

# UNDER THE SKIN: THE PERILS OF BECOMING FEMALE

---

Ara Osterweil



Mysterious geographies and ontologies surface in *Under the Skin*.

In Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), everything of this world is rendered alien. The film is a nocturne, a symphony of subtle shades colliding in the dark. As in a Whistler painting, it takes time for one's eyes to adjust to the light, for darkness to become visible. The cinematography revels in penumbral shadow, rendering geography as mysterious as ontology. Fog drapes terrain, corporeal and otherwise. Figures drown in mist; headlights sparkle and blur. Weather speaks, more frequently and comprehensibly than the film's embodied characters. The mystical glow from a space heater so inflames a woman that she is able to see herself as a human being for the first time. Confronted with such forms of

illumination, the viewer begins to question basic presumptions about the relation between sight and subjectivity. How does perception make and remake identity? What is the difference between looking with and without feeling? How does an understanding of the world and a human's place in it change when an ability to empathize with others develops?

*Under the Skin* asks the big questions about what it means to be human, but its true inquiry is into femininity. Based on the 2000 novel of the same name by Michael Faber, *Under the Skin* advances a radical proposition: to be female is to be alien. As the film eventually reveals, all of the aforementioned questions are inextricable from gender. In spite of the fact that the appearance of sex may only be skin deep, even alien forms of life become subject to misogynist violence when they are gendered female. In a year defined by several important films by male directors about female sexuality [Ed.: see essay by Linda Williams, this issue], *Under the Skin* is an insightful film about

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, Number 4, pp. 44-51, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.  
© 2014 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2014.67.4.44.



An alien reflection of coral lips challenges notions of male fantasy in *Under the Skin*.

female desire, and, I would argue, one of the most important feminist interventions in recent cinematic history.

The premise of *Under the Skin* is that an alien, rendered as female, and her handler, inheriting maleness of course, fall to Earth in order to harvest human skins, presumably as disguises to help other extraterrestrials pass.<sup>1</sup> We learn in the film's eerie prologue that the female alien camouflages herself by inhabiting the fleshy epidermis of an unidentified young woman, whose dead body has been discovered on the side of a road. Inheriting the corpse of a woman presumably killed in an act of sexual violence, the alien eventually inherits her destiny. Passing thus as a hot young thing, the unnamed heroine of the film, played brilliantly by Scarlett Johansson, embarks on her quest, which involves luring hapless men to their evisceration. Should she ever swerve from her murderous mission, her handler threatens to set her straight. Pursuing her over mist-shrouded hill and dale, this avenging motorcyclist menaces the edges of even the most remote vistas. Yet swerve she does.

The film is structured by the female protagonist's ritual seductions. Driving around Scotland while gazing through the window of her van, she picks up random male passersby, and lures them to a distant site where they are conveniently disemboweled in a viscous lagoon. Glistening perennially in the rearview mirror, her coral lips dare us to mistake her for a mere fetish object. Like a figure in a Tom Wesselmann

painting, she is all lips and breasts, the very embodiment of male fantasy. "Do you think I'm pretty?" she asks each victim. And what is never stated but always implied in these anonymous encounters: "Would you fuck me and kill me the first chance you got?" Not if she gets to them first.

After a few awkward attempts at male/female interaction, she gets her game: Ask for directions, offer a ride, bat and pout the appropriate features, drive to a decrepit house in the sticks, strip. With a little help from the special effects team, she then eliminates the awkwardness of waking up next to a stranger. Men, after all, are not such discerning creatures, and a bit of flirtation goes a long way: no woman in her right mind would enter that hellish abode, but only one of her victims casts even a concerned glance before deciding to go in. Reminiscent of the work of video artist Bill Viola, the visual direction of the evisceration scenes is memorable, and I will refrain from diminishing their wonder by describing them here.

The tension between these startling science-fiction interludes and the gritty realism of the rest of the film serves as a constant reminder of its political stakes. While the film's title advertises its concern with what lies *under* the skin, the film is actually committed to the degraded surfaces of everyday life. Captured in luminous detail by Daniel Landen's camera, the pristine landscapes of the Scottish mountains and coastline come alive through renewed perception. Like Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), which casts David Bowie as



The perfectly cast Scarlett Johansson: all too human, yet otherworldly.

an alien recently dropped from space, *Under the Skin* renders the terrestrial landscape exquisitely alien. Part of the reason the film so successfully de-familiarizes its world is that the viewer's own gaze is at least triply mediated to see the world simultaneously through alien eyes, the van's windshield, and the lens of the camera. The perennially damp streets of Glasgow overflow with intensifying menace. Crowds form and dissolve, while she peers with affectless curiosity from the driver's seat. People, none particularly beautiful, wait for buses, mouth words into their cellphones, hover at ATMs, send texts. Perception transubstantiates: humans become machine, while the alien becomes increasingly human.

