

Femininity and the Alien Other in *Under the Skin*

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Abstract:

In this paper, I attempt to analyze the 2014 film *Under the Skin* through its formal and generic elements and relate these to philosophical thought regarding objectivity and gender from theorists including Kant, de Beauvoir, and Irigaray, as well as media scholars Barbara Creed and Laura Mulvey. I argue that throughout the course of the film, by its presentation of horror, science-fiction, and film noir elements, as well as its cinematography, structure, sound, and mise-en-scène a commentary on the societal objectification of women is constructed, all stemming from its presentation of the female experience as something which is inherently alien.

I. Introduction

In examining Jonathan Glazer's 2014 film *Under the Skin*, it is perhaps worthwhile to first analyze the title. The phrase implies a few things: for one, a fundamental sameness, despite exterior differences: "enemies who are really brothers under the skin". It also evokes obsession: as Frank Sinatra famously sings, "I've got you under my skin/I've got you deep in the heart of me/So deep in my heart that you're really a part of me." Or, alternatively, it could imply irritation—when something bothers us, we might say it gets under our skin. On a more literal level, it might conjure up anatomical imagery, i.e., what actually lies under the skin, like blood, bones, and muscle, or the words might have a certain erotic connotation, suggesting intimacy. This multiplicity is no accident. The film itself is as ambiguous as its title, and the many concepts conveyed through its images and sounds are reflected and informed by the multiple interpretations of this phrase. Some of the most significant subjects that the film examines include femininity, subjectivity, and humanity, and it primarily uses genre tropes and formal filmic elements to convey these concepts. I will first present a synopsis of the film, then examine the film's use of generic conventions to develop its central ideas, through tropes commonly employed in the horror, science-fiction and film noir genres. Following genre, I will discuss the film's style of shooting, cinematography, sound, time, and mise-en-scène.

II. Synopsis

The film follows a female alien (Scarlett Johansson) who is sent to Earth —specifically Glasgow, Scotland—to seduce and entrap human men, harvesting their bodies for resources. She experiences several routine encounters in which the men she follows oblige to follow her home and are consequently killed. In one instance, on a beach, she attempts to seduce a surfer. He later unsuccessfully tries to save a couple from drowning and the three of them are swept away at sea. The couple's child is abandoned on the beach to die as the alien pursues her next victim (29:19). Eventually, she encounters a disfigured man, who engages in a conversation with her about his mistreatment by society (52:20). Feeling sympathetic to his plight, she flees the city (1:02:54) and attempts to more closely mimic humanity but is ultimately unsuccessful in truly embodying it—for example, trying and failing to consume food (1:08:19). She is taken in by a man who rides the bus with her, but runs away again after a failed sexual encounter (1:26:20). While fleeing, she is pursued by a logger in the woods who sexually assaults her (1:37:09). She tears away her human exterior to reveal an opaque, black body as the man sets her on fire and leaves her to die (1:38:34).

III. Elements of Genre

From examining the events of the film, one of the most explicit themes that start to emerge is that of womanhood and femininity. The director, Jonathan Glazer, has denied any intentions of presenting commentary on the current state of gender dynamics: “I wanted to make it more about a human experience than a gender experience.”¹ Nevertheless, it seems especially important that the alien character takes the form of a woman. In my observation of the film, one of the most useful methods of explicating its meaning is by examining its use of genre conventions—in particular, that of the horror film. In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, author Barbara Creed presents a critique of Freudian and Lacanian theories of sexual difference through the lens of popular horror film conventions regarding women.² She argues that the Freudian position, that women are horrifying to men because they are castrated (and therefore the victim) is problematic because it identifies women as natural victims. In contrast to this idea, she describes the construction of the monstrous-feminine through abjection: “That which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’, that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order.’”³ Creed focuses on abjection primarily as the blurring of borders: human and inhuman, male and female, and normal and abnormal sexual desire. She states that the main purpose of the horror film is

1. Danny Leigh. 2014. “Under the Skin: Why Did This Chilling Masterpiece Take a Decade?” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/06/under-the-skin-director-jonathan-glazer-scarlett-johansson>.

2. Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Femininity, and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 10.

3. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 51.

to “eject the abject” and reinstate these boundaries.⁴ *Under the Skin* reflects these concepts distinctly: we see how the line between human and inhuman is distorted as the female alien attempts to “learn” to be human, as well as the line between male and female, as the predatory role she assumes serves as a reversal of typical conceptions of gender dynamics. Additionally, her tactical use of seduction and simultaneous aversion to actual sexual contact could be seen as transgressive of normal sexual desire, thus crossing this boundary as well. The ending of the film resolves these refusals of boundaries as she is sexually assaulted and rejects humanity, returning to her alien state, thus ending her predatory status and reflecting Creed’s view that the goal of the horror film is resolution of the abject. Thus, the film’s use of the horror convention of the monstrous-feminine allows us to form an understanding of the subjugated role of women in society, as fear is derived from female transgression of societal boundaries, and they must ultimately be drawn again in order to reaffirm masculine hegemony.

I posit that the science-fiction aspect of the film, an alien on Earth learning to interact with humanity, is in and of itself a metaphor for gender dynamics and the subject/object relationship. In Simone de Beauvoir’s formative work *The Second Sex*, she develops the concept of the woman as Other: “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.”⁵ Throughout the first half of the film, the protagonist’s relationship with humanity is detached—she has little understanding of what it means to be human and views people as objects, exemplified in the scene where she leaves the baby on the beach to die. When she meets the disfigured man, there is a transformation in her ability to view others subjectively, as she begins to develop a sense of empathy for humanity, and a greater desire to become human herself. In the end, though, she herself becomes the object as she is left to die, drawing a parallel with her previous treatment of the baby. Just as she can only approximate humanity but never fully embody it, the woman as Other that de Beauvoir identifies will never be able to reach absoluteness. Thus, the film’s science-fiction generic qualities mirror the theory of gender dynamics identified in *The Second Sex*.

I argue that *Under the Skin* also incorporates conventions of the film noir, which is defined best less as a genre and more as a series of shared elements, seen in this film through the sense of paranoia, the importance of the city, and, most significantly, the character of the femme fatale. The femme fatale is seductive yet malicious, and often serves as the antagonist in film noir, often to the extent of murder. While it could be argued that this trope is empowering, as it upsets

4. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 57.

5. Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. France, 1949. p. 1, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>

the typical power dynamics of women and men, it is also often approached from an objectifying and conservative male perspective, as the femme fatale often serves to contrast the more wholesome wife or girlfriend character of the stereotypical male noir protagonist. As defined by film scholar Jack Boozer: “The frequency and similarity of her incarnations in classic noir films clearly point to a mass market demand to see these demonstrably ambitious and thus dangerous women put back in their domestic ‘place.’”⁶ The film invokes this trope, as the female alien stalks the city streets in search of men to seduce and trap for her mission. By the ending of the film, she loses touch with what she has been instructed to do and is also harmed by the patriarchal human society she has entered—she is ultimately “put in her place” as is typical of the ending of a film noir. Yet, these moments are framed negatively, in contrast with the typically “happy” film noir conclusion of the femme fatale paying for her power. Therefore, while *Under the Skin* utilizes this concept from film noir, it does so from a critical perspective by subverting certain aspects of the trope. It demonstrates the violence that occurs when women are viewed as object rather than subject, thereby extrapolating the concept established by its portrayal of woman as the alien Other to its logical endpoint. Additionally, it responds to the idea that the traditional power structure between the genders must be maintained by demonstrating.

IV. Elements of Film

I recognize that the broader formal elements of the film are incorporated into the development of the concept of female alienation. One of the most distinctive aspects of the film is its method of filming. The crew was equipped with hidden cameras and rode around in the back of the van that the protagonist drives around. Scarlett Johansson, the character’s actress, would approach random passersby in character, and their initial conversations would be filmed. The crew would then explain the project and the individuals would agree to take part in the film.⁷ This means that many of the interactions shown on screen are genuine. This contributes multiple dimensions to the film: first, it blurs another line. As previously discussed, many of the film’s ideas can be understood from the way that it plays with boundaries, particularly human and inhuman, as well as male and female. The hidden camera style of filming presents another ambiguity, as it complicates the distinction between the real and the unreal. Secondly, the method of filming is used to place distance between the viewer and what is shown on screen—as Ara Osterweil identifies in her review: “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.”⁸ Both aspects are significant because of the way they

6. Jack Boozer. “The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Film Noir Tradition.” *Journal of Film and Video* 51, no. 3/4 (Fall 1999): 22

7. Leigh, “Under the Skin.”

8. Ara Osterweil. “Under the Skin: The Perils of Becoming Female,” *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (June 2014): 45

enable us to view a familiar world as if we are also an alien, therefore contributing to the overall image of the woman as Other by allowing us to empathize with such a perspective.

