

The Weird and the Eerie in Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*: an examination of the film's musical score

Lo raro y espeluznante en *La piel que habito* de Almodóvar a través de su música

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Abstract:

This article examines how the weird and eerie is communicated in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*, 2011) using its musical score, composed by Alberto Iglesias. Employing Mark Fisher's concepts of the *weird* and the *eerie* in respect to Freud's *unheimlich*, the present work analyses how the score amplifies these qualities throughout the film. Focusing on the use of instrumentation, dissonance and leitmotifs, this research aims to establish how Iglesias' score reinforces the film's unsettling tone to create an atmosphere of strangeness and unease. This analysis leads into a discussion of how these elements can be linked to the film's exploration of identity, the body and trauma. This work argues that the music in this film not only accompanies the action but also introduces a psychological dimension that intensifies the film's sense of unreality and the latent violence in its narrative. In addition, the present article considers how the film's visual aesthetics interact with the score to generate a sensory experience that underlines the three key concepts explored here: weirdness, eeriness and the *unheimlich*.

Resumen:

Este artículo explora lo raro y espeluznante en *La piel que habito* (2011) de Pedro Almodóvar a través de su partitura, compuesta por Alberto Iglesias. Se fundamenta en los conceptos de lo "raro", lo "espeluznante" y lo "unheimlich" según Mark Fisher y se analiza cómo la música amplifica estas cualidades en la película. La investigación examina cómo la partitura de Iglesias refuerza el tono inquietante del filme y su exploración de la identidad, el cuerpo y el trauma. El análisis se centra en el uso de la instrumentación, la disonancia y los leitmotifs para crear una atmósfera de extrañeza y desasosiego. Se argumenta que la música no solo acompaña la acción, sino que también introduce una dimensión psicológica que intensifica la sensación de irreabilidad y violencia latente en la narrativa. Además, se discute cómo la música interactúa con la estética visual del filme, generando una experiencia sensorial que subraya los conceptos de rareza y espeluznancia de Fisher y lo *unheimlich* de Freud.

Keywords: Weird; Eerie; *Unheimlich*, *The Skin I Live In*, Pedro Almodóvar, Alberto Iglesias.

Palabras clave: Raro; espeluznante; *unheimlich*, *La piel que habito*, Pedro Almodóvar, Alberto Iglesias.

1. Introduction

Throughout his career, the Manchegan director, Pedro Almodóvar's filmography demonstrates his mastery of what the British philosopher, Mark Fisher, terms the *weird* and the *eerie* (2018). Stemming from Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*—literally meaning "not feeling at home" (p. 10)—Fisher describes the weird as that "which does not belong" (p. 12) and the eerie as something "fundamentally to do with the outside" (p. 13). Together, these terms produce an equation which, according to Fisher, is intrinsic to the idea of narrative (in all its formats) as a psychoanalytic technique. Bearing this in mind, it could be said that Almodóvar's filmography epitomizes the weird as defined by Fisher:

[T]he weird is that which does not belong. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together (p. 12).

Indeed, Almodóvar's filmography contains countless examples relating to the key elements of weirdness highlighted in Fisher's definition. However, no more so than in his eighth film, *The Skin I Live In*, are they demonstrated so strikingly.

The Skin I Live In tells the story of Vicente, a young man from Toledo who is kidnapped in revenge for an alleged rape. His abductor is Robert Ledgard, the supposed victim's father and a renowned plastic surgeon who punishes Vicente by subjecting the young man to a sex change completely transfiguring the man, Vicente, into the woman, Vera.

Throughout the film, the audience is presented with numerous instances of Fisherian weirdness. For example, "that which does not belong" is perfectly demonstrated in the scene where Dr Ledgard's brother, Zeca, appears dressed in a tiger costume so breaking the aesthetics of an otherwise elegant film that apparently aspires to the standards of high art. Meanwhile, the figure of Vera could certainly be described as something brought into the familiar that "ordinarily lies beyond it" and

that cannot be reconciled. Indeed, she could be seen as some kind of beautiful, transexual, Frankenstein's monster (once again, with reference to psychoanalysis, her presence brings to mind the words of *I am the monster who speaks to you* by Paul B. Preciado [2020]). Then, of course, as a paradigm of the entire film, we have the technique of montage.

Almost as a hallmark, Almodóvar's filmography revels in the union of film genres ranging from melodrama to pulp, popular genres which, in turn, are characterised by the mixing of various dramatic techniques (comedy, tragedy, drama and even musical theatre). In *The Skin I Live In*, the process of montage appears not only in the union of genres observed in the film's footage but also as an essential element of the plot: Vicente is effectively cut up and reassembled as a different person. Furthermore, as highlighted by Vicente Molina Foix in his prologue to the written edition of *The Skin I Live In* (published by Anagrama in 2012, a year after the film's release), Vicente's pastime while undergoing his transformation is to cut up pieces of cloth and magazine images and reassemble these scraps into figures and dolls: a form of montage.

