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GOTHIC FICTION ELEMENTS IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* (2011)

Summary

The aim of this paper is to explore the elements of Gothic fiction in the critically acclaimed Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's 2011 film *The Skin I Live In*. The film is often viewed as a distinctly modern piece of art in that it dwells on contemporary issues referring to complex ethical and moral dilemmas connected to genetic engineering and the disintegration of an individual's identity. However, despite the undeniable presence of the said issues, the idea is to show that the film's structure is in fact solidly built on a much older Gothic fiction matrix featuring many of its well-established, easily discernible motifs and conventions. Starting with the classic Gothic topos — a helpless *heroine* set in an eerie, claustrophobic architecture, and a grotesque atmosphere evoking a feeling of imminent doom — the paper will consider the film's portrayal of concepts such as death, doubles, and dreams in order to show that the work of the Spanish director bears many similarities to the canonical Anglophone genre. Inevitably, the analysis will also examine the distinct parallel between Mary Shelley's seminal Gothic fiction text, *Frankenstein*, and the contemporary counterparts of its mad scientist and his Creation embodied by Almodóvar's Dr Robert Ledgard and his Vera.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In*, Gothic features, endangered heroine, mad scientist, obsessive love, wish to conquer death, *Frankenstein*

1. Introduction

The Skin I Live In is considered to be one of the most controversial of Pedro Almodóvar's films to date, which indeed says a lot considering the nature of the Spaniard's other works.¹ Loosely based on Thierry Jonquet's 2005 novel *Tarantula* (originally *Mygale*, published in the French language in 1984), the plot of the film is centred around the scientist Robert Ledgard (played by Antonio Banderas) bent on illegally creating a new type of skin resistant to burns and insect bites by combining human and pig genes and consequently experimenting on a young woman named Vera Cruz (Elena Anaya). Although by all visual means a female, Vera is actually a man – Vicente (Jan Cornet) – whom Robert abducted and forcibly transformed into a woman due to his conclusion that Vicente raped Robert's mentally unstable daughter Norma (Blanca Suarez) and is thus directly to blame for the girl's eventual suicide.

In addition to embarking on the highly morally questionable topic of transgenesis, wherein his protagonist conducts an illicit scientific experiment on another human being, Almodóvar presents the sundering between previously joint concepts of gender and sex by having one of his male protagonists surgically transformed into a woman. By doing so, implying that the body presents only a shell which the identity inhabits – thus the title *The Skin I Live In* – the director effectively supports the prevailing postmodern theoretical opinion on the necessity for differentiation between gender and sex. Consequently, the film is characterized as “a disturbing thriller that at times veers toward horror” (Smith 1) in that it explores contemporary preoccupations with the manipulation of identity and that it challenges the conservative view of identity as a stable concept. As such, Almodóvar's work is criticized on the grounds of being insufficiently intimidating and accused of abruptly abandoning the scientific storyline, “veer[ing] sharply into a typical Almodóvar soap opera” (Anders 1). Such interpretations, which argue that the scientific part of the plot does not reflect on the remainder of the film, or rather vice versa, fail to acknowledge the Gothic fiction matrix which inevitably permeates the work.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reveal the Gothic nature of Almodóvar's film by highlighting and enumerating sublime motifs which, in accordance with the canonical Anglophone genre, provide a deeper understanding of the main character, Dr Robert Ledgard's key incentive for delving into the field of transgenetics, that is, dreams, death and doubles. Additionally, by

1 Almodóvar is thoroughly engaged in the topic of homosexuals, transsexuals, Stockholm's syndrome, and similar controversial themes.

exploring the classic tropes of the Gothic genre, the text strives to show that the primary impetus for Ledgard’s scientific feat – which is in turn deeply associated with the events following Robert’s experiment – corresponds with that which lies at the heart of Gothic literature: obsessive love and the wish to triumph over death.

2. Vocabulary of the Gothic

Gothic, the term implying an obscure, mysterious and unpleasant setting and atmosphere, was first notably used by Horace Walpole in his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), whose prominent motifs – equally dark, corrupted characters centred around an innocent heroine residing in a medieval castle filled with mysterious passageways and horrifying secrets, thus presenting a fertile ground for supernatural occurrences – in turn helped establish the archetype of the Gothic novel with its “traditional conventions of the ominous atmosphere; the archaic, mysterious abode; the uncanny and charismatic villain; supernatural haunting; the oppressed, seemingly doomed heroine; and the symbolism of the irrational” (Beville 42).

