

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

---

2-2023

### Deconstructing Biopolitical and Performative Modes of Gender in Spanish Science Fiction

Emma Navarro

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/5181](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/5181)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

DECONSTRUCTING BIOPOLITICAL AND PERFORMATIVE MODES OF GENDER IN  
SPANISH SCIENCE FICTION

by

Emma Navarro

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
The City University of New York

2023

© 2023

Emma Navarro

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

DECONSTRUCTING BIOPOLITICAL AND PERFORMATIVE MODES OF GENDER IN  
SPANISH SCIENCE FICTION

by

Emma Navarro

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement  
for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved: January 2023

Paul Julian Smith, Advisor

Faculty Name, Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

### Deconstructing Biopolitical and Performative Modes of Gender in Spanish Science Fiction

by

Emma Navarro

Advisor: Paul Julian Smith

This thesis investigates the distinctly Spanish works of science fiction created by Pedro Almodóvar and Elia Barceló through feminist and biopolitical frameworks. Utilizing the theories of feminist philosopher Judith Butler and sociologist Jemima Repo, we uncover associations between the fictional and theoretical that have seldom been studied in conjunction. The paper aims to demonstrate Almodóvar and Barceló's unique narratives free from the confines of an unwavering gender stratum while simultaneously revealing the deteriorative effects of gender as a control apparatus. Deeply influenced by the post-Franco Madrid Movida movement, these creators exemplify the feminist ideals emerging from that progressive time, rejecting more conservative cultural dynamics. Their work offers a startling prescience for modern Spain, with elements mirrored in Butler and Repo's gender-focused studies. Gender identity is malleable and non-essential to the functions of reproduction and identity in every piece we examine. That idea is central to this thesis, which intends to demonstrate the potential of subversion through fantastical Spanish science fiction narratives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor Paul Julian Smith, for his generosity, expertise, and patience. Many thanks as well to Bettina Lerner for her advisement throughout the completion of my degree.

## CONTENTS

1.- Introduction .....	1
2.- Theoretical Context .....	7
2.1 The Performative Process of Gender Proposed by Judith Butler.....	7
2.2 The Possibilities of Gender Subversion.....	9
2.3 Gender as Biopolitical Apparatus in Jemima Repo’s Sociological Study .....	11
2.4 Genealogy of Gender and Other Theorists.....	14
3.- Literary and Theoretical Gender Examination .....	17
3.1 <i>La piel que habito</i> : Filmic Elements .....	17
3.2 Almodóvar and Butler in conversation .....	19
3.3 Corporeal Elements- Violence, Performance and the Clothed Body.....	22
3.4 Almodóvar’s Exploration of Science Fiction.....	26
3.5 How Far Can Subversion Go? .....	27
3.6 <i>Consecuencias naturales</i> Observed with Repo: Literary Elements and Parallels .....	29
3.7 Nuclear Panopticon and Regulatory Observation as Gender Essentiality .....	34
3.8 Reproduction and Motherhood as function.....	37
3.9 Gendered Language as Linguistic sexism.....	39
3.10 Limits of Feminist Critique.....	41
4.- Conclusion: Toward A New Gender Identity.....	42
Bibliography .....	45

## 1-Introduction

Science fiction is often relegated to the secondary arenas of literature and literary study. Often conjuring the thought of spaceships, aliens, malevolent powerful technology or experimentation gone disastrously wrong, stereotypical tropes are part of the genre. However, science fiction is also a literary genre concerned with societal elements that hold great importance during our own times, namely, in exploring how technology has shaped and may continue to shape our own reality. Evidently science fiction will differ in its specific focus based on who is writing, where they are writing and when they are writing. While not a novel idea, this reservation highlights the importance of studying those that have been left largely untouched by scholars. Spain's post-Franco science fiction work displays the unique concerns of a society, namely a new liberation from the former regime's harsh grip. Rather than adhere to the intransigent or muddled notions of science fiction as juvenile or lacking serious study, it must be regarded as the expansive corpus of work that history proves it to be.

In this study of Spanish science fiction, I intend to explore the intersection of gender, technology and "anti-gender" as delineated in Elia Barceló's novel *Consecuencias naturales* (1994) and Pedro Almodóvar's film *La piel que habito* (2011). Questions of gender identity and the influence of scientific advancement on the human condition are among the recurring motifs of both works, created in a post-Franco Spain when issues of gender equality were acquiring novel importance. I argue that both Elia Barceló and Pedro Almodóvar perceive gender as non-essential and locate various possibilities of resistance through gender performance and subversion. The different mediums of these works, prose fiction and film, also allow for the uniquely stylized exploration of gender-based theories. Barceló's novel, proclaimed a "feminist, gender-swapping farce" on the back cover, offers a radical messaging on the role of gender in



reproduction and societal function. In her author's note to a recent reprint, the first publication in English, Barceló herself states, "I wrote this novel twenty-five years ago and it worries me that we've hardly made any progress in all this time" (17). She certainly understood the unimpeachable status of gender and its troubling immovability.

Aiming to disassemble existing gender designators through outlandish developments possible only in science fiction, the novel features a chauvinistic cisgender male astronaut impregnated after a sexual encounter with an alien astronaut. The alien population known as Xhroll are revealed to have their own complex system of gender function. Rather than accept this fate as result of his ceaseless philandering, Nicodema Andrade (known as 'Nico') is forced to contend with the treatment that he has considered subservient his entire life. He must live on the Xhroll planet and abide by their directive until giving birth. Joined by one of the spaceship *Victoria's* commanders, Charlie Fonseca, a woman marginally sympathetic to his situation, Nico experiences the painful effects of sexually based discrimination. Charlie is assigned to accompany him with an express mandate to protect the two species' peaceful negotiations regarding Nico. She is the situation's failsafe and Nico's contrasting counterpart in ideology. Charlie shares every phase of his journey yet ultimately reaches starkly opposing conclusions regarding humanity and Xhroll gender relations. Albeit *Consecuencias Naturales* has since received less attention than its merits, Barceló quickly gained acclaim with the publication of her novel in 1994. She contended with detractors and supporters alike with her radical, controversial examination of gender relations released in the wake of a Madrid Movida that encouraged young writers such as her.

No doubt the shedding of a repressed societal status quo influenced Barceló's passionate portrayal of unbridled gender discrimination. Although the subject of her novel is concisely

focused, it invites endless interpretation and study. Marit Hanson writes at length on Barceló's intricate use of gendered language in "The Semantics of Solidarity: Radical Vulnerability and Gendered Language in Elia Barceló's *Consecuencias Naturales*", calling attention to a linguistic critique of the heteronormative societal structures presented in the novel. Hanson posits that this sort of radical discursive change is needed to create a mutually understood linguistic paradigm, in which all parties may empathize with the Other. Barceló herself presents *Consecuencias naturales* as a feminist novel in the vein of a science fiction story. She chose this format precisely to illustrate the fallacy of a technologically advanced population which still considers gender a meaningful designator of worth.

Barceló's only significant pushback when first publishing the novel were complaints at her main character being an "overbearing macho prick" and the use of crude language, largely to accurately illustrate this character (Barceló 5). The introduction mentions a work published directly in response to *Consecuencias naturales*, in which a character strikingly like Nico is featured without the subversive element central to the original novel (5). That secondary work displayed both in creation and narrative subject the behavior that Barceló herself repudiates. However, studies of her work continue well into the current time. Isabel Clúa writes more broadly of Barceló's prominent featuring of feminine characters. The first collection Barceló published, *Sagrada*, introduced the feminist ideals that would echo through her oeuvre. Tired of the over saturated male science fiction stories she found, Barceló wanted to feature women who did everything, from gentle acts to cruel attacks (Clúa 279). Women's roles in *Sagrada* and beyond deconstruct familiar representations of the feminine in challenging the idea of a designated life-giver. Clúa offers a deeper investigation into Barceló as an individual and into the history surrounding her publication, discussing the praise she received from fellow writers such

as her husband (268). Ultimately the penetration of not only a work of science fiction, but one of feminist science fiction into the Spanish mainstream was a monumental accomplishment in its own right.

Pedro Almodóvar made the first feature film of his countercultural career in 1980. His work holds particular significance to Spain's Madrid Movida cultural movement, focusing as it does on the changing mores within the country, particularly an unprecedented openness regarding sexual expression and gender identity. Both he and Barceló found a space for their revolutionary ideas on gender and sexuality in this community. With *La piel que habito*, Almodóvar directs a film which rebels against the very idea of an immutable gender and presents its performativity as farcical. In this film, identity (with sex and gender being the primary factor in that identity) is something which can literally be changed through scientific advancement. A young man named Vicente is transformed into a woman through non-consensual cosmetic surgeries. Going beyond gender reassignment surgery or merely the initial vaginoplasty Vicente is subjected to, Dr Ledgard changes the very skin of Vicente into a synthetic, nearly indestructible one resembling that of a woman from his past.

