

Dark Virtuosity: Violin Symbolism in Alberto Iglesias's Score for Pedro Almodóvar's Film *The Skin I Live In* (2011)

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Abstract

Singled out as one of the finest and most original works by the leading film-music composer Alberto Iglesias, the score for Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* (2011) stands out for its inclusion of a (neo-baroque) virtuoso part for solo violin with key symbolic functions in the film. This part is largely derived from the composer's post-minimalist string trio *Cautiva* (c. 1990). The present article analyses Iglesias's reconfiguration of key materials from *Cautiva* to express the relationship of domination, violence, and desire between the film's villain and the heroine as well as the role played by violin virtuosity in establishing links to the (gothic) horror genre and in the exaltation of the artist's power as creator that Almodóvar ultimately reflects upon in *The Skin I Live In*. The article adds to recent studies on the centuries-old symbolism of the violin as a topos of the demonic and otherworldly by analysing these meanings in one of the finest contemporary film scores. The study is part of a recent upsurge of critical assessments of Almodóvar–Iglesias's work from cultural and musico-analytical perspectives.

Heigh, heigh! The devil rides upon a fiddlestick.

William Shakespeare, *Henry IV* (I.2.4)

This article examines the original music by the Spanish composer Alberto Iglesias (b. 1955) for Pedro Almodóvar's highly acclaimed film *The Skin I Live In* (2011). The score has been singled out as one of the finest and most original works by the world's leading film-music composer.¹ *The Skin I Live In* explores the relationship between the body and gender identity through the story of Vicente (Jan Cornet), a young man whom the plastic surgeon Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) kidnaps in revenge for the rape of his daughter, locks up in

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- 1 Iglesias's film score won several important awards, including the Goya Award for Best Original Score in 2011. The film music scholar Andi Hill singled out this score from Iglesias's large output for inclusion in his recent book on film-music analysis; see Andi Hill, 'Surgical Precision: Alberto Iglesias's *La piel que habito*', in *Scoring the Screen. The Secret Language of Film Music* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2017).

his opulent mansion, and turns into a replica of his deceased wife. The woman of extraordinary beauty and perfect artificial skin created by the surgeon is christened Vera (Elena Anaya). To escape her captivity, Vera seduces Ledgard and eventually kills him and his housekeeper Marilia (Marisa Paredes). The film is based on Thierry Jonquet's novel *Mygale* (1984) and has Georges Franju's film *Les yeux sans visage* (1960) as one of its main references. *The Skin I Live In* is one of Pedro Almodóvar's most internationally acclaimed films and has undergone some of the most thorough and detailed analysis by scholars.²

Ledgard's character is a reworking of several myths, including those of Faust (the intellectual dissatisfied with his limited knowledge and power) and Pygmalion (the artist in love with his own artistic creation). The film begins *in medias res*, showing Vera locked up in a room of the surgeon's mansion after the years-long process of surgery to which Vicente was subjected. The narrative unfolds in three main parts or acts: the first and third parts take place mainly in 2012 inside the claustrophobic mansion; the middle part narrates Vicente's story before the kidnapping through a series of flashbacks. To simplify my analysis, I follow Almodóvar's script and use 'Vicente/his' to refer to the protagonist when played by Jan Cornet and 'Vera/her' for the same protagonist when played by Elena Anaya. Since the surgeon succeeds in changing the body but less so the gender identity of his victim, the names Vicente and Vera respectively refer to the protagonist before and after his physical, but not mental, transformation into a woman.

Iglesias's score stands out in that it foregrounds a virtuoso solo violin part, recorded by the Spanish soloist Vicente Huerta, which serves key functions in the film: besides a symbol of the conflicted and erotic relationship between the villain and the heroine, this part operates as a topos of evil and the uncanny, and is one of several means through which artistic creation and artistic beauty are exalted in the film. The nine cues for solo violin and orchestra in the film score (out of twenty-two in total) are largely derived from a minimalist neo-baroque concert piece for (solo) violin, viola, and cello entitled *Cautiva* (*Captive woman*) that Iglesias composed in the late 1980s.³ Unlike most of his output throughout his career, this single-movement trio was not composed to accompany the work of another creator (e.g., filmmaker, choreographer) but on Iglesias's own initiative.⁴

2 *The Skin I Live In* won several international awards, including Best Film Not in the English Language at the 65th British Academy Film Awards. Among the dozens of scholarly studies published on *The Skin I Live In*, the following are particularly noteworthy: Francisco A. Zurian, 'A Story of Imposed Gender and the Struggle for Identity', in *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, ed. Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon (Chicester: Blackwell, 2013); Xavier Aldana Reyes, 'Skin Deep: Surgical Horror and the Impossibility of Becoming Woman in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 90/7 (2013); Darren Waldron and Ros Murray, 'Troubling Transformations: Pedro Almodóvar's *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (2011) and Its Reception', *Transnational Cinemas* 5/1 (2014); Jesse Barker, 'Sculpting Women: From Pygmalion to *Vertigo* to *The Skin I Live In*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 37/4 (2020).

3 The Spanish National Library keeps a copy of the trio dated in 1989 under catalogue number MP/2904/8. The score was first published in 2009 by the Spanish publishing house Unión Musical; see Alberto Iglesias, *Cautiva* for string trio, Madrid: Unión Musical, UME 28248-01, 2009.

4 Roberto Cueto, interview with Alberto Iglesias, in *El lenguaje invisible. Entrevistas con compositores del cine español* (Alcalá de Henares: Alcacine33, 2003), 259.

The composer explained that the decision to include an 'adaptation' of *Cautiva* in the film score was based on the 'obvious conceptual and plot relationships' ('evidentes conexiones de concepto y argumentales') between the trio and *The Skin I Live In*.⁵ Based on this premise, this article examines the key functions that the solo violin music assumes in the film's narrative. After looking at the compositional style, structure, and programmatic content of *Cautiva*, I analyse Iglesias's reworking of this piece to express central aspects of the relationship of domination, violence, and desire between Ledgard and his captive. My focus is on the role of (neo-baroque) violin virtuosity to express the wickedness and sophistication of the surgeon's revenge and to place the film in the realm of Gothic-Romantic. The study ends with a consideration of the role played by the solo violin in the exaltation of the artist's power as creator that Almodóvar ultimately reflects upon in this highly aestheticized film. The article adds to recent studies on the centuries-old symbolism of the violin as a topos of the demonic and otherworldly by analysing these meanings in one of the finest contemporary film scores. More generally, the article is a case study of film composers' reworkings of their own (non-film) scores because of the close relationship between the programmatic, expressive, or symbolic content of the pre-existing composition and the film's narrative. The study is part of a recent upsurge of critical assessments of Almodóvar-Iglesias's work from cultural and musico-analytical perspectives.⁶

Neo-baroque minimalism

Cautiva has an ABCA' form. Section A (bb. 1–50) is characterized by a fast, regular, and constant pulse, a markedly linear texture, the continuous repetition of short arpeggiated motives, the lack of dynamic changes, and a slow harmonic rhythm, with relatively static fields of diatonic harmony. The textural and metrical differentiation between the solo violin and the accompaniment (viola and cello) is particularly manifest in this section. [Example 1](#) shows the beginning of the trio. The viola and cello parts complement each other to create a melodic-rhythmic entity whose regular quaternary metre contrasts with the metrical irregularity of the violin melody. Harmonically, much of this section is organized around the tonic and supertonic chords, which function as basic harmonic elements. This is particularly apparent in the first thirty-two bars of the trio, consisting of the regular alternation every four bars of the tonic triad (C minor) and the supertonic triad (D diminished), respectively.