Gothic literature encompasses a wide range of works that differ in style, plot, and certain pivotal characters such as vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and things without a name. However, one can note some distinctive characteristics that to a certain extent permeate almost all Gothic texts. In the wake of Anne Radcliffe’s definition that “the primary function of the Gothic tale is to ‘evoke pity and terror’” (qtd. in Beville 42), Nick Groom will state that “the crucial activity of the Gothic imagination,” apart from evoking fear, is the evoking of power through the creation of “sublime effects based on Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*” (62). Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In* corresponds with both definitions and strives to elicit the feelings of fear and power, as well as of pity, as shall be discussed further in the text. Moreover, according to Groom’s designation, the definition of the sublime denotes reasoning deficiency or the “sleep of reason” and is “best communicated by obscurity” (62), wherein he lists the seven types of obscurity: meteorological (mists, clouds, storm), topographical (impenetrable forests or mountains); architectural (towers, prisons, dungeons, locked doors), material (masks, disguises), textual (riddles, folklore), spiritual (magic and the occult), and psychological obscurity (dreams, visions, hallucinations, drugs, mistaken identities, doubles, derangement, ghostly presences, death, hauntings) (62-63).

Almodóvar's work abounds in profoundly disturbing events and motifs – the “obscurities” – belonging to the Gothic imagination. As traumas from history that repeat themselves, “betrayal and loss [layer] on each other in a tormenting spiral” (Lemma 1926). To start with, the film's plot is set in a secluded mansion, which later resolutely proves itself as a prison and the locale of horrific events, as suggested by the claustrophobic and sinister atmosphere in the beginning of the movie. At the heart of such a disturbing setting, there is a young and beautiful female, more accurately a male forcefully trapped in a female body, who is in turn literally trapped behind the locked doors of the mansion belonging to a deranged villain. The *heroine* represents a physical double of the villain's late wife, who committed suicide in front of their daughter after having been disfigured in a car crash. The daughter follows in her mother's tragic footsteps after being raped by a young man, whom the girl's father later surgically transforms into a woman as a form of revenge, providing him with the facial features of his late wife. As a woman, the young man suffers rape at the hands of the villain's insane brother, wherein the brother mistakenly believes that he is once again claiming his sister-in-law. Finally, set at the centre of these recognizably Gothic “images of perversion, transgression and the forbidden” (Smith and Wallace 3-4) is the Hamartian anti-hero/villain incapable of coming to terms with the loss of his wife (and later his daughter) whose destructive nature inevitably brings doom to him and everyone surrounding him.

The obscurities which noticeably elude Almodóvar's film are the meteorological and the spiritual. Yet, although neither gloomy weather conditions nor supernatural occurrences are present that would possibly point in the direction of unsettling predicaments and relationships between characters, Almodóvar's carefully orchestrated opposition between the prominently lustrous and even refined visual expression and its violent content prove to be equally resonant. Its genuine source of fear is the

. . . horror that unfolds within the confines of apparent style and beauty. Indeed the real horror of this film lies in its seductive aesthetics. As our gaze is intoxicated with the beautiful physical surroundings of *El Cigarral* and of its prisoner – the stunningly beautiful Vera whose skin is flawless – we are jolted by the reality that Vera's beautiful skin masks a body that has been brutally cut up and redesigned against her will. Beauty frames the horror and the horror is all the more brutal against

this surfeit of beauty, which is but a corruption of the reality it masks. Vera's flawless skin, which conjures up unreality in its perfection, covers up a profound traumatic injury which, unlike the new skin grafted on her by Ledgard, never heals. (Lemma 1299)

As for the absence of supernatural events, despite the fact that the large majority of Gothic authors incorporate supernatural elements in their works, texts written in the Gothic tradition “can be divided into those exploiting the supernatural or the uncanny and those simply designed to shock and thrill with their account of horrifying events that . . . turn out to have a rational explanation” (Riggs 157). Apart from asking its viewers to suspend their belief when it comes to Ledgard's creation of the new, synthetic type of skin, Almodóvar's film otherwise mimics the third category of Gothic texts in which the horrifying events have a plausible explanation. Nevertheless, such a state does not detract from the traditional Gothic intention to appal and shock with the help of