This radical and subversive play on gender is met with both acclaim and some criticism of Almodóvar's choice of narrative expression, particularly his use of violence. Questions arise such as how Almodóvar's narrative of forced and violent sex change can still leave space for a freer play of gender and sex identities. Paul Julian Smith and Rob White discuss *La piel que habito* in a *Film Quarterly* piece (unpaginated), praising Almodóvar's visually rich work while at the same time expressing their critiques with certain contentious elements. They denote a desensitization of the film's action and a displeasure in its depiction of desire and transsexualism. Praising the unusual reach of Almodóvar's creative endeavor, these two scholars

rightly question the connection an admired filmmaker has with the audience he once seemed so in tune with. The film also inspires study into less overt topics, as with Catherine Davies' article, "What lies beneath: Fabric and embodiment in Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*". Davies examines clothing in relation to the human body. In her reading of the film, dress and makeup are some of the conventionally feminine articles that characters either reject or embrace in their arc, speaking volumes about their interiority.

This thesis, then, is a comparative study of Pedro Almodóvar's film work and Elia Barceló's novel along with relevant scholars Judith Butler and Jemima Repo. Despite their differences of focus, these writers present similar ideologies regarding gender performativity and the governing of the gendered body. Butler studies the phenomenology of gender as, "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 520). With *The Biopolitical Birth of Gender: Social Control, Hermaphroditism, and the New Sexual Apparatus*, Repo offers rather a historical genealogy of gender. As she suggests in her title, the modern concept of gender was birthed as an apparatus of control specifically to "justify surgeries on children with ambiguous genitalia in the name of social health and order. Gender was therefore invented as a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining, and governing sex" (Repo 2). These ideas function in conversation with science fiction because technology allows for unmediated performance. Of course, online identities and cyberspace also offer the ability to be anyone anonymously; but even the advanced cosmetic surgery and space travel we see in science fiction facilitate performativity. Science fiction places the performance in a setting removed from our own reality but no less genuine in its sentiment.

Although employing differing narratives and on opposite ends of a science fiction spectrum, these works aim to bridge a divide between gender identity as it understood and a new concept of gender. Both Barceló and Almodóvar brilliantly employ the notions of gender transcendence I will examine in this study. I have chosen these particular Spanish auteurs due to their artistic methods of critiquing gender and, vitally, because of their distinct chosen mediums of film and prose fiction. While Barceló's novel may feature an alien society and intergalactic travel, it is simultaneously grounded with sections featuring characters' internal monologue. Almodóvar meanwhile takes advantage of film to offer a world that is not too far removed from modernity yet contains the fantastically visual possibilities of an indestructible synthetic skin. With their exuberant and radical works, Barceló and Almodóvar explore both the non-essentiality of gender and the construction of gender as a hegemonic regulatory system.

## 2- Theoretical Context

### 2.1 The Performative Process of Gender Proposed by Judith Butler

In this chapter, Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" and Jemima Repo's *The Biopolitical Birth of Gender: Social Control, Hermaphroditism, and the New Sexual Apparatus*, will be closely analyzed. Both share feminist frameworks and a thematic focus on revealing the truth of gender identity. These theorists investigate the origin of gender as a constructed notion, and the methods through which that notion has survived. Butler's work dates back to 1988, while Repo's was published more recently in 2015; and examining them parallel to each other reveals both the ideas that have maintained importance in feminist studies over time and those that have risen to significance more recently. Additionally, examining two works far apart in publication date can bring to light the shortcomings of both their theorist's ideas and the society for which they were written, in much the same way that the narrative works of Almodóvar and Barceló reflect on both their genre's possibilities as well as on post-Francoist Spain.

The purpose of this analysis is to thoroughly review how these thinkers explore the effects of heteronormativity, patriarchy and oppressive rules on gendering and identity formation. Butler argues, famously, that biological sex is distinct from gender, and the elements that constitute gender are no more than a series of performances repeated by those attempting to be male or female. Repo uses rather the work of previous historians of ideas such as Michel Foucault to expand on established ideas regarding gender identity, and study what feminist writers may have missed in their accounts.

As her title suggests, Butler maintains a focal point on the phenomenology of gender identity. Rather than the existence of a “choosing and constituting agent prior to language” that phenomenology often assumes, Butler asserts that “there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive facts” (Butler 519). Relating the theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, she uses their understanding of gender identity as a foundation for investigating the origin of the term. Beauvoir anticipates the radical reinterpretation of constituting acts that Butler proposes, declaring that one *becomes* a woman rather than being born one. Gender acts are therefore “in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time...through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Merleau-Ponty also understood the body as a historical idea and entirely a set of ‘possibilities’ determined by circumstance. Those possibilities are dictated by the historical period of the body’s existence and “constrained by available historical conventions” (520). Hence, according to Merleau-Ponty, the human body is perennially enacting the socially acceptable possibility of ‘male’ or ‘female’. Butler chooses Merleau-Ponty precisely because that notion of possibility illustrates gender as a performance with clearly punitive consequences, suggesting why it has survived the nuances of human sexual reality.

The ideology behind gender survives due to what Butler describes as a regulatory system. The specific acts that are designated male or female have continually evolved, but the general notion behind them has remained intransigent. Articles of clothing or manner of behavior assigned to the female body are drastically transformed from generation to generation, but nonetheless remain unchanged as to the identity they represent. This is Butler’s central argument— the performativity of gender, the doing of one’s body as reality. As Butler poignantly

remarks, “Gender is not passively scripted on the body...Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (526). She stresses the action of performativity as the bedrock of gender, rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon which identity instinctually arises from. With a socially influenced regulatory system, gender identity becomes a self-sustaining cycle of performative acts.

## 2.2 The Possibilities of Gender Subversion

Butler further underscores a difference between the natural body and gender, noting that they are, fundamentally, two separate phenomena. Cataloging these elements of human behavior is a feat undertaken by many feminist and sociological scholars, and Butler steadfastly locates her work in this vein of study. The task she sets herself is to, “examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts” (Butler 520), separating the ‘theatrical’ elements of gender from their necessity and its potential subversion. Her contention regarding the perpetuation of gender performativity is perhaps best summarized with the following, from the beginning of her article:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation, between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 520)

Here, Butler addresses the crucial necessity of breaking with stylized repetitions of gender identity. Transformation and subversion of gender may best come from a recognition of its constraining repetition and a pivoting of that hegemonic structure. This lends to Butler’s



adjoining interest, the possible subversion of gender into a new style more correlated with the variety of human gender and sexuality. Gender performance is an intangible element, incredibly malleable once the rigid confines are abandoned. Drag, transgenderism, cross dressing, and impersonation are practices of subversion that Butler recognizes in her various theoretical works, through which stylized repetition of gender may be performed by those who *should not* enact them, but nonetheless keep doing so. Repetition should not be discounted as a means to subvert the grounds of gender identity, as acts understood as specifically male or female, acceptable or unacceptable, may shift in the process of performance. That arbitrary relation which Butler acknowledges maintains gender identity in its existent frame allows for a wider stage for performance. The very fact that gender identity relies entirely on the stylized repetition of acts means those acts may be altered and a destructive systemic structure can be substituted for a positive one.

Along with a study of gender constitution and its consequent performativity, Butler aims to spotlight the methods through which the transformation of established gender identity can be achieved. A presupposition of gender designators such as ‘female’ or ‘male’ is largely what shackles. Understanding must go beyond an expressive model of gender and rethink the relationship between appearance and reality. Butler offers an example of a ‘transvestite’ onstage versus on a bus, a thought somewhat outdated but still worth consideration. Onstage the challenge to established gender functions may elicit applause, but on a bus, it gives rise to discomfort. For many the ostentatious display of gender rejection is reserved for the spectacle only. After Butler presents this example, she concludes that the “transvestite’s gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations” (Butler 525). If gender is performance, how can boundaries exist? Butler’s analysis of gender thus echoes Simon de

Beauvoir's sentiment of a 'becoming' quality of gender, wherein the constitutive acts beget the performance.

Butler chooses to underscore that process of becoming gender, confronting the assumed natural link between sex and gender. This assumed naturalized relationship takes for granted that a female body shows 'feminine' characteristics and desires, or that a male body displays masculine properties. Subversion is the process through which she believes the performativity of gender identity may best become more aligned with experience. Ideally, through subversion a stage is achievable where "acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*" (Butler 530). This is not a utopia but rather a state in which the complexity of gender is brought into a cultural interplay without punitive consequences.