Section B (bb. 51–139) contrasts with the preceding A section in that its character is more lyrical, the tempo is slower and more flexible, the harmony is less static, and there are more

5 José Antonio Muñoz, 'He tenido tensiones con Almodóvar, pero siempre nos hemos llevado bien', *Ideal*, 18 October 2019, www.ideal.es/culturas/tensiones-almodovar-siempre-20191018095235-nt.html.

6 See Hill, 'Surgical Precision'; Segio Lasuén Hernández, *La armonía como elemento de comunicación en procesos creativos globales: evidencias empíricas e interpretación valorativa en el cine español de los noventa* (PhD diss., University of Granada, 2016); Alberto Jiménez Arévalo, 'La música de Alberto Iglesias en el cine de Pedro Almodóvar: pliegues de la historia en *Amante menguante* de *Hable con ella* (2002)', *Cuadernos de Etnomusicología* 8 (2016), www.sibetrans.com/etno/cuaderno/25/cuadernos-de-etnomusicologia-n-8; Diego Alonso Tomás, 'Narratividad, intertextualidad y topoi musicales: un estudio semiótico de *Amante menguante* (2001) de Alberto Iglesias en *Hable con ella* de Pedro Almodóvar', *Acta musicologica*, 93/1 (2021).

The image displays three systems of a musical score for string trio. The first system shows the Violin (Vn.) part as a whole rest, while the Viola (Vla.) and Violoncello (Vc.) parts play a rhythmic, arpeggiated pattern. The second system shows the Violin part entering with the same pattern. The third system shows a dynamic change, with the Violin marked 'p' and the other instruments marked 'mf'. The score is in 4/4 time and features a complex, arpeggiated texture.

Example 1 *Cautiva* for string trio, bb. 1–13. © Alberto Iglesias.

dynamic changes; its style is less minimalist. Section C (bb. 140–218) comprises a lengthy ‘cadenza’ (the term is Iglesias’s) for solo violin in rhapsodic, improvisatory style. The cadenza begins with a slow, angular, expressive, dissonant melody (Example 2) that is followed by increasingly arpeggiated, consonant, and rhythmically regular motives. These motives culminate in the fast arpeggiated melody shown in Example 3. This melody leads into section A’, which functions as the trio’s coda (bb. 191–218). The concluding A’ section is mostly a repetition of a portion of the A section (bb. 25–45).

The music of *Cautiva* never fully resolves in a functional manner. There is no authentic cadence at the end of any part of the piece, not even the final A’ section. The trio finishes with a nine-bar section that is centred on G major. The final cadential (third-less) chords on G do not resolve in the tonic C minor but on the dyad D–A, that is, the (third-less) super-tonic chord (Example 4).

In the film score, Iglesias reworks only the outer sections (A and A’) and the cadenza (section C) of *Cautiva*. Regarding their uses and meanings in Almodóvar’s film, these sections’ most notable feature is the preponderance of various stylistic elements of late baroque music. In the A and A’ sections, these elements are the motor rhythm, the regular phrasing (4 + 4 bars), and the profusion of arpeggios in all parts, with the consequent horizontalization of the harmony; in the cadenza, the abundant arpeggios and multiple stops, some

The image shows a musical score for violin, consisting of three staves. The first staff begins with a tempo marking of '♩=80 Rubato' and a dynamic of 'mf'. It features a trill on the first note, followed by a series of eighth notes with slurs and accents. The second staff continues with a 'poco rall.' marking and a dynamic of 'f', showing a melodic line with slurs and accents. The third staff concludes with a 'cresc. más lento' marking and a dynamic of 'mp', featuring a trill and a final cadence. The score includes various dynamic markings such as 'mf', 'mp', 'f', and 'p', and performance instructions like 'Rubato', 'poco rall.', and 'cresc. más lento'.

Example 2 Beginning of the cadenza (bb. 140–68). © Alberto Iglesias.

incorporating a trill in one of the strings (Example 2; bb. 145–8). Significantly, the cadenza includes none of the instrumental techniques established in the violin repertoire in the Romantic period and later, such as glissandi, portamenti, harmonics of different types, pizzicati in both hands, ricochet, spiccato, and saltato.

These neo-baroque elements recall the violin writing featured in works from the last third of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, especially by Italian composers, who particularly favoured motor rhythms and pattern-based materials elaborated through repetition and sequencing. Alongside the violin's role as solo instrument and the inclusion of a virtuoso cadenza for unaccompanied violin before the final tutti (A'), in which the opening material is restated, these neo-baroque elements establish a strong connection between *Cautiva* and the genre of the (Italianate) Baroque solo concerto. This genre began to consolidate after the publication in 1711 of Antonio Vivaldi's influential collection of violin concertos *L'estro armonico*, op. 3. The transition from cadenza to coda (A') in *Cautiva*, however, differs from baroque compositional practices in that it is achieved not by means of an authentic cadence but by means of the arpeggiated melody shown in Example 3. Iglesias may be emulating here the similar transition from the cadenza to the coda in the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 64 (1844).

Cautiva shares these allusions to late baroque stylistic and structural elements with many minimalist pieces created around the same time, most notably Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), which includes a neo-baroque organ cadenza, Michael Nyman's score for *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), and John Adams's Violin Concerto (1993).⁷ The references to earlier music in *Cautiva*, the piece's short duration, the weight of the melodic content, the classical instrumentation and structure, the teleological direction of the music, and the

7 On the links between musical minimalism and late baroque music, see Claudia Swan, ed., *Perceptible Process: Minimalism and the Baroque* (New York: Eos, 1997); Robert Fink, "A Pox on Manfredini": The Long-Playing Record, the Baroque Revival, and the Birth of Ambient Music', in *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Kheng Keow Koay, 'Baroque Minimalism in John Adams' Violin Concerto', *Tempo* 66/260 (2012); Jelena Novak and John Richardson, eds., *Einstein on the Beach: Opera beyond Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2019); FÉrdia J. Stone-Davis, 'Vivaldi Recomposed: An Interview with Max Richter', *Contemporary Music Review* 34/1 (2015).



