

Under the Skin

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Everything that can be known about an intention belongs to its skin, which reveals something but conceals even more. A skin must be viewed as a mere token and requires interpretation as it can be many things, but on its own, it means barely nothing.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 2019

Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) is an enigmatic SF horror movie, loosely based on the novel by Michael Faber, which continues to explore the animal-man allegory. The movie masks its true vigor on first view and is, with its long-winding narrative and uncertain outcome, perhaps a dissatisfactory experience for those who expect drastic plot twists and a happy ending. A more in-depth analysis, however, allows for the discovery of manifold surprising connections to the actual state of society. Similar to his 2001 feature *Sexy Beast*, it takes up the motifs of change and power relations but in contrast to the former, which lives from absurdly vivid dynamics between the characters and verbal exchange, *Under the Skin* exhibits their palpable distance and captivates the viewer through mesmerizing visual language. It resists a common tactics of tension building followed by relief and focuses on the female protagonist and her story, showing a more realistic trajectory of life that is worth contemplating on. The essay applies the theoretical concept of the cyborg to decode the alien form and method and investigates the roots and moral foundations of this new order, which in complex interplay with technological and capital forces gradually covers reality with an egocentric representation. The movie's alien perspective on the world makes clear, that basic fundamentals of life such as strong social bonds and change are at stake.

Under the skin is a-void, wherein trapped males meet nothing but death after their attempt to bogart beauty. Yet a brief encounter between two of them can still be witnessed, when a previous victim reaches out to a recent arrival for physical closeness but is rejected upon consideration. Shortly after he implodes with a pop and his skin, now formless waste, remains drifting in vast emptiness. His insides however, make a seemingly valuable resource for alien intention and moved along on a conveyor belt to be processed in a struggle of life and death, eventually put to rest by rays of light, similar to those featured at the beginning of the movie. The opening scene is as clear as the mystery it reveals, many suggested it represents the formation process of the woman's eye

by alien design, but to see is only the circular capture of light from different perspectives, everything else is open to interpretation. To hear is the ingenious soundtrack by Mica Levi and the development of garble into language.

Overall it seems as if the movie is deliberately kept silent to make voices heard in a culture where the visual has upstaged sound and to bring changes in communication to the fore. Dialogue, if performed, carries a mechanistic feel, resembling 'the psychological reality of AI models'.¹ Their virtue lies in drawing attention to the luminous skin to obscure the limited technological feasibility of recreating natural intelligence. Appearances are deceiving, and yet casualties become readily accepted just for a promise of happiness since the information explosion triggered the implosion of meaning in the social. Matter ceased to resonate in a space de-void of energy, because the actual transcendental qualities of its transmission were deemed impractical and replaced by fixed artificial illuminants, which only simulate movement due to the lack of self-propulsion. On account of a false sense of security, flickering light usurped the real as exposure to captured sunlight with its intense and relentless radiation led to the gradual surrender of the values of life.²

Glazer said in an interview that the film is basically about her,³ but unlike the book, circumstances regarding the woman's origin or everyday life remain in the dark. Scarlett Johansson is captured as an alien character stripped to the bare essentials, however, one that can be examined from various angles. For a more comprehensive picture, it is relevant to look at her counterpart, the motorcyclist, who embodies the couplings between animal, man and machine. His leathersuit protects him from the harsh conditions outside and provides an illusory armour similar to exoskeletons of animals without a spine, which in case of a severe crash holds together a mass of pulp. A lone wolf, racing along a curvy and risky path, his life dependent on the bike's headlights, that guide him through the darkness of the Scottish landscape. Only later he requires help from his mates, but until the woman starts to break free, the motorcyclist seems to be a self-assured man in control. He is aware of her actions and corrects them if necessary in a feedback loop between perpetrator and victim.

She supports the dynamics of violence, just like the lonely men, who are easy prey in a world stripped of meaning and untied bonds, or the resident at the window, who watches the elimination of a fellow citizen with indifference. There is a grain of truth in the saying that humans are essentially alike under the skin and Fisher argued that neoliberalism reinforced their lower instincts like egoism, envy and greed. Such traits are treasured by the political henchmen of global capitalism and to substantiate this claim, Fisher quoted Thatcher, who said in an interview 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'.⁴ Solidarity and cohesion constitute the greatest threat to totalitarian regimes, hence the efficiency of deliberate divisive policies is put to test in most progressive societies. This proves successful beyond belief as

¹see Dennett, 1981, p. 115

²see Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 210-223

³see <https://youtu.be/hZUvIfXKVVc>

⁴see Fisher, 2018, pp. xi-xii

today's executives not only get away with constant surveillance, repression and an incredible uneven distribution of wealth but even manage to market the current situation as an era of total individual freedom.