In his preface, Foix observes that montage is not simply fundamental to the film's construction and plot but also has a parallel, metaphorical role as a reference to film editing. This last, of course, is a tool that Almodóvar considers to be of primary importance when it comes to assembling a filmic story:

The scraps of fabric and pieces of hessian that Vera uses to make her dolls, inspired by the art of the American sculptor Louise Bourgeois, as well as the sheets of artificial skin that Dr. Ledgard glues to his mannequins, are, in my opinion, representative of the cuttings or scraps taken by Almodóvar from the two previous works that inspired him: the novel *Tarantula* by Thierry Jonquet (*Mygale* in its original French title published by Gallimard), and Georges Franju's film *The Eyes Without a Face* (*Les yeux sans visage*, 1960). The novel and film can be seen, thus, as the laboratory prototypes on which Doctor Almodóvar, with a high-precision surgical device,

imposes his meaning and adds the finishing touch (...) Not to mention, continuing with similes, the numerous scenes of cutting, incision, gluing and sewing that equate Robert's medical and Vera's artistic endeavours with the task of editing a film. A task that Almodóvar, in a conversation I remember, described as the truly transcendental phase of the filmic story, placing it above both script-writing and filming. In the editing, Pedro said, the body of the filmed material is given the soul of meaning (2012, p. 2).

However, perhaps the most decisive factor in unleashing the already evident weirdness and eeriness that oozes from this story is the music. Written by Alberto Iglesias—one of Almodóvar's regular collaborators—the score for *The Skin I Live In*, faces several challenges from the point of view of setting and narrative. On one hand, it must generate the film's all-pervasive atmosphere of terror, while on the other, it needs to trigger the emotional elements of the melodrama. At the same time, it must also assemble a range of different musical genres to create a score that reflects the film's themes of cutting up and transformation.

Iglesias' score confronts the challenges outlined above using a range of aesthetic-musical elements (discussed in the musical analysis that appears later in this article) to transmit a sense of otherness through its definition as difference. That is, departing from notions of *performance* as the catalyst for new realities with respect to gender and identity (Trujillo, 2022), ideas first presented by Judith Butler (2023) in her book *Gender trouble* and now widely adopted in *queer* feminist studies, the film presents that which differs from the normal or that breaks our sense of what is considered normal demonstrating, in the process, both the artificiality and constriction of our ideas of normality. Here, Carretero's words are particularly informative: "In the film, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), not only is the body deconstructed through surgery and science but the process forms the central drama of the film itself, as the product the doctor's (Antonio Banderas) revenge on one of the characters and which involves Elena Anaya, the film's main protagonist, who, it must be said,

bears a striking resemblance to another one of Almodóvar's girls (Victoria Abril)". (2012, p. 78)

Moreno (2022) goes further, establishing a parallelism between the confluence or montage of film genres so paradigmatic of Almodóvar's filmography and the deconstruction of gender (as a process of transition) and identity (as the fluidity of gender) writing: "Certainly, Almodóvar has accustomed us, in his films, to reflecting on the limits of gender, in its cinematographic but also sexual meaning, in such a way that the frontiers of gender are questioned and the very concept of gender enriched" (p. 3). This author also notes that perhaps, "(...) in no other film but *The Skin I Live In* has the filmmaker gone so far in his enquiry into the relationship between sexual identity and physical appearance" (p. 3). Other authors analysing *The Skin I Live In* speak more specifically of the "poetics of the trans" (see Poyato Sánchez, 2015; and Sánchez-Mesa, 2015, as cited in Gallo, 2012, p. 64). Naturally, such poetics must also be represented in the film's music, through the aforementioned mechanism of montage, that is, mixing genres and other available musical resources, as well as through other techniques that provoke the confusion of glimpsing elements that have been stolen and assembled in places where they do not belong. These poetics, thus, form the heart of our analysis and respond to the key concepts on which it is based as will be demonstrated in our examination of the film's score.

The parallelism observed in the film's fluidity of genres and of gender—sexual and transsexual identity—is metaphorically reflected in the construction of its score. Indeed, according to Carretero, this score which mixes, by turn, different musical genres from popular and folk culture, takes Almodóvar back to his *underground* or countercultural essence:

To understand Pedro Almodóvar's cinema, we must make a retrospective examination of the whole series of countercultural indicators used by this filmmaker during his experimental period and which helped to create the Almodóvarian universe in the first part of the 1980s. These include, for instance, seedy luxury, camp, kitsch, pop, punk, queer and filthy as well as other more formal devices ranging from the mother figure and the

feminine, to the erotic and the autobiographical. It is through this conjunction of indicators that we understand Almodóvar's cinema as an intimate and personal iconography (2022, p. 67).