Example 3 Final melody of the cadenza (bb. 179–82). © Alberto Iglesias.

Example 4 End of *Cautiva* (bb. 215–18). Owing to a printing error, the natural sign is missing before pitch-class A in the last bar. © Alberto Iglesias.

evocation of extra-musical ideas (by means of the title) position *Cautiva* in the realm of what has been called ‘musical post-minimalism’. Music historians use this term to refer to the compositional style developed since the early 1980s by a large number of mainly American and European composers who were born, like Iglesias, between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s, and who thus belonged to the next generation after the pioneers of experimental, avant-garde minimalism.⁸

Gender confrontation

The recordings of *Cautiva* and of seven other early Iglesias pieces were released in 1992 on the composer’s first commercial album, which he also entitled *Cautiva*.⁹ This album paved the way for several collaborations with some of Spain’s most prominent artists. Immediately

8 Kyle Gann analyses the main features of post-minimalism and provides a long list of the main composers of post-minimalist music (which does not include Alberto Iglesias) in: ‘A Technically Definable Stream of Postminimalism, Its Characteristics and Its Meaning’, in *Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist & Postminimalist Music*, ed. Kyle Gann, Keith Potter, and Pwyll ap Siôn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). See also Tristian Evans, *Shared Meanings in the Film Music of Philip Glass. Music, Multimedia and Postminimalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). On the integration of stylistic and structural features of (much) earlier times in post-minimalist works from the 1980s onwards, see Pwyll ap Siôn, ‘Reference and Quotation in Minimalist and Postminimalist Music’, in *Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist & Postminimalist Music*, ed. Gann, Potter and Siôn; and Susan McClary, ‘Minima Romantica’, in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

9 Alberto Iglesias, *Cautiva*, CD, Música SIN-FIN MSFCD-006, 1992.

after its release, the renowned Spanish choreographer Nacho Duato used the trio and five other works included on the album for a dance piece on patriarchal violence and domination, also entitled *Cautiva*. Iglesias was apparently involved to some extent in the ballet's conception.¹⁰ The trio accompanies one of the dance piece's key scenes, which features a submissive female dancer, the protagonist, whose movements are always controlled by her male partners. The violence to which she is subjected is shown particularly explicitly at the end of the ballet through the scenographic use of a metal chain curtain separating her from her lover (Figure 1) and the staging of her murder at his hands. The Spanish National Dance Company premiered the work in April 1993 in Madrid to mostly positive reviews.

The same year, the Spanish film director Carlos Saura commissioned Iglesias to compose several pieces similar to those included on the album *Cautiva* to accompany a number of scenes in his recently shot film *¡Dispara! (Shoot!, 1993)*.¹¹ This tells the story of a young circus performer who, after being gang raped, murders the perpetrators but dies of a vaginal haemorrhage as a consequence of the rape. Iglesias's newly composed pieces accompany key scenes of the film, but not, significantly, the rape scene and other scenes showing brutal forms of patriarchal violence: these are accompanied by the trio *Cautiva*.

Around the same time, the journalist Manuel Domínguez described Iglesias's string trio as the violin's 'struggle . . . to emerge from the murky sea that the viola and cello are creating. A circular music which, ending as it begins, does not extinguish the sensation of instability it has created'.¹² The term 'instability' seems to allude here to the marked differentiation between the violin part and the accompaniment and to the lack of traditional harmonic closure (functional resolution) at the end of the piece. Given that the journalist made these comments immediately after an interview with Iglesias, it is possible that they partly reflect the composer's thoughts on the work. These observations together with the trio's evocative title and, especially, its use to accompany the works on patriarchal violence of Duato, Saura, and Almodóvar suggest that *Cautiva* is a piece of a narrative or descriptive kind, one whose programme is related to male domination and violence.

In *The Skin I Live In*, arrangements of the outer A and A' sections – that is, those that show the most limited harmonic vocabulary and the greatest degree of textural and metrical differentiation (or 'confrontation') between the violin and the accompaniment – accompany three key scenes in which Vera violently rebels against her captivity in Ledgard's mansion and in the body and identity imposed on her by the surgeon. In these arrangements, Iglesias intensified the elementariness of the original harmony (the tonic–supertonic alternation) by eliminating a brief passage (bb. 37–42) of *Cautiva* that was centred in triads other than C minor or D

10 Alberto Iglesias, interview with María Ángeles Ferrer-Forés, Madrid, 16 December 2017, in: María Ángeles Ferrer-Forés, 'Alberto Iglesias. The Spanish Composer behind Pedro Almodóvar's Films', in *Double Lives: Film Composers in the Concert Hall*, ed. James Wierzbicki (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 158.

11 Carlos Saura, *¡Dispara! (Shoot!)*. 5 Films S.A. Production, 1992. The film was released in the United States on DVD in 1997 as *Outrage!*

12 'la "lucha" del violín' 'por salir a flote del mar tenebroso que urden la viola y el violonchelo. Una música circular que, al terminar como empieza, no apaga esa sensación de inestabilidad que ha creado'. Manuel Domínguez, 'Serenata de las postrimerías', *Cambio* 16, No. 1704, 22 June 1992, 116.



Figure 1 (Colour online) The protagonist of Duato's ballet *Cautiva* behind a metal chain curtain (1993). © Compañía Nacional de Danza, Madrid.

diminished and replacing it with a C-centred passage extracted from the beginning of the string trio. This is the only major structural change of the original material in the arrangements for the film score.

Of these three scenes, the one that happens earlier in the plot is shown in the film's third act (01:21:00).¹³ At the beginning of her imprisonment, Vera attempts to escape from Ledgard's mansion. After kicking him in the genitals, she manages to break out from her cell-room and to reach the house's main exit door. The surgeon prevents her from getting out by locking the door with a remote control. Her break-out thwarted, she reacts by slitting her throat and falls unconscious to the floor. The scene is accompanied by an almost exact quotation of the A section (bb. 1–50) scored for solo violin and string orchestra without violins. The cue begins when Vera kicks Ledgard and ends when she falls unconscious after injuring herself. The solo melody remains essentially unchanged from its original form in *Cautiva*. The first violas and first cellos play the respective original melodies from *Cautiva* (divisi in legato and spiccato); the second violas, the second cellos, and the double basses play new motives that are not from the string trio (Example 5).