The passage at the end is the 'patho-logical'⁵ conclusion of the woman's journey through the realm of modern man. In consequence of rape, the woman sheds her teared up skin and bares the dark inside, which has solidified into a body with human features. The substance holds its former surface and both faces look at each other in self reflexion before dastardly set on fire. Terrified by the sight of a chimera the big killer runs away and she turns from blazing flame into bonfire, out of which smoke particles strive against the sky and return with the fall of snow. Probably unaware of the events, the motorcyclist sans machine stands lonely on a mountaintop. He, once the self-appointed pride of creation appears to be lost. It was proposed that the scene is a reenactment of Caspar David Friedrich's painting the Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, one of the icons of German romanticism, which can be interpreted as a figurative depiction of the uncertain future.

Heidegger argues, that the gradual step from being-in-the-world to Dasein is the development of a uniform and self-contained person, marking the origin of 'a' life that simultaneously claims its death.⁶ This progress makes man reputedly different from, and superior to the animal, but becoming human, along with its importance, is shown in the movie in reverse order. Here, being in the world grants the woman independence, a soul and the capability of genuine compassion, however her previous lifestyle of killing and skinning men is still in accordance with the Heideggerian concept of Dasein, suggesting that blunt presence represents death. Her lethal actions were nevertheless carried out in good faith and justified by the code of ethics of the alien authority, which ironically features a concept of mercy that rests on rational thought.⁷ Compared to visceral response, indoctrinated compassion can only be fake and Nietzsche identified idleness, indifference and political weakness as further negative effects of the mind construct.⁸ Judgement based on only two default, strict opposite options, although both are true, to avoid strenuous weighing and bringing them into debate, is not just wrong but obscures the overall and actual cause of the matter.

The rapist came upon an indefinable hybrid, which is a frightening but true visualization of being in the world that deviates drastically from the constructs supported by the pillars of the Western mind. A rare sight even for a sober and selfgoverned brain, which naturally edits superfluosness out to arrange vital information in time. For conscious being, time is the most essential dimension to translate the unintelligible dynamics of life into meaning and to navigate

⁵see Popa, 2019

⁶'Dasein becomes properly individuated insofar as it appropriates death as its own.' see Brassier, 2007, p. 154

⁷Nietzsche wrote, that in modern times the value of an action is judged by its intention, or more precisely by its morality, which in turn is interpreted by the delusional concepts of origin and self-knowledge. see Nietzsche, 2019, p. 15

⁸see Nietzsche, 2018

forward in the vastness of space, imagined in the movie as a black mass of alien origin. The viscous fluid simulates merely the qualities of spacetime, such as unbound freedom and a high standard of transformability, and deviously offers movement in infinite directions, which turn out to be deadlocks instead of paths to the future.

The beginning of the end of the future, once open and accessible for all, took its course with the Enlightenment, which brought about an organizational model that was later facilitated by the technological achievements of the Industrial Revolutions and since then further refined. The doctrine of separating mind from body triggered a chain of reactions and escalated into an ongoing 'border war'⁹ that did not stop at the gates of the church. The rise of Protestantism meant to take an unequivocal stand, and many readily followed the mission of salvation and its fascist interpretation of the term apocalypse,¹⁰ and therefore killed the future of millions in one way or another. Apocalypticism has been always a great tool to control and paralyze the people. State leadership and institutions deceive commoners into servitude by projecting a deterministic image of the future, which either raises fear or prospects of a status that is beyond reach.¹¹

Western politics of segregation spread to the subatomic level by first prioritizing thought over sense and the mathematical over a more holistic approach and later exchanging transcendence with substitutes altogether. The benefits seemed to be obvious, thought is particularly suitable for calculation and prediction, can be divided into discrete units to be subsequently computed until the result equals a fixed value, which was increasingly equated with capital. Figures are gathered from the commonalty, or rather what is on display. The skin served as a matter of analysis all along, but only the onscreen reflection of visibility offered endless possibilities to rigorously illuminate, survey and extract its data. The carnal body however, was classed useless and discarded for the mere purposes of exploitation and consumption. To make up for the lack of qualitative substance, hidden in the once attached flesh, quantitative bias was used to secure even and new numbers.