This personal iconography is also clearly represented in the soundtracks that accompany his films.

2. The state of the art

2.1. Fisher's weird and eerie and Freud's *unheimlich* in *The Skin I Live In*

Fisher uses cinema and its symbolic and narrative codes to exemplify notions of the weird, eerie and *unheimlich*. Specifically, he argues that the sensations they evoke on-screen are "modes" in the way they create codes that extend beyond the film itself and shape concepts of identity and personality, that is, of "being": "(...) There is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being." (Fisher, 2018, p. 11). In this way, Fisher justifies his choice of cinema as an object of study in his book, and this is why it seems appropriate to employ his analysis in this examination of Almodóvar's work.

Following from the connection between cinematographic, musical and identity genres set out in the introduction, it is revealing to note how these "modes of doing" coincide with the "modes of being" in Almodóvar's career as a director. In particular, the "poetics of the trans" appears both in *The Skin I Live In* and in Almodóvar's filmography more generally. Thus, in the light of Rukovsky's (2016) analysis of Almodóvar and "trans politics" it may be concluded that the films produced by this director require: "a whole hermeneutics [that] can be read as camp as it is queer, configured from the different registers that Almodóvar constructs" (p. 46).

This camp-queer perspective on Almodóvar's cinema almost automatically links it to notions of weirdness and eeriness. Indeed, in the current language of psychoanalysis, it might even connect it with the term *abjection*: "Transvestism and transsexuality are perceived by the spectator as the abject ghosts of Freud's own primary repression: the non-heterosexual" (Gallo, 2012, p. 64).

Here abjection should not, in any sense, be taken to imply, disgust for or the inability to enjoy Almodóvar's cinema. On the contrary, this director connects representations of the other with aesthetic and libidinal pleasure, as, for instance, Doctor Ledgard takes pleasure in the vision of his own beautiful but monstrous work. Indeed, throughout the film, Almodóvar introduces elements that are out of their proper place (most obviously, the kidnapped Vera but also the tiger-man displaced from his more normal context of carnival) which, despite their strangeness, are aesthetically pleasing. In this way, as Fisher argues, the mechanisms of the weird and eerie operate in the spectator such that:

The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread — but it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying (Fisher, 2018, p. 10).

In the following, Fisher's definitions of the weird, eerie and *unheimlich* will be explained before embarking on our analysis of how they are communicated through the score of *The Skin I Live In*.

2.1.1. The *unheimlich*

Fisher takes Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* as the starting point for the mechanisms that create atmospheres of weirdness and eeriness. This psychoanalytic term translates literally as "unhomely" (Fisher, 2018, p. 10), but, as Fisher explains, Freud employs this term as a synonym for both weird and eerie, using these words interchangeably. In contrast,

Fisher sees distinctions between the two concepts and seeks to differentiate them.

In fact, Fisher regards Freud's explanation of the *unheimlich* as "disappointing" (2018, p. 11): "The examples of the *unheimlich* which Freud furnishes—doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prostheses—call up a certain kind of disquiet. But Freud's ultimate settling of the enigma of the *unheimlich*—his claim that it can be reduced to castration anxiety—is as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective's rote solution to a mystery" (p. 11).

This said, in the case of *The Skin I Live In*, the idea of castration anxiety does, in fact, give meaning to the whole narrative and, likewise, to the music that accompanies it. This is especially evident in one scene where the accompanying musical theme, *The Torn Dresses* (*Los vestidos desgarrados*), triggers a sense of *unheimlich* in precisely this context. In this scene, we learn the sinister origin of the torn dresses that Vera uses for her montages (as discussed previously): Vera has just become aware of her transformation—by castration—at the hands of Dr Ledgard, and, seeing the dresses laid out on the bed for her to try on, Vera instead rips them to shreds. These dresses represent the completion of her transformation which, following from Butler's ideas about the performativity of gender, must now be affirmed through the external performance of femininity, i.e., donning feminine-coded accoutrements.

2.1.2. **The eerie**

This idea of unhomeliness bifurcates, first, into Fisher's notion of the eerie meaning that which comes from outside, from the exterior. The eerie, then, is something unprotected by the domestic space—a space, moreover, that has been traditionally feminine. Furthermore, as Fisher explains, the eerie calls attention to whatever may have provoked the results experienced or being observed:

What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an eerie cry? As we can see from these examples, the eerie is fundamentally tied up

with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? These questions can be posed in a psychoanalytic register — if we are not who we think we are, what are we? (Fisher, 2018, p. 13).