After sewing up her neck wound, Ledgard returns Vera to her cell-room, where she finds on the bed three dresses that he has left as a gift. After gazing furiously at them, she tears them violently to shreds. Vera's rebellion against her imposed gender identity is particularly vehement in this scene (01:24:55). Her insubordination is accompanied by the cadenza's final

13 I have set the start of each discussed scene in the following format: (hours: minutes: seconds). This is based on the DVD version of the film: *La piel que habito*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, Twentieth Century Fox, 2011.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for measures 6 through 10. The score is arranged in a system with six staves. From top to bottom, the staves are: Violin (Vln.), Violin I (Vla. I), Violin II (Vla. II), Violoncello I (Vc. I), Violoncello II (Vc. II), and Double Bass (Db.). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The music is marked with a dynamic of *mf* (mezzo-forte). The Violin part begins in measure 6 with a melodic line. The Violin I and II parts play a rhythmic accompaniment. The Violoncello I and II parts play a similar rhythmic accompaniment. The Double Bass part plays a rhythmic accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 5 Excerpt from Iglesias's arrangement for solo violin and orchestra of the A section of *Cautiva* (bb. 6–10). © Alberto Iglesias.

arpeggiated melody (Example 3) followed by a shortened version of section A' arranged as described earlier. Almodóvar has stressed the importance of this 'masterful' cue in expressing without words Vera's rejection of the sex and gender imposed by the surgeon.¹⁴

A further scene of rebellion accompanied by an arrangement of the A' section is shown at the beginning of the film (00:08:26). This scene occurs in the plot years after the scenes just described. After admiring his prisoner's beauty via the video surveillance system, Ledgard goes to her cell-room to smoke some opium with her, only to discover that she has attempted suicide. Several fragments of the cadenza followed by the first six bars of section A' accompany this scene. The discovery of Vera's attempted suicide coincides with the shift from solo to tutti and the beginning of the coda (A').

As a kind of minimalist neo-baroque concertante piece for violin and string orchestra, these arrangements of the outer sections of *Cautiva* powerfully aestheticize the surgeon's domination and Vera's rebellion against it. They position Ledgard's surgical vengeance in the realm of the artistic and refined. In this regard, it is interesting to compare these cues with the one accompanying the assault of the other agent of patriarchal domination over Vera: the lower-class criminal with primal instincts Zeca (disguised as a tiger). The outstanding piece accompanying his sexual attack is unrelated to *Cautiva*, lacks any reference to the musical past or

14 Pedro Almodóvar, 'Almodóvar elige su secuencia favorita de *La piel que habito*', promotional video for *El País* online platform: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AM3upBAzG-Y.

high musical culture, and does not feature the solo violin in its instrumentation. Although original in many respects – notably in the caricature of the rapist through a funky syncopated gospel organ figure – the style of this piece is much closer to standard action-film music.¹⁵

Mephistophelian precision

As a powerful and refined ‘aristocrat’ haunted by his past, as well as an amoral scholar whose goal – like that of Faust or Victor Frankenstein – is to master nature and defeat death, Ledgard’s character displays many attributes of the archetypal villain of (Gothic) horror, a genre with which Almodóvar repeatedly associated the film.¹⁶ The housekeeper Marilia, who clearly recalls the governesses of Victorian ghost novels and classic Hollywood cinema, implicitly links Ledgard to that genre: ‘Since the accident [of Ledgard’s deceased wife Gal], we lived like vampires, in complete darkness and without mirrors’ (‘desde el accidente, vivíamos como vampiros, en completa oscuridad y sin espejos’). A (partial) darkness pervades all the spaces in which Ledgard lives and works, even his private operating theatre. His mansion, called El Cigarral, is ‘a palace built in the eighteenth century, refurbished in later periods’ (‘casa palacio construida en el siglo XVIII, intervenida en épocas posteriores’).¹⁷ The house corresponds to the age-old opulent, gloomy, impenetrable, claustrophobic castle or palace in which Gothic villains typically live in seclusion. Almodóvar does not locate it in Madrid (where almost all his films are set) but on the outskirts of Toledo, a Castilian city associated in the Spanish imagination with the past, in particular the Spanish ‘Golden Age’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The mansion’s decoration with its mixture of classical and contemporary furniture and paintings, the kitchen equipment including both an old wood-burning stove and a present-day electric one, and even the ultra-modern private laboratory within ancient brick vaults show Ledgard as a mixture of sophistication and archaism, hypermodernity and tradition.¹⁸

Further underlining this portrait are the dark harmony and instrumentation as well as the subtle allusions to the musical past in the sort of post-minimalist neo-baroque overture cue that opens the film. The cue’s opening theme (bb. 1–38) accompanies the first images of Ledgard’s mansion-jail and a title providing the place and (future) time of the action: ‘Toledo 2012’ (the film premiere was in 2011). The theme is in G minor and scored for strings without violins. The cellos and double basses play the primary melodies. The material includes basic tonal progressions and traditional part-writing and ornaments

15 Hill discusses the parodic musical elements in this cue in ‘Surgical Precision’, 238–41.

16 Pedro Almodóvar, ‘Sobre la película’, in *Los archivos de Pedro Almodóvar*, ed. Paul Duncan (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), 377; Elsa Fernández-Santos, ‘Almodóvar, sobre su nueva película: “Será de terror, sin gritos ni sustos”’, *El País*, 5 May 2010, digital edition, https://elpais.com/diario/2010/05/05/cultura/1273010401_850215.html.

17 Pedro Almodóvar, *La piel que habito. Guion de la película* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2012), 11.

18 On the film’s relationship to the horror genre, see Paul Julian Smith. ‘La piel que habito. (The Skin I Live In, 2011). Stitches in Time’, in *Desire Unlimited. The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (London: Verso, 2014), 840; Paul Julian Smith and Rob White, ‘Escape Artistry: Debating *The Skin I Live In*’, *Film Quarterly* 10 (2011), <https://filmquarterly.org/2011/10/12/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in>; Jelena Pataki, ‘Gothic Fiction Elements in Pedro Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In* (2011)’, *Anafora. Academic Literary Journal* 3/2 (2016).

(appoggiaturas). These elements alongside the motor rhythm, the use of terraced dynamics, the instrumentation for small orchestra, the (intermittently) regular phrasing, and the abundance of arpeggios recall the style of early eighteenth-century (Italianate) art music. Although no specific material from *Cautiva* is reworked, these neo-baroque features and instrumentation indirectly related this theme to the trio. I call this opening material the 'Cigarral theme'.