The film's brilliant soundtrack is essential to its effects. Drawing new attention to sound and silence, Glazer finds the audible world rich enough without too many intrusions of human language. When characters do speak in this mostly dialogue-less film, it is in a burr so incomprehensible to most Anglophone ears that it might as well be from another planet. In any case, there are more important vibrations to heed. Electronic noise guides its cycle of seduction. When these sounds begin to mix with more organic sounds, the heroine is in trouble.

Science fiction is, of course, always about otherness. Yet the smartest examples of the genre also reveal something essential about the world we live in. Glazer's film journeys not to some distant beyond, but to the interstices between the inner and outer spaces of femininity. Even though what lies under the skin may be incommensurate with one's visible exterior, anatomy proves to be, as Freud famously claimed, a form of destiny.<sup>2</sup> In *Under the Skin*, the alien narrative is an allegory for what continues to pass unrecognized about patriarchy: those who dare break the rules of gender are stamped with a scarlet letter that easily becomes a target.

Glazer's choice to engage the skin of today's world, rather than the glistening surfaces of the future (compare his aesthetics to the spectacular mise-en-scène of Stanley Kubrick's

*2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968], for example), signals his political concern with the quotidian. Why else would an extraterrestrial who has traveled from outer space to exenterate human flesh drive around in such a crummy van? Surely, there are more appealing forms of transport in which to attract human specimens! Anyone who missed *Under the Skin*'s Kubrickesque prologue would never know they were watching Johansson's meanderings around Glasgow through a sci-fi lens. Filmed on location with a hidden camera, the film often captures unscripted encounters between Johansson and people unaware of either her star status or the fact of the film's production. Amusingly, the fact that even many Anglo members of the audience cannot understand the Glaswegian dialect of these unwitting players helps sustain the film's illusion of otherworldliness.

Voluptuous and huskily voiced, Scarlett Johansson is perfectly cast to play an alien in a science fiction film. Judging from her recent performances in *Under the Skin* and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), Johansson is the favorite choice of late to play inhuman characters, precisely because she is so human. For in spite of what the narrative alleges, this is a real woman. Revealed in relentless close-up, the blemishes on Johansson's Renaissance face are paradoxically highlighted by the layer of cosmetic concealer she wears. Her outfit, which the character chooses herself in an early trip to the mall—*is it any wonder that her first activity as a human female is to shop?*—is not the slick, neutral garb that contemporary science-fiction associates with alien apparel, but instead, fashion marked with regional and class identity. Wearing tight acid-washed jeans, a hot pink V-neck sweater, fur-trimmed ankle boots, and a faux fur jacket that looks fashioned from roadkill, Johansson's trashy getup conjures a decidedly Bridge and Tunnel version of VALIE EXPORT.

Far more startling than the film's supernatural choreography (or the discovery that there are still people, even in Scotland, who do not recognize Scarlett Johansson) is its

bold representation of female desire. Like Lars von Trier's *Nymph( )maniac*, *Under the Skin* is a film about a woman on the prowl. Yet whereas von Trier's film reduces the boundlessness of female desire to a pathological cartoon, Glazer's film offers a searing portrait of the awakening of female sexuality and its consequences.

I will skip the apologetic prefaces I originally drafted and go straight to my confession: I have never before so identified with a female protagonist in a feature film. Watching Scarlett Johansson's character gaze with impunity at the men she pursues, I remember what it feels like to experience the world through a lens of uninhibited sexual desire. This resonance astonishes me. Through her, I recall the pleasure of imagining random strangers, however oddly comported, as lovers. Whereas her alien mission gives her license to act upon this taboo impulse, watching her, I feel suddenly and terribly constrained by my various pledges to refuse the world's seductive energy. I may be of this Earth, but I too am curious about the shape of strangers' bodies under their clothes, and wonder how a random passerby might react to a thinly veiled solicitation. How might a calculated intervention transform an anonymous encounter into an intimate ritual? Only by witnessing someone becoming human for the very first time do I realize how many aspects of "being human" I have relinquished. Must one be an alien to behave as she does? Is there any space on this Earth in which one can freely explore taboo sexual desire without incurring censure or violence?