### 2.3 Gender as Biopolitical Apparatus in Jemima Repo's Sociological Study

Although much less of a mainstay than Butler, Jemima Repo similarly studies the indelible connection of gender and performativity. She, however, narrows her focus to the origin of gender in the nineteenth century, labelling this period the biopolitical birth of gender. In her words, gender became the "major sexual signifier of the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first century", born from the specific biopolitical concerns of these times [Repo 3]. Repo draws on Foucault's argument for sexuality as a defining biopolitical technology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. During a moment when gender and sexuality were recognized as discursive fact, Foucault challenged this ideology to assert sexuality as not an "identity or truth of the self but a biopolitical apparatus centered on the question of the management of life of the

species” (Repo 6). Like Foucault, Repo’s interest lies in human societal existence, but her lynchpin is more closely on uncovering gender identity.

To investigate this proposal, Repo suggests that gender does not originate with the feminist theorists and writers she has studied, but from the study of intersex and transsexual persons during the mid-twentieth century. In fact, she concludes that gender as currently understood and performed has always been used as a method of control over those individuals. Prior to this designator, the term was used broadly throughout various disciplines. Context was thus key to the understanding of what ‘gender’ actually meant in any scenario. The rigid binary boundaries of gender identity so recognizable today were more of an unspoken societal function rather than clearly delineated lines of performance. Repo dubs gender the “cultural nominator of sex” for half a century, but notes how shockingly few will recognize it as anything other than the “sexual order of things” in modernized society (Repo 1). Many cannot even comprehend the idea of gender as associated with anything but the established system of sexuality. In this way the term has undergone a drastic change since the 1950’s, when the current order of gender and sexuality was established in American labs. Now, to clarify, Repo does acknowledge the etymological roots of the word gender. A complex system traceable to the Old French *gendre*, or further the Greek *genus*, Repo is not aiming to rewrite the word’s history. Indeed the term has undergone many evolutions, with Repo noting that:

Before the 1950s, gender could be used to refer to various types, varieties, kinds, or modes of any sort of phenomena, sometimes sex, but not necessarily. Its only regular usage was in linguistics, where it was used to classify nouns as masculine, feminine, or neuter. At some point in the twentieth century, gender went from being a nominator of types and became bound to the sexual order of things. (1)

Gender, then, was not always known primarily as an apparatus of the sexual order. The word experienced a marked pivoting on these parameters. Repo echoes the sentiment shared by Foucault, namely that gender belongs to the twentieth century like a fish to water (2). More than Butler or other second wave feminists, Repo has the benefit of writing from a modern viewpoint. She even claims that those early feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Robert Stoller are often misattributed as the inventors of gender theory. Repo points rather to the birth of gender identity in the year 1955, “when psychiatrist John Money and his colleagues Joan and John Hampson at Johns Hopkins University published a series of articles on the psychosexual development of intersex patients” (2), challenging the time’s dominant belief that a sense of gender arose from biological variables such as genitalia or sex chromosomes. This research group proposed the idea that gender was learned postnatally and could therefore be manipulated under controlled circumstances. They believed that postnatal learning of gender could even override those biological variables of sex previously ordained as the essence of gender.

Money and colleagues’ radical argument for gender development was employed to “make sense of the sexual incongruities of the intersex subject, for example, to explain how an intersex person’s sense of being male or female could contradict biological sex variables” (2), however this novel understanding of gender was not used for a progressive revolution of societal function. In fact, “Rather than challenging the sexual order of things with their new scientific arguments, the doctors’ idea of gender was used to justify surgeries on children with ambiguous genitalia in the name of social health and order. Gender was therefore invented as a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining, and governing sex” (2). Although Repo delves into the political function of gender, her focus on the creation of the concept of gender is more relevant to this

paper. Foucault may have birthed the notions of gender's biopolitical apparatus of power, but Repo may look to explore the specificities of its genealogical analysis.

## 2.4 Genealogy of Gender and Other Theorists

A section of Repo's book pinpoints the theorists she believes are most significant to her own study. Foucault, of course, laid the foundation of biopolitical discussion, but Repo also feels it necessary to mention Judith Butler, "whose gender theory represents the most well-known Foucauldian and genealogical theory of gender", its significance evident even in this paper. Although Repo does note that "biopower is never the central mechanism governing gender" (6) in Butler's work, as she omits the methods of biopower central to Foucault's account of sexuality. For Butler, power is less focused on the political systems and centralized methods of control present, but on the incessant corporeal acts of each individual body. Repo takes issue with this incomplete analysis of gender constitution, while still accepting the monumental contribution Butler has made. Careful to note that gender cannot be theorized as a representation of sex nor a cultural construct, Repo rather declares gender a consequence of "discourse centered on the question of life" (6). As a prerequisite of examining the genealogy of the concept of gender, she stresses the need to suspend all theories of gender and rather observe the conditions of possibility that enabled its emergence. She thus approaches the notion of gender as a historically specific technology of biopower free of any associative structural systems such as patriarchy or capitalism. With this explanation Repo defends her position as a novel approach to gender study, involving aspects of Foucault's theory that even major feminist theorists like Judith Butler missed out on.

It is evident, then, why examining these two parallel works is of consequence despite their similarities. Gender is a technology of power inextricably tied to the twentieth century, but in the twenty first century we are free to study how that apparatus functions in recent and modern society. As mentioned previously, this reflection allows theorists like Repo to expand on the foundational writings of those who wrote before her. Repo writes of her intended specialization in, “postwar Western capitalist biopolitics and the shift to neoliberal modes of governmentality from the 1980s onward” (3). She works toward an examination of gender in conversation with biopolitical modes of governmentality, and questions gender’s emancipatory potential in political or feminist spheres. An idea created explicitly as a historical apparatus of power and control will undeniably hold on to that sentiment despite all desires to reclaim it. Repo thus affirms that gender is entangled “in the same web of biopolitics in its own historical context”, especially as it culminated in the governmentality of industrialized European nations where gender equality became a prominent policy concern in the 1990s and 2000s (2). Skeptical of gender equality, then, believes it became a method of promoting neoliberal government with its true aim that of further controlling the population. Proposing a novel agenda on the biopolitical origin and longevity of gender identity, Repo offers a historically accurate analysis on how power and gender are inextricably tied through systems of governance.

I have deployed an expansive survey of Butler and Repo’s texts in order to lay down a foundational understanding of these theorists. It is important to focus on the methods through which they come to their related goals of uncovering a new truth for gender identity. Both intend to displace misconstrued notions of how gender identity originated and why it continues to exist, although they approach from different disciplines. On the one hand, Repo sketches a historical survey of mid twentieth century lab experimentation which directly influenced Western nations

governing strategies; on the other Butler offer a theory of performance and individual action towards the fruition of gender identity, relating that process to a more societal and interpersonal context.

### 3- Literary and Theoretical Gender Examination

In this chapter, I will analyze two works of fiction, the novel *Consecuencias naturales* and the feature film *La piel que habito*, and evaluate them in conversation with the feminist theorists. These creative works retain relevance in the discussion of the feminist theoretical works due to their common subject matter and the gender-focused attention of their creators. Both Barceló and Almodóvar intersect the artistic and the theoretical through narratives which confront the notion of a rigid stratum of gender identity. And both present their themes with the use of a particularly Spanish satirical, absurd humor founded on exaggeration. These creators explore in similar fashion the harmful elements of a rigid understanding of gender and sexuality, yet they offer unique insights through their chosen mediums. Barceló utilizes the limitless potential of prose fiction to illustrate a world free of Earthly confines and larger society, although the damaging effects of binary gender and sexuality still persist. Almodóvar chooses to upend the audience's assumptions and deliver a film which capitalizes on the medium's visual nature, thus making a highly aestheticized and radical depiction of transgender experience. As we shall see, an immersive experience in these fictional worlds puts into practice the ideas explored by Butler and Repo. Moreover elements that are unique to science fiction also demonstrate the possibilities of subverting binary gender that are facilitated through technology.

#### 3.1 *La piel que habito*: Filmic Elements

With *La piel que habito*, Almodóvar purposely aims to confound and blur the boundaries of that which is considered traditional, in gender as in cinema. By no means a subtle film, *La piel's* unease around the gender-focused motif is evident right away. At the very beginning, the film's introductory scene is out of sequence with its chronological narrative. We see protagonist Vera



going about her daily routines, unaware of her status as prisoner or victim. She wears an odd flesh colored body suit presenting her as more mannequin than human. Every aspect of her existence seems unnatural; yet she also seems to exist with an effortlessness, as if her bizarre situation is all she has known. Time and place are in a state of disarray for both Vera and the viewer, with crucial expository scenes left to the middle or end of the film. Almodóvar's utilizes an anachronic flashback structure to aid in the creation of a tone which disorients and unsettles. This tone is further achieved through the film's undefined mise-en-scene. Unlike the usual specificity of Almodóvar's films (such as the villas of *Volver*, or the countryside of *Todo sobre mi madre*), identifying aspects of *La piel*'s locations are left suspended as the film is largely confined to the sterile rooms of Dr Ledgard's expansive home or apparently random shots of Spain's diverse regions.