This combined use of a flat minor key and the lower register of the instruments in the Cigarral theme has been a topos of the sinister and the supernatural since the seventeenth century.¹⁹ The prominence of insistent repeated notes, the contrasting dynamics, and the flat minor key relate the theme to the eighteenth-century *tempesta* style. This term is used for music from the late seventeenth century onwards that exhibits stormy characteristics. By the middle of the eighteenth century, *tempesta* style became associated with frightening experiences such as conflict, pursuit (especially by demons or furies), madness, and rage; all are pivotal notions in Almodóvar's film. (A well-known example from that period is the final of Gluck's ballet *Don Juan* (1761), in which the demons drag Don Juan down to hell after the statue of the Commendatore has pronounced his fate.) The Cigarral theme's metrical unevenness, created through the irregularity of the accents (not at all baroque), subtly intensifies the sense of instability and unpredictability that the style conveys (Example 6, e.g., bb. 4, 6, and 7).²⁰

The opening cue's second theme accompanies the images of Vera mentally 'escaping' or transcending her captivity through yoga. This material greatly contrasts with the Cigarral theme in that it is scored for solo piano, lacks any allusions to the past, and is more 'luminous' because of the high register and wide voicing. A soft low sustained note (C) played by the double bass subtly 'darkens' this theme. It follows a section for piano and strings in which both themes are combined and elaborated. This section accompanies images of Vera making replicas of the sculptural work of Louise Bourgeois and interacting with the 'jailer' Marilia.

Further on in the film, Iglesias resorts to an idiomatic virtuoso violin style as a topos of the demonic to depict Ledgard's revenge on Vicente as a perverse act of evil. This cultural meaning of violin virtuosity dates back to the invention of the instrument (or its development from the *vielle* and the *lira da braccio*) in the sixteenth century. The topos was first generated by street musicians' use of the instrument to play dance music, a genre that was associated from early Christianity and throughout the Middle Ages with the Devil. This association became considerably stronger in the Romantic period, particularly after the publication around 1799 of Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Sonata in G minor (c. 1740) under the title 'The Devil's Trill', and even more following the rise to fame of Niccolò Paganini in the 1820s.

19 See Clive McClelland, *Ombra Music in the Eighteenth Century: Context, Style and Signification* (PhD diss., Leeds University, 2001), 30–47. For a study of these topoi in film music, see Neil Lerner, ed., *Music in the Horror Film. Listening to Fear* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009); and Tobias Plebuch, 'Mysteriosos Demystified: Topical Strategies within and beyond the Silent Cinema', *Journal of Film Music* 5/1–2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1558/jfm.v5i1-2.77>

20 On the eighteenth-century *tempesta* style, see Clive McClelland, 'Ombra and Tempesta', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and in particular *Tempesta. Stormy Music in the Eighteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

Example 6 Beginning of the Cigarral theme in the opening cue (*M101-Principio*, cues 1–9). © Alberto Iglesias.

The Romantic fascination with the supernatural and macabre, as well as the popularity of Goethe's *Faust* (published in two parts in 1805 and 1832), were crucial to the genesis of the myth of Paganini's alliance with the Devil.²¹ This cultural meaning of the instrument has been recurrently exploited since then in a wide range of artistic disciplines. Notable examples in the field of music are Cesare Pugni's 'ballet fantastique' *Le violon du diable* (1848), Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* (1874), Igor Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* (1917), and George Crumb's *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* (1970) for electric string quartet. In the visual arts, Alfred Rethel's *Der Tod als Erwürger* (*Death as Strangler*, 1851), James Marshall's *Tartini's Dream* (1868), and Alfred Döblin's *Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod* (*Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle*, 1872; [Figure 2](#)) stand out. Many nineteenth-century literary works associate the instrument with death and the ominous, including Heinrich Heine's cycle of poems *Die Heimkehr* (*The Homecoming*, 1826) and Thomas Hardy's short story *The Fiddler of the Reels* (1893). More recently, the novel *Violin* (1997) by the popular Gothic-fiction author Anne Rice and the films *The Red Violin* (1998) by François Girard, *The Devil's Violinist* (2013) by Bernard Rose, and *The Sonata* (2018) by Andrew Desmond deal with the violin as an instrument of the supernatural.

The introduction of virtuoso neo-baroque solo violin passages to express the wickedness of Ledgard's punishment of Vicente is particularly manifest in the cue for the abduction scene (00:59:55). For reasons unknown to me, this cue was eventually replaced by Danish DJ and

21 On the violin as a topos of death and the demonic, see Reinhold Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes: die mittelalterlichen Totentänze und ihr Nachleben* (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1980); Rita Steblin, 'Death as a Fiddler: The Study of a Convention in European Art, Literature, and Music', *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis* 14 (1990), www.e-periodica.ch/digbib/view?pid=bjm-001%3A1990%3A14#4; Maiko Kawabata, 'Virtuosity, the Violin, the Devil: What Really Made Paganini "Demonic"', *Current Musicology* 83 (2007); Gabriella Asaro, 'Tartini il violinista e Le violon du diable di Arthur Saint-Léon', in *Il diavolo all'opera: Aspetti e rappresentazioni del diabolico nella musica e nella cultura del XIX secolo*, ed. Marco Capra (Venice: Marsilio, 2008); Robert Riggs, ed. *The Violin* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016), 3–35. For other related meanings of violin virtuosity in the Romantic period, see Maiko Kawabata, 'Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance: Power, Military Heroism, and Gender (1789–1830)', *19th-Century Music* 28/2 (2004); David Larkin, 'Dancing to the Devil's Tune: Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* and the Encounter with Virtuosity', *19th-Century Music* 38/3 (2015).



Figure 2 (Colour online) *Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod* (Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle, 1872) by Alfred Döblin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

composer Trentemøller's *Shades of Marble* (2010), but it is included on the commercial soundtrack album as the second part (the last two minutes) of *Rojo y negro*.²² Iglesias's cue is dominated by the distorted sound of the electric guitar during the chase, and through the use of a tension pad on the synthesizers once Ledgard knocks Vicente off the motorbike. When the surgeon shoots him with the tranquillizer dart and prepares to kidnap him, the solo violin, which has been tacit until then, enters unexpectedly playing the melody shown in [Example 7](#). The double stops in sixths and the rapid arpeggios that make up this melody are ubiquitous in the violin works of Antonio Vivaldi, Arcangelo Corelli, Giuseppe Tartini, Pietro Locatelli, and many other composers active in Italy in the first half of the eighteenth century. Soloist Vicente Huerta's rendition of the melody with a slight rubato (not marked

22 Alberto Iglesias, *The Skin I Live In* (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack), CD, Lakeshore Records, 2011.

The image displays a musical score for Example 7, covering measures 64 to 77. It features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Absynth, and Violin. The tempo is set at a quarter note equal to 110 beats per minute. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, *mf*, *mp*, *p*, and *dim.*, along with articulation like *poco cresc.*. The Violin I and II parts play a melodic line with some rests, while the Absynth part provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The Violin part at the bottom features a fast, arpeggiated melody.