This last question: "if we are not who we think we are, what are we?" could be interpreted as a direct question to Vera. In her own words she was "tailor-made" by Doctor Legard, just as Alberto Iglesias' score was made especially for the film; but like the score which, by turns, seems to be a bolero, a tango, a popular song, a piece of classical music, we cannot be sure who Vera is because she has been literally cut up and stitched back together. Emasculated by Legard, Vera is at the same time somehow outside the world dominated him and is, thus, eerie. Precisely how the score helps to achieve this sense of eeriness is examined later in the musical analysis section of this article.

2.1.3. **The weird**

The second meaning that Fisher extrapolates from *unheimlich* is something novel or never seen before, i.e., the weird: "The sense of wrongness associated with the weird—the conviction that this does not belong—is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new," (2018, p. 15).

Novelty is strange because it breaks with the everyday, with life and reality as they have been customarily experienced. However, this strangeness evaporates once the novelty becomes habitual, transforming sensations of displeasure into enjoyment. Fisher goes on to relate this kind of enjoyment to Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, which is understood as an emotion more complex than simple pleasure in that it is linked to transgression. In this regard, Lacan, introduces a distinction between phallic *jouissance* and feminine *jouissance* where the latter is that which has escaped the master's discourse (Lacan and Miller, 1996). These ideas, which are expounded in Lacan's Seminar XX *Encore* between 1972 and 1973, led to the French psychoanalyst's famous statement "woman does not exist". This refers to how the feminine is inextricably linked to otherness (Lacan, 1998) and thus, in Fisher's terms, to the weird.

Thinking about this in regard to the film at the heart of this study, the protagonist, Vera as a created woman, a woman who does not really exist, wholly embodies the weird in its true Fisherian meaning.

In this sense, defined by the combination of pleasure and pain and, above all, as the manifestation of something novel or new, the weird finds many representations in Vera's character. She belongs nowhere and is a mixture of the past (Dr Ledgard's deceased wife is the model for Vera's new body), the present (Vicente's body and memories) and the future: transformed, she flees the prison of Ledgard's house to return to Vicente's original home, where she no longer fits in.

In Alberto Iglesias' score, the weird is represented most strongly in association with Zeca, Dr. Ledgard's long-lost brother who disguises himself in a tiger costume and hides among the carnival goers. The musical themes played when this character appears on screen include synthesizers, electronic bases and a Hammond organ, instruments that are not used in any other sections of the film's score. This disconnect finds its resolution within the narrative when we discover that Dr. Ledgard's maid, Marilia, is the mother of both Zeca and the doctor himself. Thus, the weird ultimately finds a place in the domestic, but not before succumbing and changing its nature.

2.2. In search of music in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography

Over the course of his career, Almodóvar has built what Frédéric Strauss called his own paradise (2001), a field of operations in which the expression of his ideas has found a broad and solid space in which to develop. As a director, Almodóvar experienced almost instant success; however, it has been labour of much time, experience and, metaphorically speaking, pain (Strauss, 2001) to create his own style, underpinned by an extremely personal *mise-en-scène*, and a language powerful enough to convey the emotions present in his head.

The importance of music in Almodóvar's cinema is clear from his earliest films, as is the eclecticism of his musical tastes. In the film *Dark Habits*

(*Entre tinieblas*, 1983), the character of the Mother Superior says at one point: "I love songs that speak of feelings; boleros, tangos, merengues, salsa, rancheras..." to which Yolanda's character replies, "It's the music that tells the truth of what we live, because everyone has experienced love or disappointment in love". This simple dialogue gives us the foundations of Almodóvar's thinking about music, a thinking that is amply demonstrated throughout his filmography (Strauss, 2001).

Thus, for Almodóvar, music always addresses feelings, and it is here where the truths central to every individual can be found. Over the years, the musical illustration of Almodóvar's films has rested on a balance between, on the one hand, the use of songs that, despite being considered desperately old-fashioned by the general public, provide an immense emotional kaleidoscope and, on the other, creating incidental music to complement the cinematographic melodrama.

Even from his first films, Almodóvar has insisted that, while the songs chosen for the soundtrack formed the basis of his early language, the incidental music was composed to reinforce the melodrama and tension. As he confessed to Frédéric Strauss (2001), concerning *Labyrinth of Passion* (*Laberinto de Pasiones*, 1982), the drama is set to music by Béla Bartók because it was similar to the music Bernard Herrmann composed for Hitchcock's films. The soundtrack for *Dark Habits* (*Entre tinieblas*, 1983) incorporates tracks by Miklos Rozsa (who had collaborated with Hitchcock) and Nino Rota, due to conflict between the director and his long-time musical collaborator, Bernardo Bonezzi (Álvarez, 2013). Almodóvar and Bonezzi had shared a creative space throughout La Movida and their series of joint adventures and misadventures culminated in one of the most important titles of Almodóvar's career: *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988).