. . . a world of disturbing psychological violence, the minimalist performance style (especially in the case of Antonio Banderas), the insatiable thirst for vengeance the film transmits, and the terror that results from the exercise of absolute power, unchecked by any type of moral or ethical counterweight. (Zurian 263)

Even though the supernatural haunting does not occur in its literal sense, the presence of a deceased person — Robert's wife Gal — is palpable throughout Almodóvar's work and it reflects on other characters' motivations and patterns of behaviour in multiple ways. Similarly, the recognizable Gothic use of dreams as devices that help blur the line between reality and events that present only figments of a character's imagination takes a conspicuous turn. Namely, the dreams retain their prophetic meaning; however, combined with events that immediately follow them, instead of being supernatural in nature, dreams help articulate the main character's descent into madness, which presents yet another crucial motif of Gothic literature.

Finally, Zurian will go on to claim that: “There is little visible blood, no acts of overt physical violence; everything is white, clean, aseptic, sterilized” (263). Even though Almodóvar's work largely corresponds with the Gothic tradition

by having its primary focus set on building a strong feeling of claustrophobic and ominous atmosphere based on the concept of terror,² if one remembers the two instances of rape present in the film and the heroine's very graphic slicing of her own throat, it does not do justice to claim that violent acts are entirely absent from the screen.

2.1. Setting and Atmosphere: Isolation, Gloom, and Secrets

The Skin I Live In opens with a scene depicting the Spanish city of Toledo³ surrounded by a forest, and fluctuates to an equally isolated mansion in the possession of the villainous doctor, Robert Ledgard. Named *El Cigarral*, the visually attractive mansion represents "a glamorous prison: huge wrought-iron gates and a videophone system bar the entrance to Robert's opulent house. Remote-control locks seal the building while CCTV makes the interior a panopticon" (Smith 1). The claustrophobic atmosphere, largely characteristic of Gothic fiction, is thus achieved both on the outside of the mansion and, more importantly, on the inside.

On the one hand, the forest, the high-security entrance gate, and the very distance which separates the occupants of the mansion from possible visitors or intruders makes the breach an almost impossible mission without assistance from one of the occupants. Such a state is visible from the very outset of Almodóvar's film when the camera locks in on the iron bars at the beginning of the path which leads toward the house. The second instance bearing witness to the inaccessibility of the house takes place when Zeca (the Tiger, played by Roberto Álamo), servant Marilia's (Marisa Paredes) long lost son, reappears and demands to be let in. Marilia, although reluctant at first, allows for his entrance, but also finds it necessary to instruct the newcomer that he should "pass the second gate upon reaching the end of the path," therein implying both the existence of another possible path, as well as the second barrier between the mansion and the outside world.

On the other hand, the mansion's interior does not provide any relief from the exterior conditions, nor does it strive to establish the feeling of safety.

2 Gothic literature is decisively characterized by the teetering between the notions of horror and terror, and the prevalence of the latter, wherein in the simplest of terms, horror is ascribed to physical feelings of dismay and revulsion in the wake of a horrific event, while the terror is psychological, referring to unpleasant emotions such as apprehension and dread evoked by the sense of imminent danger, but not its immediate experience (Radcliffe 311-316).

3 Not insignificant due to Toledo's abundance of Gothic cathedrals and the city's overall medieval appearance. Additionally, many English authors of early Gothic fiction set the plots of their novels in Spain and Italy as representatives of correspondingly dark, mysterious, and exotic locations.

Quite the contrary, its spacious, albeit labyrinthine corridors, a cornucopia of (locked) rooms and constant video-surveillance testify of the mansion's prison-like nature and only serve to intensify the feelings of inescapability, as well as the imminence of dark, horrifying events.

All the above listed measures of preservation and isolation, according to the Gothic tradition, revolve around "the oppressed, seemingly doomed heroine" (Beville 39). Vera, a beautiful yet grotesquely clad woman – wearing a suit that solidly covers her body all the way to her neck – is first introduced to the viewers while practicing yoga. In an opposition to her outward serenity and contentment, Almodóvar's film follows an initially unknown female servant (later to be identified as Marilia) while putting a suspicious substance, presumably a tranquilizer, in a glass of juice which is afterward delivered to Vera through conspicuous means. Namely, suggesting the locked state of Vera's room door, the servant sets the tray with food and other objects in a specialized contraption (the dumbwaiter), which is consequently received on the other side by Vera. The absence of direct human interaction between Vera and the servant(s) is additionally reinforced by the use of telephone to which Vera is obliged if she wishes to communicate. Further aggravating the state of such already heavily controlled environment is the presence of video surveillance in Vera's room, unmistakably pointing to her forcible detention.