That Glazer's images of female cruising are so startling is testament to the rarity of images of the active, sexual female gaze in popular cinema. In a cinematic world still defined by what Laura Mulvey famously theorized, in 1975, as the sadistic male gaze, the representation of an insatiable feminist point of view wreaks havoc on spectator expectations. This is not to suggest that nothing has changed in the intervening decades. Indeed, the film is fascinated with the expanded forms of perception and communication that are activated through the use of technological prostheses ubiquitous in the modern metropolis. But even in a world that claims to move toward "post-human" and "post-feminist" conditions, men will go to the ends of the Earth to eliminate a woman who challenges patriarchal power. While melodramatic popular culture has aligned the female look with concern and empathy—woman's eyes in cinema are reliable producers of tears and terror—Johansson character's gaze in *Under the Skin* is remarkably unburdened by feeling. Curious albeit unmoved by pathos, she surveys the world coolly through the windshield of her van. Physically removed from the bodies she appraises, she nonetheless regards each male passerby as a potential conquest. Seen through the figure of a woman who both looks with a piercing gaze and is

constructed deliberately "to-be-looked-at," conventional gender balance is implicitly challenged. The fact that Glazer includes actual scenes of interactions with unknowing people on the street only adds to the intensity of the film's inversion of the traditional gendering of scopophilia. Finally, I have discovered a film that represents something akin to my experience of subjectivity, without asking me to inhabit a male viewing position. How strange to experience the female gaze saturated with desire but unencumbered by care.

Insisting that looking is a sexual act that transforms both the seer and the seen, *Under the Skin* transforms everyday encounters into erotic performance. Like Steve McQueen's *Shame* (2011), Glazer's film captures a world that is spilling over with sensual potential. Yet although sexual acts are more explicitly represented in *Shame*, *Under the Skin* is the more unusual film. However excessive his sexuality may be, McQueen's male protagonist does not trouble the conventional equivalence between masculinity and mastery. While the interest of *Shame* lies in its envisioning of the world as an erotic theater, the fact that the film eventually pathologizes the protagonist's sexuality belittles its otherwise compelling portrait of a world remade by desire. Gesturing obliquely toward childhood trauma in what has become an all too familiar trope of contemporary cinema, *Shame* insists that alternative forms of sexuality are pathologies in need of redemption and rehabilitation.

Refusing these conservative alibis, *Under the Skin* presents female sexual desire without apology. Scarlett Johansson's alien identity annuls the questions of human morality that smother conversations about sexuality, enabling her to desire without shame. That this femme fatale's predatory aim is not to merely seduce and kill her male victims, but to harvest their skins for alien habitation, is the detail that justifies this film's genre as science fiction. Yet the film's visual choreography suggests that this woman looks, not because she is programmed to do so, but because she wants to. In so doing, *Under the Skin* advances a genuine phenomenology and politics of desire: to be human is to be embodied. To be embodied is to experience corporeal sensations that create the conditions for desire. To experience desire is to begin to see the world differently. To do so is to threaten conventional hierarchies. In the end: this is a form of agency often met with violent resistance.

*Under the Skin* brilliantly demonstrates that for a woman to dare to look with desire radically others the everyday landscape and its power relations. Yet however empowering this heroine's alien gaze may be, it is also deadly. At first it is only fatal to her victims. But when she begins to relinquish her emotional detachment and empathize with others, she renders herself vulnerable to the injuries of the world. The transformation from a predatory to an empathetic gaze fully



To experience desire is to begin to see the world differently.

delivers her into the conditions of feeling, but it also destroys her. Even for a woman who has seized the predatory gaze, her powers can be instantly and fatally turned against her. Like Medusa, whose paralyzing gaze is deflected by the mirror that Perseus wields, the power of the alien's gaze is stolen and used to annihilate her.<sup>3</sup>

Two scenes are key to her profound transformation. The first occurs relatively early in the film, when this unnamed alien attempts to seduce a man who is surfing at the same rugged beach where a family has gathered. In an attempt to rescue a pet dog carried away by a treacherous current, both parents and surfer perish, leaving their infant on the shore awaiting certain death. The tide quickly advances, while the orphaned baby wails in desperation. Dragging the useful corpse of the surfer along, Johansson's character departs, utterly indifferent to this helpless creature's suffering. Night approaches; water and fog engulf the shoreline. If regarding the pain of others can feel unbearable, then watching others regard the pain of others without feeling is even worse.