At times aesthetic details seem prioritized over coherent narrative function. With no explanation or rejoinder for the bizarre narrative unfolding, Almodóvar accentuates elements which convey a certain displeasure, to better understand the characters' interiority. Paul Julian Smith writes of a transparent disconnect evident in *La piel*'s mise-en-scène, wherein the film's present is far from the reality of contemporary Spain still grappling with various financial and societal states of contention. These elements are key to understanding the potential of *La piel*, perhaps Almodóvar's most distinctively odd film, and one that tends to underscore a theme of gender fluidity. Its director's only venture into the genre of science fiction, the film puts forward a possibility for true radicalization through technological advancement, even in this purely fictional context. Almodóvar's use of distinct filmic elements, from editing and narrative structure to mise-en-scène and choice music, tends to disrupt viewers' understanding of traditional cinema and, indeed, of traditional society.

### 3.2 Almodóvar and Butler in conversation

Almodóvar's extensive filmography displays a passion for representing the unconventional in all senses, especially regarding gender and sexuality. His works shares similar ideas to those of the theorist Judith Butler; and a look at his oeuvre will reveal those feminist influences. Both focus on the cyclical nature of performativity and the methods through which this process may be resisted. In *La piel que habito*, Almodóvar, in line with Butler's theory of performativity, clearly depicts gender as a performance. As explored in the previous chapter, gender is a repetitive doing of both unconscious and conscious signifiers. The choices made to conform with female or male repeat so often that they form a mere appearance of substance or natural state of being. Gender performance is of course not an active choice. Just as Vera is imprisoned by Dr Ledgard in his clinic from the very start of the film, so individuals are born into a restrictive and regulatory system which dictates behavior. Oftentimes the director almost seems to take direct inspiration from these ideas in Butler's writings, featuring characters who know exactly how much of their gender role is performance or genuine, and who even seek subvert those roles. In particular, the Vera/Vincent hybrid performs femininity as an act of resistance against Dr Ledgard's tyranny. Vera's performance of gender confuses the viewers, deceives his/her captor, and exposes the precariousness of gender constructions.

Additionally, Butler dictates that the continued social and political representation of women is crucial, but also warns of doing so in a manner which distorts and reifies the very collectivity feminist theory is intended to emancipate (Butler 70). The performative acts of gender- the gestures, clothing and visual body, must ultimately express nothing in regard to identity. Butler ultimately believes that a fixation on sexual difference is an implicitly binary and heterosexual framework as the descriptions of gender, sexuality and gender identity become

shackled to the functions of genitalia and reproduction. She focuses on the nature of femaleness not as something waiting to be expressed but rather as an endlessly diverse series of experiences that should be shared. The process of ‘becoming woman’ is unique to everyone and ultimately a learned phenomenon.

Despite its unconventional methods, *La piel* aims to express this very concept, notably with the controversial character of Vera. The film showcases the development of gender performativity in a microcosm. Vera’s becoming of a woman is entirely confined to Ledgard’s house. She must perform the traditional aspects of femaleness while being observed at all times via camera. The regulatory system which Butler (and Repo) address is present and malicious. Any deviation from female behavior is swiftly punished both physically and psychologically, making literal the performative nature of gender that Butler develops. Vera’s entire womanhood is fabricated and performed for Ledgard as a method of survival. This performance is also what frees her from Ledgard’s clutches, as she soon realizes that what he desires is a further extension of her performance, namely a sexual parody of his dead wife. Butler writes, “As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend” (Butler 67). The body is not a passively scripted object but an amalgamation of the individual and pre-existent directives. In *La piel* we observe the exaggeration of this process in that Vera has the choice of gender performativity forced on her while still retaining a sense of personal identity.

Above all, *La piel* stresses the notion that identity need not be defined by gender. Although this is certainly not a novel thought, it is telling that Almodóvar still felt so strongly about this topic in 2011 after a career of gender radicalizing films. As evidenced from the theoretical essays

and creative works discussed throughout this thesis, these issues have proven timeless. The film suggests that Vicente remains himself (or herself, it is unclear with which gender Vicente/Vera identifies as at the film's conclusion) independent and determined, even after becoming trans or, rather, being forced to become trans by Ledgard's unwelcome surgery. Rob White notes in discussion, "Vera escapes in the end because, in contrast with the identity play and performativity and lightness of being that often comes to the fore in Almodóvar's films, she stays in some steely way fanatically true to herself (or himself?) and her determination to get away" (*Film Quarterly* unpaginated). The logic of the film's narrative suggest that some essence of Vicente is still present after s/he has survived horrors at the hands of Ledgard. The actress portraying Vera, Elena Anaya, captures the restlessness with which Jan Cornet embodied her alter ego and predecessor Vicente.

The two actors chosen to play the same part, differently gendered, are not too distinct from each other physically. Almodóvar's choice of casting a young, boyish looking man in the role lends an interesting layer to the character. Vicente is a restless, lustful young man capable of raping a girl and abandoning her naked body on the ground. Yet his physicality does not immediately render him a threat to other men; and he is easily overpowered by Ledgard. Perhaps this contradictory appearance was chosen intentionally on Almodóvar's part, as Vicente does not fit the mold of a predatory man. His slight stature and soft features share more in common with Vera than the violent pathogenic men we see in Ledgard or Zeca, another sexual abuser. Almodóvar seems to make viewers question the assumptions made of someone with this physique and more largely the assumptions of gender identity made from performative elements. The outward appearance of an individual may thus only be a part of the performative nature inscribed upon them.

### 3.3 Corporeal Elements- Violence, Performance and the Clothed Body

Almodóvar's film looks at various corporeal facets of gender identity: violence, performance and clothing all relate to the body in different degrees. The motivation behind Dr Ledgard's outrageous actions is his belief that Vicente raped his daughter Norma, resulting in her suicide. It is important to briefly examine this scene between Norma and Vicente, because it holds a complexity that muddies Vicente's fate. The interaction of the two is purposefully odd, in that Norma appears to have a manic episode following an initially enthusiastic response to Vicente's sexual initiative. It is unclear what exactly triggers this reaction, but it is apparent that she becomes fearful of some nebulous element. Nevertheless, her reaction does present the encounter as a rape despite the framing of the scene as a confusing spectacle of young heterosexual passion. Tragically, after a prolonged hospital stint Norma shows no improvement in her manic condition and commits suicide. Vicente and Norma's scene is notably different from another rape in the film- that of Vera (Vicente, post-transformation) by the animalesque Zeca, an escaped criminal. That scene is explicitly violent and disturbing in its callousness. By comparison Vicente's forced sexual reassignment functions troublingly as a punishment for his commitment of rape.

Vicente subsequently enacts the part of a woman, and specifically the woman Ledgard has turned him into a facsimile of, the doctor's dead wife Vera. Vicente's performance, only tardily revealed to the audience, is complete with the costuming of woman in the new skin and feminine body imposed on him. This synthetic skin that Ledgard has created is key to Vicente's performativity. It is a remarkable scientific development which has taken years to perfect, with Vera at the unwilling center of the experimentation. Ledgard defends his use of transgenesis to a skeptical colleague: "We intervene in everything around us. Meat, clothes, vegetables, fruit,

everything! Why not use scientific advances to improve our species? You know how many diseases we could cure with transgenesis? Or the genetic malformations that could be avoided?”. Here with Dr Ledgard we see a recognizable element of science fiction- the dangerous, hubris-induced exploration of scientific progress. Almodóvar thus identifies a thought-provoking locus of intersection between science, violence and performance in this unconventional way. The aseptic and orderly surgery that Ledgard performs on Vicente’s body is part science experiment, part performance in its own right, but is finally the pivotal ordeal for Vera’s enactment of the concept of woman.

