement that disavows her newly-formed position as a recycled appropriation of Robert’s deceased wife. S/he mutilates the clothes provided that signify a new identity as a woman (and hence requiring a wardrobe that reflects society’s gender coding through clothing). By reconfiguring these fabrics into sculptural objects rather than using them to shroud the constructed somatic form, s/he is symbolically reasserting control. The reconstructed fabric is a physical act that generates self-awareness. Vincent/Vera experiences his/her body by orientating him/herself through the act of making, touching and feeling the sculptures (Merleau-Ponty, 1981). The shaping and forming of the fabric correlates with the shaping and forming of an emerging subjectivity and agency.

These sculptures hint at the character’s reclaiming of a familiar identity in his mother’s vintage clothes store. Vincent/Vera’s first flashback for example presents him/her at work fashioning a shop window straw mannequin. In a subsequent flashback, s/he is viewed stitching garments on a tailor’s dummy. These scenes provide a grim foreboding of Vincent/Vera’s fate but also serve to reiterate a potentially cathartic restoration of his/her previous skills in the realms of recycling and refashioning textiles. The concept of a familiar selfhood is expressed through the making process. The affectual interaction with fabric re-orientates the protagonist through habitual sensory behaviour. Whilst Vincent/Vera’s exterior somatic form is ‘new territory’, reshaping fabric is a recognisable tactile sensation that aligns with the feeling of familiar comfort and proximity to the spaces of his/her mother’s shop (Ahmed, 2006)
Vincent/Vera's sculptures correspond to Bourgeois' work and challenge Robert's artistic endeavour. The surgeon's psychological trauma about the dissolution of flesh and skin is allayed through his creation beyond the constraints of mortal material embodiment. This motif of 'perfect' unblemished skin is projected on to the unadorned body stocking that is symbolic of a reconstructed identity. The victim's abrasive sculptural objects juxtapose the unblemished forms of the silky smooth apparel. Vincent/Vera’s creativity can be viewed as foregrounding the harsh reality of his/her identity formation in which fabric as skin/flesh accentuates rather than erases material embodiment. According to Coxon (2007) “rough stitching and vivid fabric recall muscle or flayed flesh…Bourgeois’ disturbingly evocative stitched specimens seem to give up the secret of their own insides, as if they had been dissected” (Coxon, 2007: 288). Vincent/Vera clearly recognises his/her identity as the sculptural object of Robert’s own traumatised creativity and inspired by Bourgeois' themes and motifs, s/he reclaims agency as the artistic creator rather than remaining solely a created object at the hands of another. As Almodovar notes, the character “is not trying to be original, it is simply a balm that allows her to carry on” (Sight and Sound, 2011: 21). The creative expression through the reconfiguring of fabric pieces into sculptural shapes, offers a defiant stance against Robert’s corporeal violence. It offers a twist on the notion of make do and mend as the sculptures reflect the somatic distortion that has befallen Vincent/Vera, whilst reasserting his/her previous occupation of tailoring and modifying existing garments in his mother’s vintage shop.

Whilst contemplating phenomenological approaches to fabric and embodiment, Almodovar’s narrative continues to remind us of symbolic approaches to bodies and clothing in the motif of destroying and reconfiguring fabric. Both Vincent/Vera and Robert’s daughter Norma, express hostility towards objectified female identity in their disavowal of fabric as adornment rituals. Norma’s rape and subsequent emotional deterioration is illustrated in the fragments of clothing littered throughout the garden as Robert stumbles upon her after the event. This corresponds to the previous sequence of her initiation from child into woman in her ‘dressing up’ and wearing high heels at the party. It is not surprising therefore that one of the symptoms of her trauma later is her insistence that clothes repress and suffocate her. Adornment practices constructed her as an object and victim of the male gaze. Vincent/Vera’s punishment of course is to suffer a similar fate. Female clothing as an indicator of restrictive gender coding is evident in his/her traumatic reaction to the transformation as s/he violently slices dresses that are symbolic of enforced gender rituals. This motif of restriction is echoed in Robert’s daughter Norma whose symptoms of a distressed psyche are manifested in her inability to wear clothes that she feels confine and trap her.