As this brutal scene suggests, empathy is neither coincident nor coextensive with embodiment. What is colloquially referred to as "being fully human" insists on the relation between humanity and empathy, even though the world is structured by acts of human violence that suggest otherwise. Although the Roman playwright Terentius claimed that "*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*" ("I am a human being, I hold that nothing human is alien to me"), the world furnishes enough examples of atrocity to nullify any sense of kinship with certain others of the human species. However empowering her sexual appetite may be, Glazer's protagonist's arctic disregard makes her a challenging character with whom to sustain identification. Yet the film is not just reinforcing the stereotypical categorization of women into monsters, mothers,



Johansson's alien departs the scene of a human death, as indifferent to the suffering as the waves that carried the bodies away.

or whores. On the contrary, this indigestible scene takes the viewer to the very limits of the film's philosophical inquiry: If having a human body is not coincident with full consciousness, then human subjectivity must exceed corporeal distinction. But if anatomy is not, as it turns out, destiny, then what compass remains as a guide?

It is admirable that *Under the Skin* dares to put a child at the center of such uncertainty. As queer theorist Lee Edelman has argued in his book *No Future*, the child is often invoked as the rhetorical limit of contemporary ideological debate.<sup>4</sup> Who, after all, could dare to publicly speak out against "the children"? That a woman should evince such indifference is even more damning, for a woman who refuses maternal feeling relinquishes her claim to humanity from the point of view of patriarchy.

Along with Scarlett Johansson's character, *Under the Skin* boldly refuses the "universal" appeal of the child and proposes a more radical identification with alterity as the key to human empathy. This emotion arises through an encounter with disability, when the alien temptress meets a man so grossly disfigured that she is finally able to experience a form of kinship that gives way to kindness. He has the misfortune of meeting her while he is on the way to the grocery store, under cover of darkness. Hiding his misshapen visage under a hood, the man recoils from the potentially sadistic gaze of the able-bodied. Tentatively, he enters the car. Unexpectedly, she abandons her usual script ("Do you think I'm pretty?") and asks instead about his loneliness. When she learns that he is friendless and has never been sexually intimate, she invites him to stroke her face. Though it seems an act of tenderness, her motives remain suspicious. This, after all, is the same emotionally frigid creature who has lured every single one of her pickups to death by liquefaction. When she ends up performing the predictable gestures of seduction, we are convinced that he, too, is a goner. A close-up of his



**A momentary act of tenderness between the beautiful alien and a disfigured human. Discovering empathy, she discovers herself anew.**

exposed face makes this scene seem like another instance of directorial sadism.

The morning after proves otherwise. She frees him, leaving him to make his way home through the city's outskirts, naked and unmasked. Under such difficult circumstances, one wonders whether it would have been better to suffer disembowelment by alien temptress than whatever banal human acts of violence a man so visibly disabled might meet in the light of day.

Although her victim perishes nonetheless (for her motorcyclist guardian is never far away), the act of identification proves transformative for the alien heroine. Though she is gorgeous and he hideous, he is equivalently othered. Finally encountering someone whose skin is as alien to him as she experiences her own to be, she is moved to empathy. Alarming her handler with her disobedience, she breaks precedent and instantly becomes a fugitive.

In discovering empathy, the alien discovers herself anew. Suddenly catching sight of her face in a tarnished mirror, she is startled by some new form of recognition. Of course she has been captured in mirrors already—the film is structured by glimpses of her face in the rearview mirror—but never looking at her own image: she has never before been able to see herself as a human being. As in Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the birth of

the self emerges here from the simultaneous recognition of, and estrangement from, her own reflected image.<sup>5</sup> And yet, this recognition is impossibly belated. The fact that she only begins to discover herself after she has been marked as a target is this film's form of tragedy.

She begins to feel. Or she tries to learn how. Betraying her species and her superior's commands, she attempts to experience the sensual pleasures of the flesh: eating, walking, intimacy, and, eventually, even sex. At a breakfast joint in the mountains, she nibbles a piece of cake only to choke it up moments later to the disdain of onlooking customers.

Her journey toward conscious embodiment delivers Johansson's character fully into the realm of the senses. Yet as she loses her unfeeling identity, she also discovers human pain. Shivering in the damp as she tries to escape her pursuer, she learns what it is to feel cold, wet, and lost. Alone on a bus, her empty gaze and mute bewilderment are mistaken for post-traumatic stress. Or are they actually? Taken in by the only kindly man she meets in her brief sojourn as a pre-human post-human, she is given shelter. He cooks a modest supper of beans and toast, which she can't eat, and they watch a bit of comedy on the telly, whose humor she finds impenetrable. As he washes up the dishes, he sways in rhythm to music from the radio. Like an infant, she mimics him by tapping her fingers on the table, though she fails to



As a woman on the run, the alien cannot escape the cliché of gendered, pathological violence.

get the beat. The documentation of these barely perceptible dissonances suggests that the distance between her awakening consciousness and the fully embodied experience of humankind are simultaneously vast and acute.