Revenge ceases to be the sole reason for the doctor’s creation once Vera becomes more than just an experimental subject for him. There is a deeper need for Ledgard to control a feminine figure after the failure he experienced with his dead wife and daughter. He performs the experimental procedures in the secrecy of his home lab. As he is guiding Vera through her new body, moved as he is partly by revenge and partly by lustful power, Ledgard says of her surgically applied breasts, “They don’t seem pneumatic do they? They’re like drops of water sliding along a glass surface”. This line of dialogue exposes his own fascination with an intersection between the natural and artificial. Ledgard enjoys creating the performative aspects of womanhood such as clothing, makeup and sensuality. Certainly, the reason he gains so much satisfaction from Vera’s creation is because for him, she is somewhat akin to property, the accumulation of everything he has worked for and sacrificed. As Butler suggests in her study, gender performativity is the precursor to dominant gender roles. The nature of those gender roles designates a male possessor, especially given their reliance on the nuclear family or a similar dynamic. Ledgard, for all his proclamations about the importance of scientific and societal progress, reveals through his actions that what he truly longs for is the superiority those

traditional gender roles offer him. What is more, *La piel* speaks openly about the transitory position of all genders. Gender is revealed to be a far more malleable and individual part of the human than fixed behavioral patterns and performative elements, including the clothing which captivates Ledgard.

During their first meeting, Vicente says to Norma, “You are different. I am different as well”. It is unclear to what extent Vicente is saying this to endear himself to Norma, but they certainly do share some comradeship in a disaffection for their everyday existence. Although it is not uncommon for young people such as them to feel disconnected from the world, the entirety of their conversation hints at a deeper discomfort with their corporeal selves. Norma states, “Clothes make me feel claustrophobic. I wish I could stay naked all the time”. This is more than just a quirky line from an underdeveloped character. Clothing is arguably the most significant visual indicator of the gender identity that an individual chooses to present themselves as. The articles of clothing they choose, the way they wear those pieces and even their attitude in wearing them speak volumes. Discomfort in one’s own clothing or even one’s own skin is nearly always evident in some form in the film. Norma feels so suffocated by the clothing she wears, a highly feminized styling, that she would rather wear nothing at all.

Catherine Davies interprets clothing as protection of the body from exterior forces that may do it physical or emotional harm: “Clothing's relationship to the body would therefore appear to quell anxieties and shroud areas where inner and exterior coincide” (Davies 69). Feeling restricted and uncomfortable in one’s clothing as Norma does suggests a serious interior trauma. As mentioned earlier, she would rather be naked and in a more vulnerable state. When Ledgard brings her clothes to the hospital, all dresses and feminine fabrics, she screams in terror. Both Norma and Vicente reject female clothing and the performance that it necessitates. Vicente

is horrified by the femineity being forced on him by Ledgard, destroying the dresses and makeup offered to him/her. Davies writes, “Both Vicente/Vera and Robert's daughter Norma express hostility towards objectified female identity in their disavowal of fabric as adornment rituals” (Davies 74). These characters thus desire an authenticity that the adornment ritual of clothing opposes.

Almodóvar’s work, here and elsewhere, includes many images of feminine clothing and silhouettes, illustrating the hollowness of attire and of the identity assigned to it. Returning to Butler, she writes of the assumed naturalized relationship which takes for granted that a female body shows ‘feminine’ characteristics and desires or that a male body displays masculine properties [Butler 528]. In *La piel* Almodóvar presents a subversion of this principle in characters who reject and subvert any assumed relationship between the body and gender specific characteristics. Just as subversion is the process through which Butler believes the performativity of gender identity may best become more truthful, so Almodóvar puts into practice those ideas of performativity and subversion. In his film the elements of male or female are something that is literally transient and alterable. And just as the narrative technique that Almodóvar employs challenges the audience, so he is undeniably subverting an understanding of strict gender roles. At the end of the film after she has won her freedom by killing Ledgard, Vera declares that they are still Vicente, thus suggesting that despite appearances interiority has not changed. Here Vera dons a dress, makeup and well styled hair -stereotypically female elements- yet also returns to her “home” and authentic core, which is, significantly enough, the women’s clothing store run by his/her mother. If performance, and more critically, subversion means eliminating the rigid constructs of gender then *La piel* showcases just that process with unique Almodóvar-esque flourishes.



### 3.4 Almodóvar's Exploration of Science Fiction

*La piel que habito* craftily utilizes the conventions of science fiction for thematic effect in this the director's arthouse contribution to the genre. Impossible scientific advancements are featured in a fantastical yet grounded manner. Significantly, Almodóvar is himself a fan of the genre. He stated during a 2012 BAFTA David Lean Lecture, wherein prominent filmmakers speak on their career, "I am still young enough to make a science fiction movie. I have ideas for this genre. The way I would like to do it is present something impossible in a real, domestic way" (*Variety*). Interestingly, he does not consider *La piel* a work of science fiction. His published comments on the film suggest his standpoint is something slightly removed from the genre and more in line with a psychological thriller. However, *La piel* does exactly what Almodóvar wishes for his own science fiction work. Artificial skin is certainly a real invention, but the near indestructible one shown in the film is as yet impossible. Along with this, the ability to perfectly copy one person onto another through plastic surgery exists only as fictitious speculation. Hence although Almodóvar has ideas for a future science fiction work, he does not seem aware that this one fits that bill quite well. As for the domestic aspect also voiced by the director, Ledgard certainly keeps his experiments disturbingly close to home. Given the OED definition of the genre as, "Fiction in which the setting and story feature hypothetical scientific or technological advances, the existence of alien life, space or time travel, etc." ("science fiction", def. A.3), it is hard to deny that Almodóvar's film is an inspired work of science fiction.

As mentioned earlier, *La piel* is generally presented as a *mélange* of various genres and tones, mainly thriller or horror piece. But limiting it to those considerations erases an integral part of the film's essence. The science fiction element makes it an outlier in Almodóvar's filmography. Whereas his usual output is more melodrama and fantastical, *La piel* presents a

disturbing fascination with corporeality. The film doubtlessly takes influence from Frankenstein, but unlike in that monster tale, Vera is a creation of beauty and true scientific accomplishment. Ledgard is the maniacal doctor too lost in his own mind to address the horror of his creation. Marilia, Ledgard's housekeeper and mother, similarly functions as the female accomplice to his experiments, with veteran actor Marisa Paredes inverting her typically sympathetic roles for Almodóvar. Her character here ignores the cruelty of Ledgard because he is her biological son, but she is no less complicit in his crimes.

The scientific and religious also come together, with Ledgard fashioning himself as a sort of god with complete control over the creation of Vera. His surgical procedures evoke a picture more ritualistic than scientific as he crafts Vicente's new identity. The connections between the two monster stories is clear, but why Almodóvar would want to tell a narrative about trans identity in the structure of a cautionary scientific tale is less so. The horror evoked by this scientific farce at times paints gender reassignment as unforgiving, which is unusual for Almodóvar, who has long presented it as purely positive. Along this vein of thought, it is also crucial to discuss some of the contradictions and counterpoints voiced by critics in regard to *La piel que habito*. Although the film does call for a greater cognizance of gender fluidity, the controversial elements which enable that theme have generated poignant discussion. Rosa Boshier for one interrogates Almodovar's "rape technique" and the visceral reaction of sexual violence as cinematic component in a striking piece (The Rumpus unpaginated).

### 3.5 How Far Can Subversion Go?

Why does Almodóvar (and as we will see, Repo) use sexual violence as a necessary tool towards gender radicalization? These artists clearly desire to disparage gender inequalities and

indeed lean towards feminist sympathies; yet rape is the inciting incident to both stories. Possibly, beyond discrete acts, Almodóvar ventures to emphasize the violating nature of an uncompromising system of gender and sexuality. And perhaps the fact that the film features two distinct acts of sexual violence, both involving Vicente/Vera, is a commentary on the violence often directed towards trans individuals. The distressing nature of these scenes forces viewers to consider sexual violence in direct relation to gender identity, and especially female trans-gender identity.

This discomfiting essence of *La piel* may influence some viewers negatively. Paul Julian Smith writes of the “surgically chilly” feel of the film and laments the disconcerting un-pleasure that Almodóvar chooses to showcase this story of sex change, questioning if the director has lost touch with the reality of Spain (unpaginated). Rosa Boshier asks, “Can forced sex changes and serial rapes as revenge really serve to further an agenda of gender equity, especially when a man wields this plot?” (unpaginated). The motif of a paternal pathogen that Almodóvar uses in this film is also identified by Dean Allbritton in the director’s earlier films in the article “Paternity and Pathogens: Mourning Men and the Crises of Masculinity in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* and *Hable Con Ella*”. Here, argues Allbritton, men are the infectant beginning of women’s suffering. The introduction to this dissertation asked how Almodóvar's narrative of forced and violent sex change can still leave space for a freer play of gender and sex identities. One answer may lie in the sad reality that violence is often a constitutive part of gender and sexuality. Ultimately though, Almodóvar always takes radical, often controversial approaches to his themes; and his detractors sometimes fail to address those issues.

Butler notes, “In a sense, the prescription is not utopian, but consists in an imperative to acknowledge the existing complexity of gender which our vocabulary invariably disguises and to

bring that complexity into a dramatic cultural interplay without punitive consequences” (530). In Almodóvar’s film, finally, the prescription for gender confinement does not deny the complex, often debilitating element that gender has created in modern culture but instead uses that element to create new expressions of gender.