In addition to the practical purpose of efficiently keeping Vera under lock and key, the incessant live streaming of the woman's actions and behaviour serves yet another purpose intended by Dr Robert Ledgard, who represents the textbook example of the sadistic and encroaching Gothic villain: "The surveillance system installed in his home allows him to view his prisoner's every move and to manipulate and enlarge the image of Vera's body and face on a wall-sized screen" (Zurian 269). Robert's interactions with Vera in the first third of Almodóvar's film (at which point she presents the *final product* of his experiments) are heavily satiated by his monitoring of Vera, reversing the damaging effects she inflicts on her own skin and refusing to indulge her modest wish of "cohabitation." Vera's fate single-handedly lies in Robert's hands since he is the only person who, with the help of a key, which he keeps hidden in his room, has direct access to Vera's room and Vera herself.

Therefore, the recognizable topos of Gothic literature consisting of a helpless heroine set in an eerie, claustrophobic architecture and a grotesque atmosphere evoking a feeling of imminent danger at the hands of a shadowy villain, has been established. Following the reverse process of how the *heroine* found herself in such a situation shall help expose Ledgard's mansion as a truly grim setting at which unspeakable acts of horror came and continue coming about.

The connecting point between the young Vicente and the hybrid identity he adopts with the purpose of seducing Robert and freeing himself, albeit irrevocably residing in the female body of Vera, is another, likewise reclusive part of Robert's mansion. That is the laboratory in which Robert is seen conducting his transgenetic experiments by combining human and pig genomes in order to create a new type of skin impervious to fire and insects. Robert's laboratory is equally meritorious to the establishment of the formidable atmosphere at the beginning of the film due to Robert's shady procurement of necessary agents. Namely, one of them is taken over by Robert himself by a person of an undisclosed identity in an underground garage following his speech on the creation of the new skin, while the other is delivered personally to Robert by Marilia, whose words "It was taken while the animal was still alive," and the bright red colour of the liquid substance in the container leave little place for imagination.

Moreover, before turning into a location at which Vicente's worst nightmare comes true when he is kidnapped and involuntarily subjected to vaginoplasty, the laboratory (in fact, *El Cigarral* on the whole) is mentioned by Ledgard's fellow surgeon as to have been the location at which many successful (legal) surgical procedures took place. By urging Robert to return to his surgical practice that he has been neglecting as is evident in the list of patients to be operated in his mansion, the colleague reveals the contraband character of Robert's undertakings, as well as his conscious detachment from the community in order to pursue them, supported by Robert's unflinching untruthfulness when asked about the subject of his experiments and their (dis)continuation.

Finally, as the third representative of the traditional Gothic architectural obscurity, the viewers are presented with the basement in Robert's mansion to which he brings Vicente upon abducting him. By chaining Vicente to a wall and treating him like an animal by forcing him to eat and drink on all fours, Robert makes his cellar a dungeon similar to those in the Middle Ages, the period and the concept to which the original Gothic fiction is deeply indebted.

2.2. Helpless heroine and the Sublime

As the main subject of both psychological terror and physical horror in terms of what is being done to her body since the Gothic "terror is almost always sexual terror" (Haggerty 2), Vera's oppression and endangerment can be analysed from two perspectives.

The first perspective, in which Vera, as the subject of discussion in terms of Gothic features, represents a beautiful female, trapped and (sexually) threat-

ened by a villain, shares the characteristics of the prominent Female Gothic: “The castle or secluded house which had accommodated the fiendish devices and monstrous creations of the uncontrolled scientist or aristocrat – the erotic Gothic of the villain with power – [become] the unknown spaces for the terrified woman” (Conrich 78). As such, Vera is the physical double of Robert’s late wife, wherein she serves to connect two prominent motifs of Gothic literature, doubles and the death of a beautiful female lover. Additionally, apart from being Ledgard’s and *El Cigarral*’s captive,

Vera is not only physically imprisoned in a room and in a “new” body that we slowly discover she has been forcibly given by Dr Ledgard, but also in his mind where she has taken up residence as the object of his obsession. He has no regard for her existence as independent of his omnipotent wishes and fantasies. (Lemma 1292-93)