Example 7 End of cue *M410-Persecución* (bb. 64–77). © Alberto Iglesias.

in the score) adds a sense of improvisation and rhapsodic character to the melody. In conjunction with Ledgard's diabolical appearance in this scene (Figure 3), the sudden evocation of early eighteenth-century violin virtuosity has echoes of the archaic and the evil. The classical sound of the solo violin playing the baroque-style melody is accompanied by the dissonant and reverberant sonority generated by the virtual synthesizer Absynth (Example 7, bb. 71–7). This sophisticated instrumentation is yet another means of depicting the surgeon's revenge as something between the archaic and the futuristic, between gothic horror and science fiction.

Back in his mansion, Ledgard chains up Vicente in the cellar and shaves his face. This is the first of many changes he will make to his victim's body. As Ledgard then prepares to chloroform him in order to begin the sex change (01:13:00), the violin enters suddenly playing the very fast C# minor arpeggios shown in Example 8. The virtuoso writing is here combined with a much older topos of the demonic: the tritone or *diabolus in musica*. The pedal notes of the arpeggiated violin melody are a tritone apart. Iglesias spells them out as C#–F## (instead of the C#–G♭). This is because, strictly speaking, a tritone comprises three diatonic whole steps and is therefore conceptualized as an augmented fourth rather than a diminished fifth. This tritonal structure is projected vertically as well. The orchestral chords that accompany the violin arpeggios with the tritone pedal (bb. 47 and 49) are four-note supersets of (i.e., they contain) the C# diminished triad. This triad has the tritone over the chord's root (C#–G♭). The chords are orchestrated for strings, brass (four horns, two trombones, bass trombone, and tuba), and timpani. This linking together of a minor key, melodic and harmonic tritones (in particular diminished-seventh chords/arpeggios), and the sound of *forte* brass instruments (especially the trombones, including the bass trombone) were key elements of 'musical diablerie' since the Romantic period. Well-known examples are the Commendatore scene in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787), the Wolf's Glen scene in Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821), or the opening movement (*Inferno*) of Liszt's *Dante Symphony* (1957).²³ In the passage shown in Example

23 On elements of Romantic musical diablerie other than violin virtuosity (and on their legacy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries), see Debbie Ann Masloski, *The Demonic Piano: A Comparative Study of the Devil and Piano*



Figure 3 (Colour online) Shrouded in the darkness of the night and the dim red light coming from his car's rear lights, Ledgard sets out to drug and kidnap Vicente. © El Deseo S. A.

8, all these elements hark back to the wicked and demonic in conjunction with several iconographic visual elements that convey the ideas of torture, submission, and the underworld (e.g., the darkness of the cellar, the creaking chains, the razor).

Scored for instruments other than the solo violin, the tritone is also melodically and harmonically prominent in the cues accompanying the scenes of Vicente chained in the cellar (01:09:50 and 1:11:50) and of Ledgard digitally 'possessing' Vera by exaggeratedly enlarging her face's image on the large screen that is connected to the surveillance camera in Vera's cell-room (00:18:45). This 'possession' is the conclusion of a scene in which Vera is portrayed as Ledgard's artistic object. This characterization is accentuated by her adoption of the same posture as the Venuses in the paintings owned by the surgeon. The passage accompanying this scene is in D minor. The tritone on the tonic (A^b) is suddenly introduced in the harp accompaniment and more prominently in the main piano melody when Vera, knowing that she is being watched, looks up (from the screen) and seems to observe the observer. (Figure 4). 'Even though Vera is the victim' – Almodóvar explains – 'her outsized face emanates a power far greater than that wielded by Dr Ledgard, who gazes at her in rapture. She seems to be watching the surgeon, not the other way round. She conveys the impression that she could devour him if she wanted to'.²⁴

Literature (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1999); Derek B. Scott, 'Diabolus in musica. Liszt and the Demonic', in *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Marco Capra, ed. *Il diavolo all'opera: Aspetti e rappresentazioni del diabolico nella musica e nella cultura del XIX secolo* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008).

24 'aunque Vera sea la víctima, de su rostro desmesurado emana un poder muy superior al ostentado por el doctor Ledgard, que la contempla arrobado. Es ella la que parece vigilar al cirujano, y no al contrario. Es ella la que transmite la impresión de que podría devorarlo si quisiera'. Almodóvar, *Guion*, 204.

Example 8 *M513-Afeitado*, bb. 45–9. © Alberto Iglesias.

Antagonism and desire

Iglesias resorts again to violin virtuosity to accompany two related scenes in which Vera uses her power of seduction to gain Ledgard's trust and thus more freedom within the mansion. The first is shown immediately after the scene just described (00:19:40). Ledgard visits Vera in her cell-room. Realizing the desire that her body arouses in him, she asks if they can 'live together' as a normal couple. Intimidated, the surgeon decides to leave the room. The musical accompaniment begins when Vera prevents him from leaving by standing between him and the door. The cue is entitled *Estoy hecha a tu medida* ('I [Vera] am tailor-made for you'). The piece has a four-sharp key signature. The opening bars are centred on D# minor. When she tries to kiss Ledgard and the confused surgeon is about to leave the room, Iglesias gradually begins to introduce elements centred on C# minor. Intimidated, Ledgard unlocks the door to exit – or rather escape – the room. The solo violin then enters unexpectedly, playing an increasingly *forte* C# minor arpeggio repeatedly. The sustained D# bass pedal point, which is heard from the cue's beginning, disappears as soon as the surgeon finally leaves Vera's room. From then on, the music is emphatically centred on C# minor. Ledgard may have



Figure 4 (Colour online) Ledgard admiring Vera's beauty on the video surveillance screen in his room. © El Deseo S. A.

the keys to her cell-room – Almodóvar wrote – but it is Vera who now really dominates the situation.²⁵ Back in his room, Ledgard finds the huge image of Vera's face staring at him from the video surveillance screen (an image very similar to the one shown in [Figure 4](#)). Her seductive and defiant gaze is accompanied by an impetuous virtuoso violin passage consisting of the obsessive repetition of the dyad E–C# ([Example 9](#)). The cue ends with a *forte* motif extracted from the cadenza of *Cautiva* ([Example 9](#), bb. 41–3). This motif, detached from the rest of the cadenza, also signals Ledgard's desire for Vera in two further scenes. For ease of reference I call it the 'motif of desire'.

The cue's harmonic trajectory from D# minor to C# minor is related to the outer sections of *Cautiva* in that chords built on the tonic and the supertonic notes are the main harmonic elements (but both chords are minor triads in this cue). A fundamental difference is that the tonic is not omitted at the end of the piece, but is stated repeatedly, almost compulsively. Since the slow emergence of C# minor as the new tonality or referential centre is prompted by Vera's increasing control of the situation, I read this harmonic trajectory as an expression of her empowerment and control, which is the main theme of this scene.