Ever demanding in his musical needs, from 1988 onwards, Almodóvar sought collaborations with the most important musicians of the time to ensure that his stories had the music they deserved. And, importantly, the musical counterbalance to the popular songs that would never be

absent from his films. However, even some of the heavyweights of film music, such as Ennio Morricone and the Oscar-winning Ryuichi Sakamoto who wrote the scores for, respectively, *Tie me up! Tie me down!* (*Átame*, 1990) and *High Heels* (*Tacones Lejanos*, 1991), fell foul of Almodóvar's exacting standards: he rejected large sections of both scores (Álvarez, 2013).

At the time, Almodóvar complained about the difficulty of dealing with composers over such short time-scales since this made it impossible to communicate everything he needed (Strauss, 2001). For this reason, when it came to the music for his next film, *Kika* (1993), he decided to create the incidental music using samples from a range of sources including contemporary concert music and music from other films. Among the tracks used in this compilation are several themes composed by Herrmann for *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), a composer for whom Almodóvar has expressed considerable respect due to his ability to capture the viewer's attention with his music (Jiménez Arévalo, 2016).

The next significant change in Almodóvar's cinematographic approach can be seen in *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995), thanks largely to the contributions of two new additions to his team: the Brazilian cinematographer Affonso Beato and the Basque composer, Alberto Iglesias (Sotinel, 2010). After the fruitful sounding-out period of their initial collaborations, Almodóvar came to realise that Alberto Iglesias might be the key ingredient he was looking for, musically speaking. Here was a composer who liked to inject his avant-garde musical style with the airs of popular love songs (Álvarez, 2013); thus, he might be able to provide the necessary counter-balance to the popular music peppering Almodóvar's films.

Iglesias' music contains traces of not only Bartók and Rozsa but also Herrmann. At last, Almodóvar could hope for an original score resembling two of Hitchcock's great cinematographic works: *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958) (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2008). In addition, with Iglesias' gift for adding a certain something from those emotional songs the Mother Superior in *Dark Habits* liked so much, he

seemed to hold the key to unravelling the enigma that had baffled Almodóvar for so long. The collaboration between Iglesias and Almodóvar has since gone from strength to strength. That Iglesias' music is now intrinsic to the personality of Almodóvar's filmography is, no doubt, thanks to the strength of communication between these two men, a factor that was, perhaps, lacking in the director's previous professional relationships with composers.

3. Objectives and hypotheses

The ideas put forward so far can be summarised into two main objectives:

- To conduct a musical analysis of the score of *The Skin I Live In*.
- To relate Fisher's concepts of the weird and eerie and the *unheimlich* with the music composed by Alberto Iglesias.

From these objectives propose the following hypothesis:

The music in *The Skin I Live In* communicates and reinforces a sense of the *unheimlich* and Fisher's notions of the weird and eerie.

This research employs a qualitative methodology based on a) a bibliographical review of the concepts of the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* put forward in Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2018), and b) an analysis of the score composed by Alberto Iglesias for *The Skin I Live In* focussing on specific elements of the music that relate to Fisher's discussions of the aforementioned concepts.

4. Musical analysis of the score composed by Alberto Iglesias

4.1. Alberto Iglesias in *The Skin I Live In*

As Jiménez Criado (2015) observes, the music that Alberto Iglesias has composed for Pedro Almodóvar's films stands out for the way it takes the subjective and manifests its objectification. That is to say, it has the

capacity to externalise the emotions hidden in Almodóvar's plots so that they can be fully perceived—through all the senses—by his audiences.

Creating a soundtrack including music in many different styles is not an easy task; however, this is exactly what Alberto Iglesias achieves in his film scores, perfectly assembling every piece as if completing a complex musical jigsaw puzzle. In developing his scores for Almodóvar's films Iglesias chooses a style that not only brings together all the elements necessary to assert his own personality but is also uniquely adapted to the Almodóvarian universe in which popular songs and melodrama are combined in his own singular language based on a *mise-en-scène* in constant communication with the music.

The soundtrack for *The Skin I Live In* is unusual in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography in the sense that it involves very little use of sync tracks or diegetically performed music. Indeed, the only instance where music not belonging to Iglesias' score is used occurs at the beginning of the film when Spanish singer, Concha Buika, originally from Equatorial Guinea, performs at the party where Norma (Dr. Ledgard's daughter) and Vicente meet. The importance of this scene and its music in terms of the plot lies in the fact that this is when the audience learns the reason behind Dr. Ledgard's macabre revenge plot.