### 3.6 *Consecuencias naturales* Observed with Repo: Literary Elements and Parallels

The universe of *Consecuencias naturales* is a solidly imagined twenty-third century, yet shockingly close to the one Barceló lived and wrote in. Characters deride the flat, two dimensional films of the modern era and remember condoms as archaic museum pieces. Entertainment comes in the form of virtual reality-like experiences infinitely more immersive than screen watching and prophylactics and contraception are simple procedures electively undergone by the majority of people. Yet gender still occupies a malignant spot in the incredibly advanced existence of these future characters. It is not an overt role, in that few will claim to consider gender a major identifier among the other members of the spaceship Victoria’s crew. Members with low and high rank are in fact diversely represented. Nonetheless, gender identity is an unspoken and loudly delineated element in the humans’ social structure. Xhroll society is also shown to possess a surprisingly similar categorization.

There are less overt measures of inequality on the Victoria, including a familiar hierarchical structure in which nearly all of the commanding officers are male. But gender is not presented as a significant concern in the everyday function of life. Nevertheless it is Barceló’s intention to emphasize a foundational immutability in gender in this future time and warn of its continuance long past any societal necessity, if there ever was one. Protagonist Nico is an outlier with his misogynistic behavior, as the other crew members both male and female do not share his

opinions on women, and in fact condemn them as oddities. He is introduced thus: “Nico was simply beyond help. He was a great mechanic, and, as he often said, his heart—if he had one—belonged to his machines...but what he’d also amply demonstrated during shore leaves was that women held second place, maybe not in his heart, but rather a foot or so below” (Barceló 24). Labelling Nico as a man ‘beyond help’, Barceló frames his misogynistic worldview as a debilitating condition long past a point of intervention. This descriptor also hints at a deeper psychological remove for Nico, as he is able to empathize more with machines than any of his fellow human beings, especially women. While it might appear that he developed this attitude as a result of a life removed from larger society, surrounded by machines, the novel shows that the slightest investigation into his life does not confirm this. Nico has numerous friends on the *Victoria* whom he speaks with frequently, including the occasional conversation with Charlie, his companion on the Xhroll planet. He additionally has a reputation for regularly sleeping with most of the ship’s limited population of women. There is even talk of his many womanizing exploits on ‘shore leaves’, although this leaves the reader baffled as to the reason for his success with women.

There is in the novel no discernable motivation for such profound misogyny, and Nico has no problem in following the orders of his female superiors. Yet Barceló’s offers us the portrait of a man so ingrained in his particular thoughts on the world, and specifically on women, that he cannot comprehend those thoughts as prejudices. There is, moreover, something present in the character larger than any explanation we receive in the novel and is perhaps explicable only by the ideas of theorists such as Repo. The latter’s conception of gender as an apparatus of control is actualized in this character who is imagined as living some three hundred years after Money and colleagues first set the cycle of gender identity into motion. Instead of a global order,

the expression of gender control coming from just one individual (namely Nico) calls attention to the malevolence of such thinking.

As Repo suggests in her study, the concept of gender was birthed as a new variable life-affirming control. One of Money and the Hampson's most prominent conclusions was the necessity of gender roles, and Nico provides a thematic stronghold for that mode of thinking. He firmly believes in the subservience of women despite living in a world that proves him wrong. In this he is not so dissimilar to Money, whose conclusions of a strict and reproductively oriented system of gender roles went against his group's own research findings. The belief that gender roles, once established, were permanent had major implications for the subjects of Money's research. Repo details a case in which a young boy suffered great pain during their female sexual assignment surgery, prompting them to stop the procedures all together (Repo 43-47). He concluded that the child has already become attached to their male identity despite being designated as female when birthed with 'ambiguous' genitalia. Repo writes, "The invention of gender facilitated new standardized medical, surgical, and psychological sex reassignment protocols for the control of biological sex, sexual traits, and behaviors" (Repo 33), asserting that Money's influence cannot be overexaggerated. His direct implication of a sex/gender status quo can still be observed to this day, an element that both Repo and Barceló noticed about their society and one which inspired their respective works.

Interestingly, despite his chauvinistic depiction, Nico escapes a strictly cartoonish characterization and he is not easily dismissible as a villain. He commits one horrific act of rape on an unassuming Xhroll caretaker and possesses a dangerous mindset. But there is also an unexplored pain in his own self. His identity is from the start inextricably tied to masculinity and a sense of gender superiority, so any deviation from this will hurt him deeply. Although Barceló

does attempt to offer some interiority to the character, the degree to which his self-imposed plight resonates will of course depend on the individual reader. This is not to say that, objectively, Nico is anything other than vile; but Barceló takes care to portray a nuanced character despite their overwhelming moral shortcomings, encouraging readers to instead investigate the root cause of such discriminatory ideology. In Nico we have a man incredibly misguided in his view of women, but still wholly obsessed with them. Many of his waking hours are spent observing women, doling out harsh judgement on them and plotting ways to bed them. Conversely some of his more vulnerable moments suggest that this overbearingly macho, misogynistic posturing may be in some part an act, but even he buries those thoughts deep inside. Although Nico remembers the comfort his mother provided or the sweetness of his first girlfriend, he forces himself to forget that sentimentality, mistaking it for weakness.

Pregnancy is experienced by Nico as the ultimate disrespect, and he wonders how women ever manage to endure it. Yes, he is made to understand the existence of those he irrationally considers beneath him. But in the novel there is hardly a sense of revelation on his part, much less redemption. As we shall see, Nico faces many “natural consequences” for his behavior, even at the level of prose. The novel’s final mention of Nico is of him vomiting at the realization that the Xhroll he had violated were not female (hence his own pregnancy). Beyond that, however, Nico returns to his usual routines and ideology with an extra financial payout or his miserable experiences to boot. However, he now cowers before Charlie, as she was the only one to witness his most vulnerable moments alongside the Xhroll. Hence with the unusual premise of this novel Barceló circumvents a traditional story of male vs. female rivalry for a more nuanced observation on the futility of gender inequality.

Barceló thus offers a discursive work in fictional form questioning the meaning of gender and why patriarchal people like Nico still exist during the twenty-third century, or even our own times. The truth of Nico's interiority has been revealed to us and as readers we can dismiss the rationalizations he makes for such behavior. Nico is just one individual in a world purposely filled with gender-based discriminatory ideology. Clúa, a rare critic on the author, writes that Barceló, "rejects any essentialist definition of woman and anticipates a sophisticated and fluid vision of gender and identity that she explores in depth in her later novels" (Clúa 69). She thus speaks to the foresight in Barceló's work, as *Consecuencias naturales* clearly presents gender and motherhood as dynamic, not uncompromisingly defined experiences. In her introductory remarks, Barceló herself acknowledges that an exploration of sex and gender in science fiction is by no means a novel approach, and indeed she believes that the genre openly invites this manner of speculation. Nevertheless, Barceló has worked over that well tread ground and made a work specifically of her own time and country. *Consecuencias naturales* was first published less than twenty years after the death of Franco; and social progress came gradually, as the population explored a new freedom from politically and religiously prescribed gender roles. Women were no longer forced to adhere to strict behavioral modes, from a dress code to the submissive status within family unit. With an imaginative and inventive entry into the apparently unlikely genre of science fiction, Barceló openly challenges the dominant patriarchal ideals and values in post-Francoist Spain.

With the novel's shift in focus from the familiar humans to an alien species, the negative effects of gender or sex-based discrimination are made painfully clear. The Xhroll frequently question why Nico is so distraught about his pregnant condition. For them it is an honor to be 'implanted', as they call the state of pregnancy. Pregnancy is especially revered due to the aliens'



ongoing population shortage. There is a species in which the individual matters less than the collective. When one is impregnated, they become a revered figure in society, given every luxury until they have successfully given birth. In this alien society, until they reach fifteen years of age anyone is capable of being impregnated or impregnating. Nico is implanted by what he believes to be a female Xhroll, although it is later revealed that their sex and gender are entirely different from humans'. Barceló uses this element to muddy the distinction between genders in her own writing. Pronouns for certain characters will alternate between 'he' or 'she' depending on the perspective from which the story is being told. The narrative voice additionally alternates between first and third person. And while she does include some scenes of sexual violence, unlike in Almodóvar they are not laboriously detailed or prolonged. Barceló focuses less on external action and more on characters' internal reactions in both instances of sexual violence, whether those feelings are of disturbing pleasure or of overwhelming fear. That disparity in portrayal of violence is a consequence of their differing mediums, in which the novel provides a more introspective investigation of characters.

