

(*Variety* asked a number of people to write about their favorite movie of 2011. This was my piece)

The Skin I Live In

“Don’t look at the surfaces,” says Antonio Banderas’s character, speaking of kitchen countertops, yet at the same time encapsulating not only *The Skin I Live In* but the glory of Pedro Almodóvar. Surfaces are, of course, part of the joy of watching Almodóvar’s movies: the saturated colors; the seductive houses and furnishings; the nap and sheen of objects or clothes; the bodies, male and female both. Yet his mature movies all invite us to this thought: that the surface, the skin, is nothing. At first glance *The Skin I Live In* may seem a farrago of stories thrown together by a director who’s gone out of control. Yet his form here is also his meaning: the wild backstories and revelations and overlapping flashbacks turn out to *be* his subject, namely that any random human being has a history far more complicated, often far more bizarre than we can imagine, and we spectators therefore have no right to make easy judgments. A respected surgeon turns out to be a monster (but is he?); an apparently innocent young girl, a troubled psychiatric patient; a bourgeois wedding party, the scene of a rape; a rich man’s home, a laboratory and a prison; a young woman, someone’s son. This is Gothic soap opera with a purpose, humane even at its most seemingly inhumane, grotesque and even gruesome yet provocative and smart. (Almodóvar may be the last director whose characters still read books.) As always, there’s a great score and a terrific song; spectacular faces, like the tragic mug of Marisa Paredes topped here by a contradictory shock of platinum hair; a lack of the standard platitudes; and visual surprises. *The Skin I Live In* doesn’t fade or

blackout. The final image faints, and given the onscreen moment, nothing could be more fitting. It's what they used to call Art.

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