In terms of plot and musical accompaniment, this scene is closely related to another at the end of the film in which Vera again uses her powers of seduction as a strategy to escape, first by helping Ledgard to convince a member of his medical team that she is not the young man they operated on some time ago, and then by having sex with her captor (01:40:40). The musical accompaniment is a variation of the cue just described. The solo violin enters playing again the arpeggiated melody shown in [Example 8](#) when Vera fortuitously discovers the picture of

²⁵ Almodóvar, *Guion*, 46.

The image displays a musical score for Example 9, spanning measures 38 to 44. The score is arranged in a system with six staves: Violin solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The key signature is C# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 3/4. Measure 38 is marked with a forte dynamic (sf). Measures 39 and 40 feature a melodic line in the Violin solo part with a forte dynamic (f). Measures 41 and 42 show a change in dynamics to mezzo-forte (mf) and mezzo-piano (mp). Measure 43 is marked with a forte dynamic (f), and measure 44 is marked with a mezzo-forte dynamic (mf). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 9 End of the cue *Estoy hecha a tu medida* ('I am tailor-made for you'); bb. 38–44. Motif of desire in bb. 41–4. © Alberto Iglesias.

her former male self (Vicente) in the missing-persons section of the newspaper (1:40:12). The melody is no longer accompanied by the orchestral tritone chords. The restatement of this virtuoso melody accompanying the image of Vicente remind us of Ledgard's evil surgical revenge just before Vera has sex with him and eventually murders him.

Vera kisses Ledgard passionately so that he does not notice her troubled reaction after seeing her former male image. The kiss is accompanied by a variation of the above-mentioned impetuous virtuoso violin passage consisting of the obsessive repetition of the dyad E–C# (compare Examples 9 and 10). As in *Estoy hecha a tu medida*, this passage accompanies Vera's use of her seductive power as a strategy for survival and domination. The passage, again in C# minor, climaxes in an elongation of the motif of desire that accompanies the foreplay to the sexual intercourse (Example 10, bb. 39–47). This is one of the most stunning moments in the film score. The pitches D# and C# merge into three long, expressive major seconds. In *Estoy hecha a tu medida* these notes were the referential centres of the passages accompanying Ledgard's and Vera's respective command of the situation. I read these notes' merging in an expressive dissonance to accompany Ledgard and Vera's foreplay as a musical metaphor of their sexual union (Example 10, bb. 39–41). Tritone structures are prominent in the motive's accompaniment. The C#–D# dissonance is harmonized with the tonic C# minor in bars 39–40 and a four-note chord with predominant function in bars 40–1. This four-note chord is made up of the notes C# and D# and their respective tritones G and A. Note that the grace note in bar 41 is at a tritone's distance from the pedal note in the violin melody (the tonic C#) and is significantly spelled as an augmented fourth (F##).

As Ledgard penetrates Vera and she writhes in pain, we hear a chord on the dominant (G# major) with an added (dissonant) semitone over the fifth; the added tone (E) tone is tripled;

The image displays two systems of a musical score. The first system, measures 37-41, features a Violin solo part with dynamics *sfz*, *f*, *mp*, and *mf*. The string ensemble (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass) plays a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamics *sfz p sub*, *mf*, *p*, and *mf*. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 102. The second system, measures 42-47, is marked *Più Allegro* quarter note = 145. The Violin solo part has dynamics *mp* and *p*. The string ensemble dynamics are *sfz*, *p*, *mf*, *pp*, and *p*.

Example 10 Foreplay (bb. 37–44) and penetration (bb. 45–7); cue *M723-Entra con el vestido*. © Alberto Iglesias.

see [Example 10](#), bar 45. From that moment on, the action moves quickly: Vera leaves the room ostensibly in search of lubricant, takes Ledgard's pistol, and kills him and his mother/housekeeper Marilia.²⁶ Vera's escape from the mansion and return home are accompanied by a short cue for harp and strings in C# minor (1:44:45). The cue's main melody is a C# minor natural scale that ascends (optimistically) as Vera prepares to leave El Cigarral and descends as she begins to make her way back to her mother's shop. Anticipating Vera's moving reunion with her mother and her beloved, the piece ends with the diatonic version of the lament bass (the upper tetrachord of the C# minor scale) played by the cellos. This final cue in C# minor is one of the least tonally ambiguous in the film score. The choice of this key for the piece that accompanies Vera's final triumph is likely due to its association with her empowerment in previous cues.

26 Hill provides an interesting analysis of the different musical accompaniment of Ledgard's and Marilia's murder in 'Surgical Precision', 255–61.

Superhuman beauty

A particularly appalling form of terror in *The Skin I Live In* lies in the realization that Vera's extraordinary attractiveness is the result of Vicente's brutal surgical 'rape'. Unlike Georges Franju in *Les yeux sans visage*, Almodóvar never shows the unpleasantness and monstrosity of the surgical process but only the striking allurements of the end result: Vera. Her outstanding beauty is 'enhanced' several times by the sound of the unaccompanied violin playing fragments from the cadenza of *Cautiva*. The first instance is the scene in which Vera is presented as Ledgard's artistic creation and object of desire (00:07:20). After working in his laboratory, the surgeon goes to the upper part of the house. Arriving at the door of Vera's cell-room, he pauses briefly, hesitating whether to enter or not. Finally, he decides to go to his own room in order to view his 'work' through the video surveillance screen. This is the first scene that thematizes Ledgard's relationship of domination and desire with Vera. The surgeon is portrayed here for the first time as a modern Pygmalion in love with his creation. The scene is accompanied by the first and last parts of the cadenza (bb. 140–6, 149–55, 159–61, and 179–88 of *Cautiva*). Because of the absence of dialogue, the violin melody here is well to the foreground in the soundtrack.

The meaning of this violin melody should be understood in conjunction with the magnificent paintings that we admire in this scene for the first time: Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and *Venus and Musician* (c. 1550) in the mansion's foyer, and Guillermo Pérez Villalta's *Dionisios encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos* (*Dionysos meets Ariadne on Naxos*, 2008) in Ledgard's room. Like these artworks, the solo violin melody evokes notions of aesthetic sophistication, refinement and beauty. Because the violin begins to play just when Ledgard reaches the closed door of Vera's room, these notions are linked to his relationship to her. The paintings' symbolic meanings are manifestly related to the film's heroine. Like most paintings of naked women in the Western pictorial tradition, those hanging in Ledgard's foyer and room are a window through which the (male) viewer can admire the beauty of the naked female body from a position of supremacy. That this patriarchal gaze is the same as Ledgard's on Vera is made explicit when she adopts the above-mentioned posture like that of the Venuses while the captor contemplates her through the video surveillance system.²⁷

The first melody played by the solo violin in the film is the beginning of the cadenza, which opens significantly with a perfect fifth followed by a tritone (Example 11). This pair of intervals has been used for musical 'diablerie' since the Romantic period (the violin enters with a double-stop tritone followed by a double-stop fifth in both Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* and Stravinsky's 'Devil's Triumphal March' from *L'histoire du soldat*). The opening tritone C#–G \sharp (the enharmonic of F##) is the interval that spans the pedal notes in the virtuoso violin melody

27 Almodóvar, *Guion*, 12. The symbolic content and the role of these paintings in the film have been discussed by several scholars. Significant studies include Dongsup Jung, 'Yuxtaposición artística en La piel que habito de Pedro Almodóvar: En torno a las obras de Tiziano, Louise Bourgeois, Guillermo Pérez Villalta y Juan Gatti', *Neophilologus* 98 (2014); Tanja Laine, 'Art as a Guaranty of Sanity: *The Skin I Live In*', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 7 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.7.02>.