The film's cinematography also contributes to its observations on femininity. There is a focus on the body, but in a way that seems reflexive of the established cinematic concept of the male gaze. The cinematic male gaze was first identified by film theorist Laura Mulvey, but its origins can be traced back to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "the look", as defined in *Being and Nothingness* with his example of looking through the keyhole of a door, then realizing you are being watched: "But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me. What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure - modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective cogito."⁹ The acknowledgement that one is being looked at forces an individual to view themselves from the perspective of the person looking, which creates an inherent difference in power. Mulvey extrapolates this concept, as well as the Freudian notion of scopophilia, or visual pleasure, to film. She describes how in a cinematic context, pleasure is derived from looking, specifically with the position of the male as seeing and the female as being seen.¹⁰ "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong erotic and visual impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."¹¹ In films, we primarily see this conveyed through the way the camera chooses to represent female characters. Oftentimes, women on screen will be shown in a way that calls attention to their physical appearance for example, with a slow pan that highlights various features of their bodies, or close ups of body parts will be shown disembodied from their person, making them into objects of male desire.

In *Under the Skin*, we see this concept subverted in a few ways. Firstly, I argue that through her position of power and the framing of the camera, the protagonist takes up a female gaze, scrutinizing and deriving pleasure from the viewing of men's bodies. On a few occasions in the film, we see the same technique of the slow pan that is commonly used to accentuate the female figure, instead following her gaze as she sizes up her male victims. Secondly, the scenes of seduction and nudity themselves are shot neutrally. The film relies somewhat on preexisting knowledge of the actress Scarlett Johansson as a Hollywood sex symbol, which creates certain expectations for how she will be shot, only for her nude scenes to be mostly devoid of eroticism. By reversing the male gaze in this way, the film calls attention to the way that the female body is typically framed in cinema, and how the audience is normally permitted to reduce female characters to

9. Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946: 260

10. Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Indiana University Press, 1989: 61

11. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*, 62

mere objects. Additionally, this subversion of gendered expectations in cinema harkens back to Barbara Creed's position that the "monstrous-feminine" is derived primarily from abjection, particularly transcending the boundaries between male and female.¹² The fact that the female alien in the film possesses a predatory gaze that would traditionally be associated with men is part of what causes her to become horrifying, and one of the elements of abjection that is ultimately resolved by the film's conclusion, demonstrating societal lack of tolerance for women breaking from their designated gender roles. This reaffirms the idea of the woman as Other, as femininity is so inherently disparate from masculinity that to subvert their traditional conceptions is to embody terror.

I contend that a notable formal element in the film which echoes its overall message on the alienating nature of womanhood is sound. Dialogue is incredibly sparse, and the screenplay only totals about fourteen pages. In the second half of the film, the protagonist only utters around three words. Apart from her, all characters speak with a Glaswegian dialect, so although the film is entirely in English, the few sentences that are included become difficult to understand unless the viewer is a native of the region. The effect of this is similar to that of the distancing effects of the method of shooting, creating a sense of alienation from what would otherwise be a familiar environment. The score is another essential element, providing much of the film's sense of atmosphere with its low, electronic hums and repetitive, haunting violin motif. Jonathan Glazer mentioned that the original intention was for there to be no score at all, and that the protagonist was to be exposed to music for the first time while riding the bus. Although this concept was not utilized in the film's final cut, Osterweil observes that as the noise of the city ceases and we hear more natural sounds, this creates an interesting dynamic with the artificial sounds of the score, evoking the internal conflict and attempted development toward humanity that the protagonist experiences.¹³ Therefore, both the sparse dialogue and the mix of diegetic and nondiegetic sound become important aspects of constructing the film's observations on subjectivity and humanity. As stated, the film's portrayal of the protagonist's alien status and attempts to approximate humanity can be interpreted as a metaphor for gender dynamics as viewed through the lens of the woman as Other, and thus, the way that the film's soundscape contributes to the distinction between the human and the inhuman reflects its messages regarding the objectified status of women.

Time is a significant element of my argument, as its structure, at least for the first half, feels incredibly repetitive. The protagonist drives around until she finds a victim, asks them where they are going and offers them a ride. They accept, she lures them into her room and undresses, they follow her and are absorbed into the surface below them. The rhythmic

12. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 51.