Vera is in such a horrible predicament that not even an attempt at her own life can enable her to put an end to the senseless torture she has been enduring at the hands of the deranged scientist. In that sense, Robert has fulfilled his wish in achieving *victory* over death; tired of constantly being the subject of experimenting and imprisonment, Vera attempts to commit suicide by slitting her own throat with a kitchen knife. Soon after, she is brought to consciousness by Ledgard, having plucked her from death’s embrace. She hurts herself once more by cutting the area above her chest with the help of pages torn from the book Robert sends her; however, they are both aware that Vera’s second suicide was a feeble attempt since she is well aware of the fact that she cannot win against Robert.

The second perspective allows viewers to analyse Vera as who she truly is – a young man named Vicente whom Dr Ledgard kidnapped and transformed into a woman, subsequently providing him with feminine accessories and clothes in order to entirely strip him of his original identity with the aim of replacing Ledgard’s late wife Gal. Having been imprisoned, tortured, raped, and overall trapped in a horrible situation with no way out, Vicente’s struggle approximates that of a typical female in the Female Gothic, and even surpasses it since Vicente’s primary habitat – one which is even more important than the house/home – his skin, has been breached and transformed into a source of distress and fear. As a consequence of these events, “Vicente lives on the verge of madness, unable to recognize the body that encloses him as his” (Zurian 269).

2.3. *Perfectly Modern Frankenstein: Dr Ledgard as the Gothic Anti-hero/Villain*

Dr Robert Ledgard, the owner of the beautiful mansion *El Cigarral* and an esteemed surgeon, presents a “stereotypical [Gothic] character: the brooding aristocrat, marked by some secret in his past” (Cox 73). Furthermore, he stands for the archetypal patriarchal figure exhorting power over all those surrounding him. He is the embodiment of all values that are traditionally seen as masculine – strength, courage, intelligence, and authority – and as such bears a number of similarities with Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein. As equal representatives of the *mad scientist* motif, Robert and Victor share the identical flaw. Both are, on the one hand, gifted with unsurpassable intelligence, which enables them to reach scientific heights unattainable to ordinary men, but are, on the other hand, cursed with the wish to come into possession of the *forbidden knowledge*.

The nature of this forbidden knowledge that both Victor and Robert strive to attain is the same: victory over death and its unyielding effect. While Victor wishes (and succeeds) to create life where previously there was none, Robert is obsessed with re-creating the image of his tragically deceased wife for whose demise he feels solely responsible. Robert’s servant, Marilia testifies of his endless research with the aim of improving his wife Gal’s state after a tragic car accident which left her entire skin burned irreparably. When Gal commits suicide after seeing her reflection in the mirror in spite of all Ledgard’s efforts to save her, Robert’s moral boundaries become mitigated, thus urging him to resort to illicit combining of human and pig genes in order to produce a type of skin to which fire can cause no harm. Robert’s “surgical precision with which he pursues his goal of perfecting Vera’s new skin and body gives some clue to the way in which this obsessional, violent pursuit holds him together and presages how it will eventually also destroy him” (Lemma 1293). Similar in terms of Frankenstein’s devotion to his work, Robert is also explicitly warned by his superiors that his pursuit is contraband and that he should abandon it; yet, as with Frankenstein, the warning only motivates Robert to furtively continue with his experiment, never once stopping to reconsider the possible consequences.

Just as Frankenstein pries into the nineteenth-century’s science development and its possible *wrong turns*, Dr Ledgard similarly raises complex moral questions connected to modern-day scientific issues of genetic engineering and plastic surgeries.⁴ Yet, while Victor Frankenstein’s quest is mostly scientific

4 Plastic surgery has recently become a valuable asset for many criminals, allowing them to change their facial features, as well as fingerprints in order to mask their original identity.

in nature, devoid of social concerns, which are promulgated in certain film adaptations,⁵ Ledgard's scientific pursuit is overtly stimulated by his uncontrolled emotions: "madness, amorality, and unhealthy passion" (Zurian 263). His revenge instinct provoked by the suicide of his daughter brings to light Robert's original motivation for turning Vicente into a woman – the suppressed trauma of his wife Gal's suicide and his inability to save her. Robert's madness and source of his tragic flaw converge into the most poetic of all motifs and a recurrent Gothic characteristic:

Poe repeatedly stated that the most poetic of all themes was the death of a beautiful woman, and the trio named ["The Raven", "Ulalume", and "Annabel Lee"] dramatise events inspired by dead young females. To some extent, these maidens are analogous to the ghosts whose conduct influences the courses of the protagonists. (Fisher 174)

The proof that Ledgard's key impetus for creating Vera was the act of re-creating Gal, contradictory to Varga's belief that upon Vera's finished transformation Robert falls in love with Vera herself, "completely forgetting about his wife" (279), can be found in two pivotal moments in the film. One of them is the very scene in which Norma's psychiatrist suggests to Robert that his care for his daughter was not adequate. The repetition of an already traumatic experience that Robert had experienced with Gal pushes him over the edge in his ruthless devotion to his late wife. Sparked by the revenge instinct, Robert's wish to invalidate Gal's death is manifested by kidnapping Vicente and transforming him into a woman.

As in other scenes punctuated with unremitting loss, Ledgard is unable to bear the pain of this rejection and immediately converts it into accusations and violent rage: he becomes angry with Norma's psychiatrist and criticizes his care of her, his grievance perhaps not insignificantly focused on why the psychiatrist does not encourage Norma to put on some nice dresses instead of leaving her in a white nightshirt all day that indeed makes her look like the patient she is and that Ledgard wants to deny. Here as elsewhere we witness one of Ledgard's primary defences: he

5 Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* provides Victor with an altruistic motive for his scientific pursuit by having him swear on the grave of his recently passed mother that he would put an end to both death and the suffering accompanying it.

wants to “make over” reality changing the surface of the body in an attempt to distance himself from the painful reality that is inscribed on it. (Lemma 1924)

Lemma justly notices that Ledgard is not in touch with reality — he does not fully react to certain situations as the next person would — but that his obsessive mind is insistent on “making over” reality, and that is exactly what happens with Vera. In this sense, Robert’s wish for revenge after his daughter’s suicide serves as but an instigator of his dormant obsession and delusional wish to re-create reality as he sees fit, that is, to recreate and revive his tragically deceased wife.

The second pivotal moment in the film occurs in the scene when Robert’s brother Zeca rapes Vera, triggering the revelation of Robert’s original motivation for “creating” Vera:

As Ledgard watches the scene on the security cameras in the kitchen he feels something unexpected and runs to save Vera/Gal. Having given Vera Gal’s face, Ledgard sees history repeating itself and fears losing her once again. . . . The drama here takes on the cast of tragedy, as the characters assume archetypal roles in a larger, and stranger, than life struggle. (Zurian 273)

Despite never referring to Vera as Gal, Robert clearly loses his grasp on reality at that point since he altogether stops seeing Vera as that what she really is — a man trapped in a female body against his will — and falls in love with the person who is in fact the very culprit of his daughter’s suicide, something which never happens with Marilia who, although she is not acquainted with the genuine reason for Vera’s presence in the house, relentlessly doubts Vera’s good intentions.

It is with the help of Marilia’s character that Robert is disclosed as a true Gothic “hero-villain [who] necessarily bears the dual markings of both villain and victim [evocative of] similar male figures including Milton’s Satan, the eighteenth-century ‘man of feeling,’ and, above all, the Byronic Hero” (Stoddart 112). Albeit cold, ruthless, and unencumbered by any kind of moral standards, Robert is also a victim of “a kind of secret that only serves to create uncertainty and doubt and corrupts internal and external relationships” (Lemma 1925). Namely, Robert’s servant Marilia is in fact his biological mother who had conceived Robert with the lord of the house she served in, but the

mistress raised Robert as her own child. In never disclosing this secret to him, Marilia, the self-proclaimed carrier of the gene of madness, watches while Robert murders his own brother, Zeca in the form of a dreadful culmination of a bizarre game the two men had been engaged in since they were children, as Marilia calls it: “a game where they played to kill each other.”