The motif of Vincent/Vera discarding female clothing mirrors Norma’s behaviour and is initially equally repressive and violating. The shredding fabric motif illustrates this. Alongside the stitching motif on the bodystocking, the destruction and reconstruction of garments is interwoven with gender and identity discourses within the film. It is not surprising therefore that the film’s final image is his/her reflection seemingly superimposed on the figure of a mannequin in the shop window. Clothing and fabric/textiles have a symbolic function within the film encapsulating discourses on identity and embodiment. Within tropes of fabric unravelling and being reconstructed to create new forms, lies observations about Vincent/Vera as both active subject and passive object. This reiterates Warwick and Cavallero’s (1998) claims that “the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside” (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998: xviii) are reconfigured through dress and adornment practices. Almodovar conveys Vincent/Vera’s many emotions in how s/he interacts with fabric.
It becomes a conduit for the expression of the complex relationship between bodies and minds.

“I know you look at me”: Camera, surfaces and Subjectivity

Whilst the narrative theme of exposing and disavowing corporeal vulnerability is sutured in the relationship between surfaces of fabric and skin, screens offer an additional surface in Almodovar’s film that project a liminal stance on the “self’s clean and proper body with its attributes of integrity, closure and autonomy” (Shildrick, 2002: 68). The probing gaze of the camera is complicit in the act of perpetuating contradictory perceptions of embodiment, specifically apparent in the mise-en-scene of Robert’s surveillance technology.

In a film that positions a literal airbrushing process as a plot device, Almodovar’s camera gleefully accentuates his actors’ ageing features. The casting of his familiar stalwarts Antonio Banderas and Marisa Parades contributes significantly to the theme of material vulnerability, playing on the spectator’s (and director’s) relationship to these actors whose ageing process has been captured on celluloid by the director since the early/mid 80s. Almodovar utilises extreme close-ups of their faces that stand in stark contrast to new arrival Elena Anaya’s youthful complexion devoid of blemishes. The open pores of Banderas’ middle-aged visage highlight the trope of a deteriorating physicality, polarised when placed aside Elena Anaya in close-up. The casting of Banderas highlights this even further as we recall that he himself was a fresh-faced youngster when we first encountered him in Almodovar’s Labyrinth of Passion (1982). The whiff of mortality through corporeal transformation over time is generated here.

Almodovar’s extreme close-ups capturing his actors’ wrinkles and open pores (or lack of them) suggests the cinematic apparatus’ capacity to expose the materiality of the body. This is refreshing in an era of ‘selfies’ preoccupied with the camera’s capacity to airbrush and filter material embodiment (of course the very motivation behind Robert’s violence). Surfaces of fabric and tailoring, alongside those of perfection and deterioration provide textures of materiality that the film camera accentuates. In this respect, Almodovar’s interplay of surfaces – skin, fabric and celluloid – symbiotically addresses psychological preoccupations with somatic integrity. If Almodovar’s camera heightens Robert’s/Banderas’ age, Robert’s own probing gaze through his complex surveillance network views Vincent/Vera differently. In its investigation of the skin’s function as a vulnerable surface, Almodovar develops notions of somatic identity further by reminding us of how embodiment is defined culturally by its exterior representation. The entrapment enforced somatically through a refashioned corporeality is heightened in the recurring focus on cameras and screen projections that define Vera’s body as voyeuristic spectacle. The opening shot of the film introduces this motif as the surveillance camera on the wall in the protagonist’s room pans out to reveal him/her practising yoga. Vincent/Vera is therefore represented initially as an object of a probing gaze – his/her flesh-coloured body stocking performing as a screen on which Robert’s pygmalionesque desire is projected.