The second of the songs sung by Buika during this performance, *For the love of loving* (*Por el amor de amar*), belongs to the diegesis. Specifically, it appears in a previous scene—albeit in a Portuguese version by Ana Mena—sung by Norma as a child, moments before she witnesses the death of her mother. The small number of songs in this film means that Iglesias' score takes the leading role in highlighting the melodramatic and horrific elements of this deeply tragic film.

4.2. The demonic violin and harmony as weird and eerie

As we learn from Alonso Tomás (2023), Alberto Iglesias based his score for *The Skin I Live In* on a string trio he wrote in 1989 entitled *Captive* (*Cautiva*), and which was used in a 1993 production of the same name choreographed Nacho Duato. The work's original title clearly has an

important alignment with the film's plot (Muñoz, 2019): the tale of a captive at the mercy of a vengeful Dr. Ledgard.

Both in the original work and in its rebirth as a film score, the violin is the main instrument. This violin must fight against the rhythm of the instruments playing the accompanying melody, the emphasis of the two melodic lines displaced by a semiquaver to give the theme its characteristic rhythm. A strange rhythm that reflects the struggle of the film's two principal characters: the captive and their captor. The theme is written in a minimalist neo-baroque style inspired by the violin techniques displayed in Vivaldi's music and all the necessary tension is supplied by the soloist: Valencian violinist, Vicente Huerta. In this way, the musical style and its thematic development transform the relationship of domination and violence between the two main characters into a thing of beauty (Alonso Tomás, 2023).

It might be said that, throughout musical history, the violin has always had an affinity with the eerie, and Iglesias' violent, vibrant and virtuosic use of the instrument here reflects this tradition. Returning to Fisher: "The eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?" (Fisher, 2018, p. 15).

Due to the early church's condemnation of music and dance, the violin—a traditional folk instrument—has long been associated with the Devil (Riggs, 2016), and virtuosity on this stringed instrument has tended to suggest links with sorcery or the demonic. Such thinking directly influenced the aesthetics of Romanticism and the figure of the great violin virtuoso is the stuff of legend. The technical expertise demonstrated by these musicians has, on the one hand, traditionally inspired great admiration among the public but, on the other, the almost supernatural brilliance of their performances has given rise to many myths about the origin of their skill. One of the principal and most iconic representatives of this profile was the Italian, Nicolo Paganini, whose vibrant interpretations were attributed to unnatural, demonic

powers (Kawabata, 2007). Indeed, it is for this reason that this instrument takes the lead role in Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* (1917), the story of a violin-playing soldier who makes a pact with the devil.

Of particular interest is Iglesias' use of diminished harmonies and tritones in many of the film's cues—especially where the violin is the main protagonist—as noted by both Alonso Tomás (2023) and Hill (2017) in their analyses of the score. Hill sees the diminished harmonies as a gesture to flamenco music; however, this is doubtful since Iglesias' principal intention is to generate a dissonant, disturbing and, consequently, eerie atmosphere. Belonging to the more tense and unstable realm of triadic harmonics, diminished harmony does just this, and this better explains its appearance at so many points in the score. In the musical palette of Renaissance composers intent on developing what later came to be known as tonality, the tritone interval was considered the most dissonant relationship between two notes leading, as Alonso Tomás reminds us, to its nickname: the *diabolus in musica*. Summing together the devilish nature of the violin and the diabolic relationships between the notes it sustains in Iglesias' score, the eerie emerges from the music to objectify what remains hidden—to question “existence or non-existence” in Fisher's words—in the relationship between the film's main characters.

4.3. Representation and confluence of the weird, the eerie and *unheimlich* in *The Torn Dresses*.

The Torn Dresses (*Los vestidos desgarrados*) opens the film's soundtrack album, and in the film itself, this piece of music accompanies the scene from which it takes its title in which Vicente, now transformed into Vera, and after a suicide attempt and subsequent reparation by Dr. Ledgard, tears up the dresses that define his new sex. Although based on the violin-led theme of Iglesias's earlier work, *Captive*, its musical structure varies considerably in comparison with the original string trio.