The institution of science, in contrast, can afford to evade transparency and the public and forms in parts rather opaque and closed circles, which lost touch with reality. The refocus on phenomena of self-organization in complex natural systems, crucial for understanding life as a whole, was an important step in the right direction for a wide variety of disciplines. However, this approach took a very dangerous and worrying turn, supported by 'the physics of nonequilibrium processes',¹² which prepared ground for growing entropy instead of true innovation. Modern science had always used time as a mere measurement of change, but since change itself became the matter of research, the shifting per-

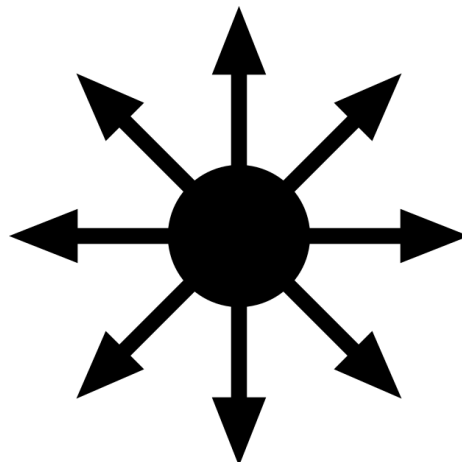
⁹see Haraway, 2017, p. 7

¹⁰Apocalypse is a Greek word (απαλυσισ), which translates as revelation.

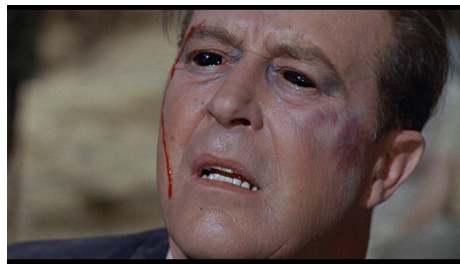
¹¹By reason of this, the woman went hunting on behalf of the alien government and robbed the meager belongings of her predecessor just to become replaceable trash from the roadside herself.

¹²see Prigogine, 1996, p. 3

spective put previous observers of systems and keepers of balance into a tilted position. Instead of recognizing what change really is, scientists swapped the pendulum in favor of the arrow of time, pursuing the delusional goal to get to the undetectable point of its origin, but became consequently drawn further in the pointless vortex of time to face a similar fate like X: The Man with the X-ray Eyes.¹³



(a) Symbol of Chaos.



(b) X: The Man with the X-ray Eyes.

Figure 1: Chaos magick.

True time exists throughout the incomprehensible dimension of the actual fluid, which can be positively reached by the unconditional adoption of change. Contrary to Heidegger but according to myths, individual death is not the most possible ultimate end but further affects the world by continuously random and moving bonds. Instead of ascension and to live on in glorious memory, the woman's alien toxic residues pollute the atmosphere of rural Scotland, spreading deadly pestilence in extant regions of untouched nature and soiling the camera's lens in the final shot, which perhaps signifies humanity's irreversible road to

¹³Prior to be set up as a fixed point, the aimless and constant moving phantom was at least theoretically able to oscillate between materiality and scientific artefact. see Ernst, 2019

extinction, leaving nothing but meaningless data behind.

In the beach scene the act of killing becomes a minor matter, brutality is not conveyed by the blow to the skull of the swimmer but unfolds in a sequence of unfortunate circumstances in a mesh of relations between people. Since the display of gore became the norm, the ongoing trend of outperforming obscenity provokes just a further expansion of boundaries and not the desired effect of aesthetic transgression, as been last witnessed around the turn of the millenium. The facilitators of capital fully engrossed aesthetics in order to manipulate feelings and to evoke reactions for their own ends and contaminate the environment with mass-produced audiovisuals, which encourage deterioration and consequently destroy the power to effect change. They understood to capitalize emotions effectively, as just a glimpse beyond reason affects the nervous system in an instant.

It took Glazer over a decade to bring *Under the Skin* about, a worthwhile wait, considering that the outcome was not a foregone conclusion but a work in progress with many parties involved, a method, which has coincided with the key themes of the movie and proven right by surprisingly fresh anti-aesthetics. The intended outside point of view allows for deep and strange insights into capitalism and the exposure of its cruelty and imbecility. Viewers can observe their movements like in a mirror, a projected and not represented version of reality, which gives a more truthful impression of today's society, such as the dreary everyday life of urban dwellers or the actual look of human beings. The movie reveals quite plainly what is left of the world if not layered with media artefacts. This was accomplished by a frequent use of natural lighting, hidden cameras and the interaction between passers and professional actors. Johansson was prompted to improvise, certainly a more exhausting task than following a definitive script. Without names, the persons portrayed in the film are objects not subjects, according to the fact, that the unconscious is the true governor of actions and everyone is a performer of a destined role, influenced by ideology, situation and personal experience.

Under the Skin lacks detailed explanation but makes room for further individual speculation and the collective exchange of findings. Its artful simplicity leads the viewer into a complex abyss of relations, which call for further inquiry.

Glazer pursued the right strategy in light of the persisting trend towards dulling superficiality for the sole purpose of profit, and made a challenging and incalculable film, which only reveals its true meaning by the human capacity of refined intuition.¹⁴ The movie is meant to be viewed as an organic whole as it is deep rooted in lived experience, faithfully conveying injustice and inequality of present life.

¹⁴So challenging to be 'capable not only of matching but of surpassing the abstractions of number and the value-form'. see Brassier, 2007, p. 97

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