Moreover, it is in connection to Robert and Marilia’s relationship that another recurrent motif of Gothic literature is employed, and that is the mocking corruption of Christian values.⁶ Namely, after Marilia has urged Robert to kill his own brother and her son, Robert takes off to get rid of Zeca’s body, and upon returning answers Marilia’s question on whether he had prayed: “Yes, I did everything right, just as you told me to.” All the while, Marilia’s neck is adorned with a necklace with a huge pendant in the shape of a cross:

Most importantly, as implied above, this contradictory personality is symptomatic of the fact that all these [Gothic] heroes are, in the first place, cursed by a rebellious impulse to test and transgress human social and ethical constraints. It is this consistent and fatal over-reaching which constitutes the core ambivalence of this figure; both violent, threatening and often demonic (signalled by the piercing eyes), he is yet at the same time always himself an outsider (‘a stranger in this breathing world’) in a state of suffering and an object of persecution. (Stoddart 113)

This “persecution” discussed by Stoddart usually has an exterior origin, meaning that the Gothic anti-heroes were outcasts, rejected by the society without any chance of assimilating and leading an ordinary life. Nevertheless, in the case of Almodóvar’s Robert Ledgard, the origin of his state of persecution can be found inside Robert’s own mind. That is his obsessive love for his deceased wife, Gal, combined with her tragic demise and Robert’s inability to accept not only the fact that she no longer exists but also that *he* was not able to prevent her death. In that sense, albeit not present in the film as a supernatural identity, Gal herself and the event of her death nevertheless *haunt* Robert throughout Almodóvar’s film. Purported by events such as his daughter’s suicide, which reinforces his inability to take care of women he loves, Robert’s obsession with Gal inevitably gets him caught in the downward spiral of madness.

6 As in, for example, Mathew Gregory Lewis’s 1796 novel *The Monk*.

2.4. Dreams: the Gothic Instrument of Madness

In Gothic literature, dreams, more specifically the nightmares, have an important role. They advance the plot, provide layers that enable the past and the present to simultaneously come to life, as well as merge the concepts of natural events, hallucinations caused by the mind, and outright supernatural occurrences:

In its sense of a distressing or disturbingly prescient dream, nightmare is a common device in Gothic fiction, where it also refers to a state between sleeping and waking, or indeed, death and life. The use of nightmare or dream as a fictional or dramatic device to figure the future or provide an allegorical reading of the plot is – of course – not restricted to Gothic writing, and is widely found in the literature of many cultures. Yet nightmare has a particular place in what might be called the mythology of the Gothic imagination. (Martin 164)

In *The Skin I Live In*, dreams initially seem to have a denotative function of nightmares. In connection to the main characters, the nightmares appear as a consequence of horrifying events experienced by the anti-hero, Robert and Vera, the *heroine*. In Ledgard's case, that is the memory of finding his mentally unstable daughter after she was raped, Norma's subsequent conviction that it was Robert who assaulted her, and her rejection of all forms of re-socialization, which eventually leads to her suicide. Vera's dream depicts an equally nightmarish content by returning to, and enabling the readers to get familiar with, her, or rather, his [Vicente's] true self. Additionally, the nightmare presents the account of how Vera came to be, since this is the first instance where Vera and Vicente's identities converge explicitly on the screen. At the same time, Vera's dream turns effectively into a plot device by exhibiting the events that precede the assault on Ledgard's daughter and those which immediately succeed it (Vicente's abduction and subjection to transformative surgery).

Nevertheless, Ledgard's dream is much more symbolic in terms of the Gothic structure than it is regarding the plot. Albeit relatively straightforward and explicatory in relation to the plot, the significance of Robert's dream is more complex and strongly points to the Gothic use of dreams as what Martin defines as "prescients" (164) or portents of deteriorated reasoning skills, obsession, and imminent doom (death). Namely, Robert's nightmare revolves

around the loss of his daughter instigated by Norma's false belief that it was her father who violated her. Urged by anger and the need for revenge, Robert is consequently witnessed to having abducted and transformed Vicente into a woman, effectively robbing Vicente of his masculinity and preventing him from hurting another woman in the way Robert believes Vicente had hurt his daughter. Consequently, in order for Robert's nightmare to support his revenge tendencies, the dream should have at least made Robert detach himself from Vera upon waking up, since at that moment they are sleeping together in the same bed. Yet, what Robert actually does is to affectionately pull Vera closer to him as a form of consolation, effectively exhibiting his own descent into madness since Robert is in fact hugging the very person he deems responsible for his daughter's tragic destiny.