### 3.7 Nuclear Panopticon and Regulatory Observation as Gender Essentiality

Repo underlines the contradictions of Joseph Money's study and its lasting influence, "Gender role, as they called it, was something learned entirely postnatally and was not necessarily dependent on any biological variables of sex" (Repo 31). The 'truth' of the gender role was thus held to be a cultural construction entirely separate from biological makeup. Yet, systemic guidelines were introduced by the scientists (and propagated by doctors, family, and larger society) for keeping gender conditioned by genitalia as assigned at birth. That is to say, genitalia were intentionally chosen, even when they were ambiguous in immediate appearance or function, as in the case of intersex children. Inflexible gender dynamics thus emerged as a

carefully considered method of control essential to the new social order. Medical guidelines, child rearing, and political stratagems were all reconfigured to coincide with Money's findings. This network of governance became inescapable largely due to a societal regulatory system which Repo refers to as a 'nuclear panopticon', in which the behavioral practices of gender performance are observed by those closest to an individual, and any deviation from them is punished.

Behavioral development and social order are therefore connected primarily by the nuclear family structure and the community surrounding it. To explain, "Parents—one male, one female—became both the subjects and objects of discipline in the aim to control children's gender role imprinting processes" (37); and in order for successful imprinting a child's "sense of sexual selfhood" must be reinforced by both the visual affirmation of correct genitalia (for ambiguous cases this was achieved through surgery) and reinforcement from those surrounding the child. Along with firm instruction from doctors regarding a child's development, the nuclear family manifested as a "remote micro clinic for the management of gender", wherein roles were clearly and uncompromisingly defined (41). For intersex children, gender affirming surgery was encouraged with the promise of being a 'normal' boy or girl, that is having the visually approved genitalia. Repo suggests that the modern development of gender roles is born from a purposeful stratagem beginning in the familial structure: it is parents that primarily influence and reinforce the nuclear family model of regulatory observation. Their display of correct gender roles and shunning of deviation serve to construct the behavioral development of children.

The successful differentiation and display of gender roles was of paramount concern for Money and the post-war society of America, spreading to other Western countries. This section of Repo's book, titled "The Nuclear Panopticon", is particularly germane to an examination of

*Consecuencias naturales*, as Barceló incorporates a version of that panopticon into her novel. More broadly, the regulatory system of gender reinforcement is present in the novel similarly to in Almodóvar's film. Nico is under constant observation once he is discovered as implanted. Along with his new designation as female, he must perform the part of an expectant mother or face harsh consequences. In Xhroll society implanted persons are the familiar 'woman as life-giver' trope, serving a singular purpose as reproductive conduits. The larger Xhroll population must conform to this regulatory system as well. Reproduction as the sole purpose of life, means that all deviation is frowned upon. Sexual pleasure and observable emotion are considered shameful. An instance where one Xhroll commits suicide is treated nonchalantly as all the others entirely ignore it or mockingly express their disgust. In a singular focus on species reproduction the alien Xhroll have forgone all interiority and exist in a repressive structure of their own. Barceló includes in her fictional world of the future a societal regulatory system because it is a necessary component of any social order that is gender/sexuality based. However, that system is also the most significant element towards the potential subversion of that order.

Once the reality of his new condition sets in, Nico's warped psyche reveals a deeply frightened man: "He was Lieutenant Nicodemo Andrade, a red-blooded male, a man born to repair robots and seduce women despite how equal they were before the law... What man wouldn't be horrified at the thought of what was happening inside of him" (Barceló 59). Important to note is that Nico believes seduction, and consequently sexual activity, is fundamentally imbalanced. It is an animalistic pursuit with one clear predator. Nico feels that women should not be equal in terms of sexuality or even the law. After his assigned attendant Charlie is intimate with him, Nico thinks less of her, not more. Whereas he previously respected

her on a professional level, he afterward considers her just another of his many conquests, confirming his belief that all women may be attained with the right words.

Nico thinks, “it always seemed strange to him, the change that happened in women as soon as you’d gotten them into bed, as if they’d suddenly realized that all of the centuries of fighting for gender equality were nothing more than an intellectual ploy by the dissatisfied to rob the human female of her true purpose, her natural role of submission to men, to their protection and their desire” (Barceló 126). Repo would be unsurprised by this train of thought, as she also argues that the concept of women’s inferiority was a deliberate narrative set in motion centuries ago. This passage is significant because it is included right before the Xhroll take Nico as prisoner for his infraction with Charlie. The couple have been under observation even in their private rooms, where they felt free from the Xhroll’s stringent observation in which social order must be followed at all times. We learn that in this alien world, Nico and all mothers are expendable, as once the child is born they have served their purpose. As we have seen, in Repo’s analysis reproductive function was the ultimate goal of a binary gender system, where sex dictated gender behavior. In *Consecuencias naturales*, Barceló rejects all justification for gender-based discrimination and presents the unvarnished truth that biological and reproductive function are the determiner of status, in the future as in the present. Regulatory observation such as that carried out by the Nuclear Panopticon enables a biopolitical mode of control. Without it, a freedom might emerge that allowed for resistance and subversion.

### 3.8 Reproduction and Motherhood as function

Where Almodóvar’s film focuses on an unorthodox transgender experience (a forced sex change surgery), Barceló’s novel examines the complexities of reproduction and motherhood.

More specifically, the novel suggests the process of reproduction is not at all tied to gender identity. Nico becomes impregnated as a cisgender male from an alien who is not quite male or female. Pregnancy with Xhroll species is less reliant on a uterus with the fetus instead latching onto several abdominal organs of the host. While the Xhroll consider Nico's pregnancy a sacred phenomenon, he refers to it as a parasitic element taking his body hostage. For the first time in his life, Nico considers what the female reproductive experience must entail. He wonders, Was it possible that every woman in the world had felt this frightened when she realized there was no turning back? It couldn't be. The human race would have become extinct centuries ago if women had felt the panic that was waking him up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat (Barceló 60). Of course, the fear and panic of pregnancy is not exclusive to him at all. Barceló subverts the ideology of reproduction as sole function. Gender roles which primarily categorize women as mothers or reproductive conduits is inherently dehumanizing. Barceló suggests the reproductive process should be inclusive of all.

The most marked change comes from the Xhroll species, who discover that their own gender and sexuality is more complicated than previously thought. The onset of reproductive function may occur later than the fifteen year age mark they know. They break from the harsh confines of their previous system and realize reproductive function may develop later than the age of fifteen. This is certainly a parallel to human gender identity or sexuality, which may change or take longer to develop with each individual. Their species is effectively saved from this discovery and they additionally feel more comfortable in expressing feelings considered frivolous and distracting. Ankkhaia is especially effected by their time with the humans and discovers an affection for their Xhroll partner who previously failed to become implanted.

### 3.9 Gendered Language as Linguistic sexism

Language plays a crucial role in Barceló's novel. Originally written in Spanish, gendered language is inescapable in both content and composition. Barceló underscores an inherent inequality in gendered language, which Marit Hanson dubs 'Linguistic Sexism', in which the weight of a gender apparatus is carried with each utterance (Hanson 198). There are a numerous elements of this language dilemma which inevitably become lost in translation from Spanish to English. Notably, the disparate levels of gendering in English and Spanish are significant to our reception of the novel. Linguistic sexism certainly exists in both languages, but the overwhelming presence is addedly discernable through the grammatical gender agreement of Spanish. The following passage in particular holds more weight in the original Spanish. The alien character Ankkhaia ponders the humans' confusing system of language:

Ellos usan el sexo en la lengua de manera constante. Todo debe ser femenino o masculino, incluso los objetos inanimados... ¿Soy yo él or ella? El humano dice que yo soy mujer y debo usar el femenino para referirme a mí misma, pero en su propia estructura sexual, el ser que puede implanter vida en otro es masculino y el que recibe es femenino. (Barceló, 2019)<sup>1</sup>

These lines are translated literally in the English edition, stripping meaning from the sentiment. The lexical gender of Spanish nouns do require grammatically feminine or masculine nouns including inanimate objects, however that does not apply in English, in which gender agreement of objects is simply not present. Ankhaia's thinking leaves some confusion in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Barceló, Elia. *Consecuencias Naturales*. Crononauta, Feb 2019  
Spanish language reprint from 2019. Separate from English edition.

translation, whereas in Spanish the disoriented feeling is reinforced through the character's words. Yolanda Molina-Gavilan and Andrea Bell address the challenges of translation in their introduction, admitting that Barceló's clever manipulation of grammar sometimes did not work in English (Barceló 9). Gender-inclusive language efforts were still in their infancy when Barceló wrote the novel, so her inventive use of language anticipates current practices and debates.