Iglesias starts the theme with a solo violin cadenza; its initial double stops, and the broken melody conjure up Vicente's inner pain and his feelings of helplessness in the face of the domination he has endured lying prostrate on a gurney while Legard tended to his wounds. As Pascal Thibaudeau (2013) notes, Vicente, now transformed into Vera, is doubly imprisoned; on the one hand, in his cell in Ledgard's house and, on the other, in the skin that the doctor has forced him to inhabit. The composition has an improvisatory feel and its accompaniment by the soft tones of the doctor assigning his patient a new name to go with his new situation provides the ultimate confluence of the eerie and the *unheimlich*: "There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am another person, and I always was. Here, the shudder comes from the eerie, not of the *unheimlich*." (Fisher, 2018, p. 14).

The newly-made Vera's rage grows, just as the violin solo reaches the heights of virtuosity—worthy of Paganini at his most demonic—with nimbly played arpeggios that accelerate as Vera advances towards the bed on which the dresses lie. Then, when she begins to tear them to shreds, the tense arpeggios of the principal violin are joined by a larger string ensemble, and they play together until every single dress is in tatters on the floor of Vera's prison room. This is where the main theme begins: a solo violin melody set back from the accompanying melody by a semiquaver. This alters the emphasis by superimposing three-note accents in the main melody over the four-note accents predominating the ensemble accompaniment. This layering of accentuation produces an unstable rhythm that represents Vera's struggle against her captor's domination.

Using a vacuum cleaner, Vera violently removes the dress fragments from the floor; the music continues, reflecting the anger that is her last remaining tool of rebellion. During this cue, the violin melody abandons its rhythmic struggle with the ensemble to close its discourse with a series of double stops. These are just as broken-sounding as those at the beginning of the scene, but in keeping with the heightened drama of the

moment, they are embellished by the agile accompaniment of the ensemble.

4.4 Music as an elaboration of the weird and the eerie in the relationship between Vera and Ledgard

The scene where Vera tears up the dresses is where *The Torn Dresses* appears most prominently; however, its different movements appear separately at several other points in the film as the action unfolds. Throughout the film, for instance, the virtuoso violin section is associated with the moments of tension between Vera and Ledgard. In addition, to accentuate the weird, the eerie and *unheimlich* in their relationship, variations on its theme are played at key moments.

The cue entitled *Room (Habitación)* in the original score, accompanies a scene in which Vera is depicted as a Venus, reclining, on her back, just like the Venuses in the paintings hanging on the walls of Ledgard's house. The doctor is watching her on a giant screen, enjoying this vision of conventional beauty. The POV shots recreating this image of Vera on Ledgard's screen, slowly revealing her whole body emphasise the role of the spectator and are accompanied by a solo violin.

As the violin plays rapid arpeggios, Ledgard makes his move, intending to bring Vera opium from the box he carries in his hand. The arpeggios become more aggressive and the soloist is joined by the string ensemble as he discovers that Vera's beautiful, relaxed body is in fact cold and inert: she has slit her wrists. The music swells to a crescendo as the doctor carries Vera in his arms to the operating theatre where he will save her from death. The cue ends with a C minor chord played in double stops by the solo violin coinciding with a shot of Ledgard cleaning the blood from Vera's naked torso.

This sequence marks the first time that the audience is given an insight into the true nature of the relationship between Vera and Ledgard. Here, we discover how utterly out of the ordinary it is, indeed, that it could never be credible. It is precisely an example of Freud's *unheimlich*

representing something "about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange" (Fisher, 2018, p. 11).

Vera's suicide attempt is a way out of a situation that—up until that point—is presented as weird but never so eerie as to suggest death. The suicide thus represents, in some respect, a rupturing of domesticity and brings us back to Fisher's original conceptualisation of the weird as: "a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. If the encounter with the strange here is not straightforwardly pleasurable (the pleasurable would always refer to previous forms of satisfaction), it is not simply unpleasant either: there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded" (Fisher, 2018, p. 15). In this case, however, it would not so much be a case of 'becoming outmoded', but a fracturing of notions about the familiar and the conventional that, before the suicide attempt, might have allowed us to see Ledgard and Vera's relationship as simply formal.

Beside the suicide sequence highlighting the tense closeness between the two main characters, the film contains two further scenes with similar narrative intent. In these too, the solo violin plays themes based on *Captive* to demonstrate weird, eerie and *unheimlich* elements present in Vera and Legard's relationship. In both cases, the music emphasises the drama and sexual charge with rapid violin arpeggios that, in their demonic virtuosity, mark a tension between sex and death.

The first case to be considered is the cue *I [Vera] am tailor-made for you* (*Estoy hecha a tu medida*) which plays during a scene where Ledgard enters Vera's cell to offer her opium. After a short dialogue, Vera takes control of the conversation and seduces the doctor saying: "I'm tailor-made for you". In these words, she recognises what Thibaudeau (2013) notes: she is the canvas on which he, Ledgard, has performed his work. Rapid violin arpeggios build and heighten the tension as the doctor flees the cell—and Vera's presence—entering his studio to stand, again, face-to-face with Vera although this time she is displayed on a screen, zoomed in and magnified by the eye of the security camera. The music ceases for a moment before the double stops of *Captive*'s characteristic ragged

cadenzas ring out, their diminished harmonies, as Andy Hill (2017) highlights, being the musical signature of eeriness.