During the course of the film Vincent’s initiation into performing the role of Vera, as s/he learns to ‘become’ a woman with feminine props for example, is accentuated as s/he becomes educated in the necessary position as desirable object defined by exterior embodiment. The acknowledgement of somatic spectacle encapsulates cultural constructions of femininity. This is evident when Robert observes Vincent/Vera from the one-way screen, remotely controlling his proximity by moving
in to an extreme close-up, (replicated by Almodovar’s camera). Vincent/Vera becomes well-versed in his/her position as object of desire when s/he acknowledges the camera’s presence “I know you look at me” (The Skin I Live In, 2011).

This trope of female identity inscribed as an object of aesthetic desirability is at the heart of Robert’s wife’s tragedy - a woman whose scarred face witnessed in the mirror motivates her suicide. She is unable to recognise herself as beautiful and to control this due to the scarring of her skin. If beauty is culturally constructed through unblemished skin for example, Gal’s post-accident trauma is manifested in the loss of her feminine identity. Her physical grotesqueness through deteriorating facial features would suggest a loss of her feminine ‘function’ as desirable visual spectacle, thereby suggesting a loss of self. Gal’s plight recalls Christiane’s in Eyes Without A Face (1960) in the belief that a loss of gendered identity is evoked in facial disfigurement. The dissolution of Christiane’s somatic form in Franju’s film is reflected in shrouded surfaces within her home, notably her pre-accident portrait and mirrors that quell any confrontation with the aesthetic of incompleteness. Her father’s claim “now you have your pretty face…your true face, you can start living again” (Eyes Without a Face, 1960) offers a counterpart to Robert’s psychological need to restore the ontological presence of his deceased wife. Both films equate the creation of unblemished features with female beauty and identity residing in objectified embodiment.

In addition to the recurring presence of screens and cameras that probe and define embodiment, Almodovar punctuates Robert’s house with further visual manifestations of this trope. The female body as objectified spectacle is further accentuated in the assorted paintings adorning the walls of Robert’s house. As the camera probes Vincent/Vera’s contours, the classic nudes punctuating the mise-en-scene position the figure within a tradition of defining femininity in relation to tropes of unblemished skin reflecting light. This is a reminder that clean-looking, shiny skin is a surface on which desire is projected and that the nuances of corporeal materiality are disavowed in this recurring visual reconstruction. In a film that investigates material embodiment, it is not surprising that Almodovar’s mise-en-scene enhances the thematic preoccupation of the narrative by visually highlighting what lies beneath. Amidst the classic nudes of art history, Robert’s office wall hosts a print of Gunther Van Hagen’s skinless somatic forms (Body Worlds, 1995). This serves as yet another reminder of the central narrative themes and interplay of surfaces in relation to material bodies.

The notion of what lies beneath is directly addressed in the concluding sequences of the film. Almodovar investigates the implications of a cultural understanding of physicality as a marker of identity in Vincent/Vera’s yoga practice. S/he occupies time learning yoga and is frequently observed undertaking this practice through the surveillance cameras. As the body is subjected to a seemingly controlling gaze that defines Vincent /Vera as a woman, yoga is described on the TV programme that attracts his attention as “a place you can take refuge…a place inside you…to which no-one else has access” (The Skin I Live In, 2011). Yoga is therefore synonymous with the nurturing of the inner self beyond the limits of exterior form, a haven of freedom that preserves the inner self. Subjectivity and selfhood is at its most potent during the protagonist’s yoga practice, made possible through the liberating qualities of the fabric as a flexible entity. For many who experience dissatisfaction with their body shape, lycra is a textile that offers a subjective reminder of this, recalling Entwistle’s claims that clothing can be an “object of our consciousness” (2001:45). Sweetman (2001) reminds us of clothing’s impact on “our experience of the body and the ways in which the body can be used” (2001: 66). Lycra’s elasticity evokes flexibility and generates ease of bodily movement hence its traditional function within
sportswear. So the correlation is established between an ease of physical movement and subjective psychological strength. The materiality of lycra could appear to empower and restrict at the same time. Either way, it foregrounds clothing as “situated bodily practice” (Entwistle, 2001: 45). Vincent/Vera’s consciousness is articulated and reconfigured through fabric’s relationship with embodiment. This directly highlights an experience of clothing on an “affectual level” (Sweetman 2001: 73) corresponding to Sweetman’s suggestion that fabric can “construct and reconstruct individual subjectivities” (Sweetman 2001:73). This connects to the yoga mantra that s/he inscribes on the walls of the room “I know I breathe” (The Skin I Live In, 2011). Vincent/Vera’s inner understanding “I know” suggests s/he remains in control, achieved through self-awareness of physical instinctual embodiment “I breathe”.