Of course there are precedents in the use of science fiction as gender or racial allegory. Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Teknolust* (2002) traces a similar narrative arc, albeit to dramatically different effect, with Tilda Swinton as a replicant trolling the streets of San Francisco harvesting semen instead of skins. In John Sayles's *Brother from Another Planet* (1984), a black-skinned extraterrestrial played by Joe Morton crash-lands in New York harbor after attempting to escape slavery by traveling to Earth. Picked up as homeless by the authorities—in a classic case of racial profiling—he is deposited in Harlem. Throughout his journey, he is constantly harassed by two white men, also aliens, intent on returning this extraterrestrial refugee to slavery on his home planet. The film is an allegory of assimilation, in which even the most alien forms of life are subjected to racism in a society that cannot see past the black/white divide. From the point of view of white supremacy, a black man is a black man is a black man, even when he is not.

What *Brother* does to blackness, *Under the Skin* does to femininity. Taking up these marginalized points-of-view in societies structured by binary oppositions, both films denaturalize customary ways of seeing identity. It is no more natural for whites to be privileged than it is for men—rather than women—to be active sexual agents. Seen through the eyes of an alien constantly mistaken for just another babe adrift in the metropolis, the so-called norms (of whiteness, masculinity, humanity) are implicitly challenged, even as they inevitably hold sway. What is under the skin ultimately matters less than the colors or anatomical details of the epidermal shell.

It turns out that there is a substantial difference between a man on the road and a woman on the run. To be a woman is

to be an object of incessant surveillance, a moving target. Human or alien, women are raped, discarded, and left for dead. Regardless of the epic transformations that self-discovery brings, to be female is to be voided. To feel female is not only to suffer the richness of human pain, but, inevitably, the violence of gendered hatred.<sup>6</sup> The alien meets her “destiny” in an act of violence so predictable that its clichéd status makes it all the more painful. Astonished by the physical revelations of genital intercourse—which she finally consummates with the nice guy who takes her in—she takes to the woods. Wind whips through the evergreens; fog pervades the frame. All is there waiting to be discovered, but the animated thicket is as impervious to human pain as our heroine used to be. She meets a park ranger, who advises her on trails, only to pursue her with malicious intent. As in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the wood marches, but not to woman's defense.

The heroine's lessons end as dark as the woods she dies in. For in her sudden apprenticeship as a woman, she has not learned quickly enough to be suspicious of human offerings. Weary from her trek through the forest, she comes upon a stone hut welcoming hill walkers to take shelter. Upon entering, she discovers a modest haven for human habitation. Thoreau himself might have furnished this rustic abode, for it has all of the necessary props for contemplative solitude: a desk and chair, several well-worn books, a jug of writing utensils, a yoga mat and cushion. New to the sensations of exhaustion, she sleeps, only to be abruptly awakened by the unwanted touches of the ranger she encountered earlier.

It's an old story, revealed in a breathtaking new way. As in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), male hospitality is an illusion, and whatever rare instances of human kindness she has encountered are a setup for pathological violence. Yet if the lesson of *Psycho* is, as my mother interpreted it, to always lock the door while you are in the shower, then the lesson of *Under the Skin* is far bleaker: If you are sexed female, beware of becoming human.

## Notes

1. The end of the film seems to reveal that the alien was female before arriving on Earth, but this does not alter the problems of gender that precede this revelation.
2. Sigmund Freud claims that “Anatomy is destiny” twice, first in 1912 and again in 1924. The first can be found in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love)* (1912), trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 189. The

second can be found in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” (1924), in *On Sexuality*, vol. 7, Penguin Freud Library, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 313–22, on 320.

3. See Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 191–200.
4. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
5. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 75–81.
6. I couldn’t help but think of Barbara Loden’s forgotten *Wanda* (1970), which also chronicles the plight of a woman who suddenly stops behaving as programmed and goes on a journey of becoming, only to find that there is no place to hide from misogynist violence. In both films, the woman’s refusal to maintain acceptable gender roles opens up affectless subjects to sensation.