In an interesting contrast to *The Torn Dresses* sequence where the violin solo emphasises the drama of a defeated Vicente, here the tables are turned. Unlike in this previous scene (in the narrative rather than in the diegesis which comes later), Vera's face looms overwhelmingly over the small figure of Ledgard cowering in front of the screen. Now it is the Doctor who is dwarfed by a Vera empowered by her femininity.

The second sequence we wish to highlight is that accompanied by the cue entitled *Final Duel (Duelo final)* on the officially released soundtrack, but which the original score refers to as *She Enters With The Dress (Entra con el vestido)*. As the soundtrack title indicates, this music plays during the scene showing the final confrontation between Vera and Ledgard. The theme begins when Vera interrupts an argument between Ledgard and Fulgencio, the doctor's assistant, who was deceived into helping with Vicente's sex-change operation. Fearing that Fulgencio will try to blackmail him, the doctor is threatening him with a gun; Vera's intrusion surprises him and he lowers the weapon.

Once more, the solo violin begins its virtuosic arpeggios as the audience sees what Vera sees on Ledgard's desk: a newspaper open on a spread showing a photograph of Vicente and his name on a list of missing persons. As she lights a cigarette, the distress is clear in her face, and in this moment, the violin arpeggios give way to a new theme which differs from the original in that the emphases in the violin melody match those in the orchestral accompaniment in four-eighths time.

This last detail could be interpreted as an indication of Vera's total surrender to her situation. The violin's double stops at the beginning of the cadenza are no longer solo but rather accompanied by the orchestra and, as the two characters perform the sexual act that closes this scene, the music continues incorporating various melodic and instrumental elements. This musical moment fuses Vicente's defeat on Ledgard's operating table represented by *The Torn Dresses*, with the

empowerment that Vera displays on screen in the cue *I am tailor-made for you*, and it is this which provokes her into a final, deadly, showdown with Ledgard.

5. Conclusions

The score composed by Alberto Iglesias for the film *The Skin I Live In* contains numerous elements emphasising the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* present in the film. The cues analysed in the present article coincide in how they illustrate these concepts in the narrative and in certain common features they share.

The solo violin dominates the film's score and is essential to understanding how weirdness is provoked by the eerie. The nerve of the writing combines with the music, in particular the violin, to situate spectators in an unsettling space and forcing them to experience the murky relationship between the main characters. In this way, the violin reflects the tension between sex and death that unites Vera and Ledgard.

The main theme of *The Skin I Live In* is captivity; thus, it seems highly appropriate that Iglesias' score is based on an earlier work by the same composer entitled *Captive*. In his score for this film, the violin competes rhythmically with the viola and cello of the accompanying orchestra in a struggle to impose itself, just as Vera struggles with Ledgard to avoid the destiny he has defined for her: being transformed from Vicente to Vera, a woman strikingly similar (deliberately so) to Ledgard's deceased wife. The eeriness of this situation emerges from the film's music: the broken-sounding double stops, the rapid arpeggios—playable only by a virtuoso such as Vicente Huerta—and dissonant harmonies—including that most extreme tonal element, the diminished harmonic or tritone—combine to produce a complex musical texture. This, as Jiménez Criado (2015) observes, reveals the protagonist's most deeply hidden feelings, making certain subjectivities clearly objective and palpable to the film's audience. The objective reality disclosed in this way can be

summed up as the unveiling of a horrific relationship based on Vera's weirdly passive captivity and her eerie transformation from Vicente to Vera that, due to its *unheimlich* nature makes her an object of desire.

In parallel, the conceptualisation of what is meant by an object of desire is related to notions of the "poetics of the trans" and "trans politics". The film represents these using aesthetic devices such as montage and camp, as well as a musical aesthetic in which traditionally opposed genres converge freely to create a music that is definable by none. That is to say, in Iglesias' score for this film, the cutting and assemblage that visually define montage is reprised in the cutting of sound elements and their rearrangement into a whole that, as in the film's script and action, delves deep into Fisherian weirdness and eeriness. Thus, *The Skin I Live In* is not only a visual representation of the trans but also a sonic one thanks to Alberto Iglesias' score, which revels in its weird and eerie trappings. This said, we should not forget Fisher's ultimate thesis: that the weird loses its terrifying aspect once it becomes everyday.

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