13. Osterweil, "Under the Skin", 46

nature of these sequences serves as a comment on the routine nature of life but is also reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 bruxelles*, which has been identified as "the first masterpiece of the feminine in the history of cinema."¹⁴ This film follows a mother as she completes her daily chores and sex work over the course of three days. With a runtime of nearly three and a half hours, painstaking attention is paid to the execution of each action and how her routine is constructed. In both *Under the Skin* and *Jeanne Dielman*, the repetitive structuring conveys the inherently objectifying nature of participation in such rote and mechanical work. In order to analyze this idea of work which is inherently dehumanizing, we can examine the words of Immanuel Kant, while also expanding upon them through a feminist lens, in a similar manner as Luce Irigaray, whose philosophy will be further explored later. In the Kantian view, the ability to view another person as a tool is detrimental to the subjectivity of humanity. Kant therefore identifies the "supreme principle of morality" as such: "So act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."¹⁵ While this concept itself is not inherently gendered, it is significant that the work being done in both films is dependent on the female status of the characters- seduction and domestic chores. The fact that it is women's work specifically is significant, as objectification based on gender is what primarily allows them to be reduced to mere tools, which then additionally recalls the concept of the female figure as the alien other, unable to be viewed by a societal whole as a subject unto themselves. Consequently, the film's use of time and repetition provides an observation on the devaluation of women and the work they engage in.

The film's underlying meaning about the inherent alienation of femininity is derived through the film's *mise-en-scène*, a film term that refers to everything visible in a shot, including acting, costuming, and set design. In her essay on the film, Elena Gorfinkel relates the film's use of reflective surfaces as a visual metaphor that connects to Luce Irigaray's book *Speculum of the Other Woman*.¹⁶ The book engages in a critique of the nature of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis, which she posits does not allow for a specifically female subject because it has been formed primarily through a male lens.¹⁷ Irigaray uses a mimetic writing style to respond to and expand upon the exclusively male perspective of various philosophers, and examine how their gender informs their systems of belief. The title is derived from her use of the metaphor of the *speculum* to examine Freud's view that woman is complementary to man, therefore mirroring him:

"Thus the "object" is not as massive, as resistant, as one might wish to believe. And her possession by a "subject," a subject's desire to appropriate her, is yet another of his vertiginous failures. For where he projects a something to absorb, to

14. Lieve Spaas, *Francophone Film: A Struggle for Identity* (Manchester University Press, 2000)

15. Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (1795): 421.

16. Elena Gorfinkel. "Sex, Sensation, and Nonhuman Interiority in *Under the Skin*," *Jump Cut* 57 (Fall 2016): 2.

17. Luce Irigaray. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

take, to see, to possess ... as well as a patch of ground to stand upon, a mirror to catch his reflection, he is already faced by another specularization.”¹⁸

Gorfinkel draws parallels between Irigaray’s ideas and the presence of mirrors and reflective surfaces in *Under the Skin*, ranging from the scene near the beginning of the film where the protagonist looks into a compact mirror to apply her lipstick, to the reflective black surface that engulfs her victims, arguing that this is indicative of the lack of perception of the woman as a subject, as she is seen as a mere reflection. Her essay also argues that the structure of the film itself becomes a part of this concept of the speculum, as it is divided almost perfectly into two halves which invert each other: the protagonist as the predator and the protagonist as the prey. The use of mise-en-scene in conjunction with the dual structure of the film contribute significantly to its observations on the nature of gender dynamics, specifically that women are alienated from and objectified by the male figure, who view them not as whole beings, but as mere distortions of themselves.

V. Conclusion

Under the Skin refuses to conform to the typical conventions of Hollywood cinema, which in turn leaves much of its meaning up to interpretation. Despite the fact that the director did not intend for the film to comment specifically on the experiences of women, the way the film responds to genre conventions allows us to view the violent and inescapable nature of misogyny through a new perspective, as additionally seen through its formal elements.¹⁹ This creates an interpretation of the film that characterizes it as a comment on the subjugation of women. Although the film is presented in a deliberately alienating way, and with a detached protagonist, its message is universal. For these reasons, the commentary that the film presents becomes valuable to us as an audience as we reflect on what it means to navigate society as a woman. By linking the science-fiction alien to the experience of womanhood, the film puts forward a distinct notion: that they are inherently the same.

18. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 134.

19. Leigh, “Under the Skin.”