Almodovar’s questioning of the mind/body binary is further illustrated beyond the significance of the yoga practice when the exterior form as an objective image becomes an equally liberating agent in the final scenes. Robert’s advice to Mariella “don’t look at the surfaces” (The Skin I Live In, 2011) encapsulating the over-riding themes of the film, is reiterated in the final sequence when Vincent/Vera returns to his/her previous world of his mother’s vintage clothes shop. A reassertion of subjective agency is expressed through the recognition of female attire. The reference to the dress that s/he earlier wore with Cristina allows s/he to be recognised despite an exterior form that betrays male biology. The mutual acknowledgment (and attraction) as s/he faces Cristina suggests a possible ‘happy ending’ as his previously unrequited affection for the lesbian could now be consummated now that s/he has assumed a female body. Previously, s/he had learnt the potentially liberating qualities of an exterior female form when s/he manipulates the newly acquired femininity to escape Robert’s house. A potentially mutual physical attraction between Vincent/Vera and Cristina is a further suggestion that this reconfigured form could in fact be advantageous and empowering after all. Ahmed (2006) suggests orientation relies on being “at ease with one’s environment” (Ahmed, 2006:134). The return to the clothes shop signifies not only a spatial reorientation for Vincent/Vera but also signals an embodied one too, a direct alignment with a space that privileges the remaking and remodelling of material matter.

“Can I take it I’m finished?”: Bodies and Fabric

In the climactic scene of Franju’s Eyes Without a Face (1960) Louisa’s necklace is torn from her neck to reveal the scars of her facial surgery. The exposed wound highlights her vulnerability that has been shrouded throughout the film, an example of female adornment rituals’ capacity to create the illusion of somatic integrity through the embellishment of corporeal surfaces. The exposed wound literally becomes the source of a further violation when she is stabbed, the stitches that once remade her subsequently unravel as Christiane exacts her revenge.

Franju’s film, a noted inspiration for the narrative of The Skin I Live in, considers the relationship between corporeal integrity and surface adornment practices that this paper has argued is investigated through Almodovar’s mise-en-scene. If, as Sweetman (2001) suggests “bodies and selves are made and remade in part through the ways in which they are adorned” (Sweetman, 2001:67), Almodovar’s narrative pivots on synergies between the reconfiguration of fabric, bodies and subjectivity. He has explored the interplay of surfaces relating to subjective and objective embodiment of Franju’s narrative and developed these by interweaving a study of textiles’ function relating to somatic vulnerability. The central characters of The Skin I Live In all display damaged psyches directly attributed to fears of ontological stability. They
endure tensions that exist between interior and exterior selves interwoven in the many roles fabric plays in expressing these concerns. This paper has argued that Almodovar locates plot devices about body modification and consciousness within aesthetic tropes of surfaces and discourses about fabric and tailoring. Fabric-as-material and corporeal materiality are sutured throughout this film. Warwick and Cavallero (1998) claim “destabilizing dissonances constitute a persistent undercurrent in the language of adornment, though only as half-consciously or unconsciously heard whispers” (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998:206). This study has suggested that there is no whispering, but rather a vociferous probing in this film of “the permeability of all boundaries” (Warwick and Cavallero, 1998:206). Like Bourgeois’ shape-shifting fabric sculptures that scream psychological trauma through abrasive flesh-like surfaces, Almodovar uses film as a medium in which to critically evaluate and inspire further contemplation of the complex symbiosis of textiles and embodiment.

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