Example 11 First melody played by the solo violin in the film (00:07:23). © Alberto Iglesias.

shown in [Example 8](#) and the grace note and the pedal tone in the passionate violin melody that accompanies the foreplay to the sexual act ([Example 10](#), b. 41). Coincidentally or not, the same tritone is the interval between the key of the opening Cigarral theme (G minor) and the key that symbolizes Vera's empowerment and accompanies her final escape from the mansion-jail (C# minor). In this respect, it is worth noting that the tritone is not only a topos of the demonic but also the widest distance in harmonic space (in the circle of fifths) between two keys, which could have a symbolic meaning here.

A further instance of the solo violin playing fragments from the cadenza to 'enhance' the captive's beauty is the piece that accompanies the long fade-out of Vicente's face with Vera's as a metaphor of the sex change and the ensuing images of Ledgard's rapt admiration of her naked body. The solo violin plays the motif of desire accompanied by the strings. It follows a series of dissonant chords with the tritone in the bass. They sound to Ledgard's allusion to the considerable surgical work still to be done (01:19:55). The solo violin also plays a fragment of the cadenza when Ledgard considers his victim's transformation into a woman complete and takes off her surgical mask to admire the perfection of her new, transgenic skin (01:24:00; [Figure 5](#)). The violin plays here the central section of the cadenza, which begins significantly with the motif of desire (bb. 162–78).

Conclusion: the artist's power as creator

To emphasize the superhuman nature of the transgenic skin and beauty of Ledgard's surgical creation, Almodóvar digitally retouched the close-up images of Elena Anaya's skin ([Figure 5](#)). As the film scholar Carla Marcantonio has explained, 'not only has the film's surgeon produced artificial skin, but Almodóvar himself, in a gesture that anoints him the film's ultimate mad doctor, creates the woman's perfect skin through digital manipulation'.²⁸ Throughout the film, the sound of the solo violin is used similarly as a sort of 'special effect' for emphasizing the magnificence and sophistication of Ledgard's surgical creation. The extended post-minimalist, neo-baroque passages for the soloist contribute decisively to the high (and disturbing) aestheticization of the film and powerfully evoke the notions of refinement, elitism, high culture, and artistic beauty that define Ledgard and his surgical artefact. The subtle references to the art-musical past contribute to the oneiric, eerie temporal indeterminacy of the science-fiction events that take place within *El Cigarral*.

28 Carla Marcantonio, 'Cinema, Transgenesis, and History in *The Skin I Live In*', *Social Text* 122 33/1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2831868>.



Figure 5 (Colour online) Close-up of Vera's flawless (digitally retouched) transgenic skin. © El Deseo S. A.

Arguably for the first time in an Almodóvar film, transgender is no liberating choice but imposed mutilation; violin virtuosity and tritone structures are among the main musical means that express the evil of this enforced transformation. The most technically brilliant violin passages further conjure up the Mephistophelian figure of the violin virtuoso, a figure who shares with the Faustus-type mad scientist the attributes of meticulousness, precision, inaccessibility, superhuman ability, and absolute dedication to his gift. Alongside other visual and narrative elements, these connotations help to place the film in the realm of the Gothic-Romantic and to reinforce the surgeon's links with the Faustian anti-heroes of the Romantic era. Of these, the protagonist of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) was specifically likened by Almodóvar to the mad-scientist-playing-God Ledgard. Victor Frankenstein 'gave life to a new being through electricity' – the director explained – 'electricity had a value then [in the early nineteenth century] like transgenesis has now: something capable of creating life and which equates you almost to a divinity. And in such brilliant scientists as the surgeon protagonist there is something of a god, as there is in creators in general'.²⁹

This notion of the almost divine power of (artistic) creators is one of the central themes of Almodóvar's film. As the director and some of his collaborators explained, Ledgard – as the supreme creator of his fiction – is a counterpart of Almodóvar and, in general, of every artist who possesses exceptional creative ability.³⁰ In essence, *The Skin I Live In* is a meditation on

29 'da vida a un nuevo ser a través de la electricidad . . . la electricidad tenía por entonces un valor como el que ahora mismo tiene la transgénesis: algo capaz de crear vida y que te equipara casi a una divinidad. Y en estos científicos tan brillantes como el cirujano protagonista hay algo de dioses, como lo hay en los creadores en general'. Pedro Almodóvar, interview with Pedro Vallín, in 'Lo sensato era abandonar este guión', *La Vanguardia*, 30 August 2011, www.lavanguardia.com/magazine/20110826/54206040355/en-la-piel-de-anaya-y-banderas.html. On the parallels between Dr Frankenstein and Dr Ledgard, see Pataki, 'Gothic Fiction Elements'; Aldana Reyes, 'Skin Deep'; Alessandra Lemma, 'A Perfectly Modern Frankenstein: Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* (2011, Sony Picture Classics)', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 93/5 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2012.00634.x>; Domenico Diceglio, 'Identity and Inability to Mourn in *The Skin I Live In*', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 93/5 (2012), 1308–1313, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2012.00632.x>.

30 Pedro Almodóvar, interview with Pedro Vallín. See also Vicente Molina Foix, 'Prologue', in Almodóvar, *Guion*, 5–6 and Antonio Banderas interview with Pedro Vallín in 'En la piel de Anaya y Banderas', *La Vanguardia*, 26 August 2011, www.lavanguardia.com/magazine/20110826/54206040355/en-la-piel-de-anaya-y-banderas.html.

the artist's quasi-divine power as a maker of beauty and of his/her own fictional world. In this regard, Iglesias's foregrounding in the film score of a trio composed at the beginning of his career, on his own initiative and largely for the sheer pleasure of musical creation – rather than on commission to accompany the creative work of others – can be seen as a further dimension of this exaltation of the artist's power in Almodóvar's masterpiece.

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