Likewise, Robert's revenge instinct would be purported if his subsequent actions regarding sexual acts with Vera exhibited aggressiveness or the impulse to utterly demasculinize Vicente by raping him. On the contrary, both sexual encounters that take place between Robert and Vera are prevented by Vera's petition for Robert to delay the act due to pain, followed by Robert's explicit statement that he "will wait because he does not wish to hurt her" in that way. The second instance of failed lovemaking attempt on Robert's behalf bears witness to such an interpretation by depicting Robert as utterly surprised and unbelieving when Vera re-enters his bedroom and holds him at gunpoint, threatening to kill him. Robert asks her if that is a joke, providing the viewers once again with the insight that he has lost all touch with reality since he has a hard time accepting that a woman, who is in fact a man whom he abducted, abused and killed in almost every sense except for the literal one, is determined to kill him.

3. Conclusion

In the end, it can be noted that Almodóvar's film *The Skin I Live In* presents a rich work of art in terms of characteristics belonging to the canonical Anglophone genre that is the Gothic literature. In addition to encompassing the recognizable topoi, such as the unpleasant, claustrophobic atmosphere and setting, and an endangered heroine threatened by an encroaching villain, the film abounds in mysterious and horrifying events. Namely, the typical Gothic motifs and occurrences – secrets, murders, rapings, and clandestine experiments – are heavily present in Almodóvar's work.

Although devoid of supernatural occurrences, which are traditionally linked to Gothic literature, *The Skin I Live In* exhibits a true haunting of the villain, brought on by his obsessive love toward his tragically deceased wife. Instigated by Ledgard's morally unencumbered desire to revive Gal, two of the most important motifs of Gothic literature converge: doubles and the death of a beautiful female lover. Consequently, the creation of a new identity embodied by Vera and her impermeable skin represent only the result of Ledgard's internal turmoil and loss of touch with reality. He was never set on enhancing the field of human genetics owing to his altruistic impulses; Robert's primary wish was to invalidate the effect of death on his wife. Therefore, it is highly unstimulating to focus solely on the scientific aspect of Almodóvar's work without taking into account its Gothic background.

After all, was it not the same case with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the seminal Gothic text, which tells the story of an equally avid seeker of the forbidden knowledge and his scientific outbreak? The novel's subtext, far richer with meaning than are its concerns on the rapid development of science, was vastly ignored by the film adaptations, which focused primarily on the scientific implications of Frankenstein's acts. The unleashing of the monstrous on the human race has prevailed as the central idea of the novel; yet, the motivation in *Frankenstein* in fact belongs to something else completely, something utterly quotidian and entirely *un*supernatural.

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ELEMENTI GOTIČKE FIKCIJE U FILMU PEDRA ALMODÓVARA *KOŽA U KOJOJ ŽIVIM* (2011)

Sažetak

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Cilj je rada istražiti elemente gotičke književnosti u filmu *Koža u kojoj živim* (2011) priznatog španjolskog redatelja Pedra Almodóvara. Film se često promatra kao izričito moderno umjetničko djelo zahvaljujući bavljenju suvremenom problematikom složenih etičkih i moralnih nedoumica povezanih s genetskim inženjeringom i raslojavanjem identiteta pojedinca. Unatoč neporecivoj prisutnosti navedenih elemenata, tekst namjerava pokazati kako struktura filma zapravo čvrsto počiva na mnogo starijoj matrici, onoj gotičke književnosti, očitujući se brojnim prepoznatljivim i lako uočljivim motivima i konvencijama. Počevši s klasičnim gotičkim toposom – bespomoćnom *junakinjom* smještenom usred jezive, klaustrofobične arhitekture te groteskne atmosfere koja pobuđuje strepnju pred neizbježnom propašću – u radu se promišlja o Almodóvarovu prikazu konceptata kao što su smrt, dvojnici i snovi kako bi se pokazalo da djelo španjolskog redatelja dijeli brojne sličnosti s kanonskim anglofonim žanrom. Nadalje, analiza se neizostavno dotiče uočljivih poveznica između *Frankensteina*, ključnog teksta gotičke književnosti, te suvremenih parnjaka Shelleyina ludog znanstvenika i Čudovišta, utjelovljenih dr. Robertom Ledgardom i njegovom Verom.

Ključne riječi: Pedro Almodóvar, *Koža u kojoj živim*, elementi gotičke književnosti, progonjena junakinja, ljudi znanstvenik, opsesivna ljubav, želja za pobjedom nad smrću, *Frankenstein*