The human characters of *Consecuencias naturales* proudly declare their societal freedom from sexism. As mentioned earlier, their greatest evidence for this is in the linguistic equality that has been achieved through the elimination of the generic masculine in Spanish. Any time a situation of linguistic gender ambiguity arises, the proper form of speech is to use both the masculine and feminine designators. When the *Victoria's* commander initially welcomes the Xhroll aboard, his speech is comically long due to his inclusion of every gendered pronoun. This linguistic feature is most apparent reading the novel in its original Spanish. Additionally, for the English edition, pronouns for characters frequently alternate between she/her or he/him. As the Xhroll consider Nico a mother, they subsequently refer to him as female. Charlie is likewise referred to as male because Xhroll perceive the opposite gender of Nico to be male, and the humans comply for the sake of simplicity. Barceló also invents an equivalent to male and female in the Xhroll population, known as 'xhreas' and 'ari-arkhj', those who are capable or incapable of procreation, respectively. The Xhroll all have vulvas, which may biologically make them all female, but their understanding of female is rather those who may carry a child, which is a category all its own. Their society is thus divided into three gender groups instead of two, and reproductive function is not tied to gender identity. Clearly, Barceló has given these details much thought and crafted a world which reveals how conventional language elements fail to capture

the complexity of anything beyond a binary gender stratum. Although gender is paramount to our interpretation of the novel, the limits of translation render some particularly inventive flourishes, or some confusion on the Xhrolls' part, moot in English where grammatical gender does not exist.

### 3.10 Limits of Feminist Critique

We observe through the genealogy documented in Repo's book that "gender is an apparatus of biopower that emerged sixty years ago in the clinic and was instrumental to sedimenting Western postwar capitalism through the management of sex" (Repo 3). This calculated birth of 'gender' was not invented by feminists, yet has it directly influenced feminist studies. Repo reserves a section of her book for identifying issues that a genealogy of gender poses for feminist theory. She maintains that gender is an essential element in facilitating the fusion of feminist ideas with neoliberal practices. Calling for a reevaluation of the value of the gender apparatus to feminist theory, Repo questions whether the concept is still useful. This is certainly a radical take, but not unfounded when Repo's extensive study of the history of the concept of gender is taken seriously. She recognizes the profound harm that Money's conclusions have inflicted on arenas from the medical to the theoretical. So, Repo argues, affixing feminism to the gender apparatus that Money birthed reinforces an irrelevant sexual order and entangles feminism within a debilitating governmental system.

Barceló's novel addresses the limits of closed gender understanding and its entanglement with feminism in the figure of Charlie, *Consecuencias naturales*' central female character. Charlie is overwhelmed with a conflict between her feminist ideals and her own understanding of gender. She wants true equality despite her desire to dismiss Nico as a misogynistic and



dangerous man. One passage describes Charlie's uncertainty, "She had never been able to understand men. In spite of the official opinion that mandated the complete absence of sex-based discrimination, every time she had treated a man the same way she would a woman it had been a mistake" (Barceló 123). Similar to Nico, Charlie struggles to truly accept the law recognizing men and women as equal. Nico, with his constant derogation of women, is the embodiment and confirmation of every notion Charlie has regarding the fallibility of men. However, Charlie does not want to inflict the same discriminatory logic back onto men. Barceló acknowledges Charlie's internal struggle to understand an untenable gender disparity. This is also the novel's struggle, in which the feminist element may be limited in its application for a broader messaging of gender equality.

When Charlie offers the same sympathy and kindness that she would to a woman, Nico weaponizes it against her. They both believe the worst of the opposite gender they do not understand. After Money's study, writes Repo, "feminists became unwitting interlocutors of biopolitics by failing to question the raced, classed, and sexed disciplinary origins of gender, and the violence it facilitated toward intersex and trans-people" (Repo 75). Like many great writers before her, Barceló has crafted a story illuminating the harmful results of a misogynistic dogma, and beyond that an empathetic tale on the complexities of gender identity. Some may consider Barceló's novel too focused on a feminist angle, thus sacrificing a more complex characterization of Nico. That interpretation would, however, fail to see the true depth offered Nico, which even he refuses. Repo explains the problems with feminism being so closely tied to the concept gender, even with thinkers who desire to achieve the opposite. The origin of the term 'gender' is so fraught with violent and discriminatory practices so that it's meaning cannot help but hold unintentional weight.

#### 4 Conclusion: Toward A New Gender Identity

This thesis has endeavored to examine the revolutionization of gender and identity in post-Franco Spain in two high-concept works of science fiction. Characters in *La piel que habito* and *Consecuencias naturales* accentuate the complexity of gender identity which feminist theorists have sustained for decades. In the very act of existing, these characters defy the rigid constraints of a binary gender apparatus. This process of becoming gender is not something dictated but rather a complex system borne from experience. Both works feature facets of gender performativity and a societal importance on reproductive function. Vicente is literally transformed into Vera, a person of differing gender and identity, but still maintains an essence of unchanged interiority. The alien Xhroll of Barceló's novel base their social structure on reproductive capabilities but discover a new aspect of their sexuality which widens that ability. The onset of reproduction, the Xhroll equivalent to human puberty, occurs later in some than the understood fifteen years of age. In addition, the regulatory systems of gender which Butler and Repo analyze are illustrated in these science fiction works. Whether the Nuclear Panopticon or camera surveillance, surveillance is essential for the biopolitical apparatus of gender to function. However, as I have shown, there is some justified criticism of both works for their positing of the centrality of violence to the themes of gender fluidity.

Stereotypically science fiction is a genre that detaches its consumers from life, transporting them to a separate and unique universe. Creators like Almodóvar and Barceló dispel that notion and explore rather the extra-textual capabilities of the genre. The radical thinking of Spain's Madrid Movida movement is felt to some extent through the work of these artists. The final contribution of Almodóvar and Barceló is that they have dared to focus on the complexity

of gender identity, declaring the performative process explored by theorists as non-essential and even harmful.

## Bibliography

- Allbritton, Dean. "Paternity and Pathogens: Mourning Men and the Crises of Masculinity in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* and *Hable Con Ella*". *A Companion to Pedro Almodovar*. Edited by Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon, 2013, John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, pp. 225-43  
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1002/9781118325360.ch10>
- Almodóvar, Pedro, director. *La piel que habito*. Warner Brothers Entertainment Espana, 2011.
- Almodóvar, Pedro. "The Cinema Inside Me". BAFTA.org, 18 Nov 2012, BAFTA 195, Piccadilly, London, UK. Lecture. <https://www.bafta.org/film/features/pedro-almodovar-david-lean-lecture-2012>. Accessed 17 Jan 2023
- Barceló, Elia. *Consecuencias Naturales*. Crononauta, Feb 2019
- Barceló, Elia. *Natural Consequences*. Translated by Yolinda Molina- Gavilán and Andrea Bell, Vanderbilt University Press, 15 Nov 2021.
- Boshier, Rosa. "Masculinity and Fatal Desire in The Skin I Live In", *The Rumpus*, 7 Aug. 2019, [www.therumpus.net/2019/08/07/masculinity-and-fatal-desire-in-the-skin-i-live-in/](http://www.therumpus.net/2019/08/07/masculinity-and-fatal-desire-in-the-skin-i-live-in/). Accessed 17 Jan. 2023.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Clúa, Isabel. "Dark Mothers and Lovelorn Heroines: Avatars of the Feminine in Elia Barceló's *Sagrada*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2017, pp.2 68–81. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.2.0268>.
- Davies, Cath. "What Lies Beneath: Fabric and Embodiment in Almodovar's the Skin I Live in." *Film, Fashion & Consumption*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2017, pp. 65-79. *ProQuest*, [https://doi.org/10.1386/ffc.6.1.65\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ffc.6.1.65_1)

- Gutiérrez-Albilla, Julián Daniel. "Im-Possibility of Not-Succumbing: La Piel Que Habito." *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 139–76. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1pwt2jm.9>.
- Hanson, Marit. "The Semantics of Solidarity: Radical Vulnerability and Gender Language in Elia Barceló's Natural Consequences". *452°F. Journal of Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature*, No. 25, July 2021, pp. 194-11, doi:10.1344/452f.2021.25.11.
- Mitchell, Robert. "Almodóvar plans to direct sci-fi movie". *Variety.com*, 19 Nov. 2012. <https://variety.com/2012/film/news/almodovar-plans-to-direct-sci-fi-movie-1118062373/>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.
- Repo, Jemima. *The Biopolitics of Gender*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- "science fiction, n. and adj." OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2022, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/172674](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172674). Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.
- Smith, Paul Julian and White, Rob. "Escape Artistry: Debating The Skin I Live In". *Film Quarterly*. [www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/12/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/](http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/12/escape-artistry-debating-the-skin-i-live-in/). Accessed 17 Jan. 2023.