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**Commentary**

## **Three Approaches to a Cultural Object: The Film *Under the Skin***

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**Abstract:** This article presents three approaches to the film *Under the Skin* by Jonathan Glazer (2014) that correspond to three interpretative vertices. The film is an adaptation of Michel Faber's science fiction novel set in Northern Scotland which follows an extraterrestrial that, manifested in a female human form, drives around the countryside picking up male travelers. She seduces and sends them to her home planet. Her experience on Earth is complex and causes tragical consequences. The impact of the film offered an opportunity for the authors to expand their perspectives on different directions. The first part of the article refers to psychoanalytic concepts that are applied to the film, mainly the psychoanalytical conceptualizations about the body and the starting point of mental functioning. In the second part subjective constructions are evoked by the method of free association which is applied to the film recalling the *Marsyas Myth*, the confrontation of *Oedipus* with the *Sphinx*, the work of Anish Kapoor in his modern version of *Flaying Marsyas*. A subjective construction is built. These two ways of reading the film are called applied psychoanalysis. The third part, a perspective derived from the articulation between Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics and Art Criticism serves as a trigger to read the film in its specificity as a cultural object allowing the expansion of psychoanalytic reflection in the interdisciplinary sense. This third way of reading a piece of art is called implicated psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Bodily Ego, Skin-ego, Aesthetics, Applied Psychoanalysis, Implicated Psychoanalysis

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### **1. Introduction**

The aesthetic impact of Jonathan Glazer's film (2014) *Under the Skin* (*Debaixo da Pele*, in Portugal, and *Sob a Pele*, in Brazil), became a trigger for the *reverie* on the bodily theme. Three complementary approaches were taken on the film's artistic narrative, creating a containing skin of innumerable meanings, under which diverse perspectives dialogue.

At first, the multiple and paradoxical interfaces (un)revealed by the film weave a conceptual narrative whose clinical-theoretical dimensions, like a movie script, introduce the film to those who have not seen it. Second, a subjective construction is presented through the process of free association supported by some aspects of culture—myth, painting, sculpture and music—in order to put them into

perspective; in a third moment, we see the aesthetics and art criticism that enables reading and interpreting the film as a cultural object itself, expanding reflection in an interdisciplinary sense.

### **2. The Film as Clinical-theoretical Evocation: A Conceptual Narrative**

Psychoanalytical conceptualizations about the body, evoked by the film, is intertwined with Glazer's cinematic dream narrative, by way of presentation to those who have not seen the movie.

The film portrays a (de)humanized body, wherefrom several pre-symbolic and symbolic psychoanalytic

dimensions emerge. Very clear but simultaneously not saturated reflections are opened on a number of issues: bodily ego as a starting point of mental functioning; skin in its psychic and somatic dimensions, as a bounding membrane and simultaneously as a three-dimensional surface of exchanges and porosities; shared corporality; importance of the maternal body/other body; self-engendering (monadic body) and alterity (dyadic body); interdependence and humanization. Considered by many critics to be *a film d'art*, it does not present us a linear narrative or a coherent story, but rather it positions itself on the unconscious/dream perspective. However, it paradoxically portrays the story of the discovery and attempt to humanize a (desirable, desiring, desired) body.

The body is the backdrop of the entire film, as well as the starting point of mental functioning, the place of the first emotional experiences. And "the skin is the deepest" functioning, as Paul Valéry tells us [17]. The atmosphere is *noire*, dimly lit. The film rhythm is sometimes sinister, with a feeling of bewilderment and suspense. It seems to constitute itself as *a skin*, a borderline between the outside and the inside (affective porosity), in a double movement of veiling/revealing mysteries (aesthetic conflict) to which we are acceding, and trying to find meaning. We are led to feel it in our own skin, in projective identification, and forced to make the effort to understand the enigmatic interior, the *under the skin*. Unsaturated, it confronts us with this mysterious dimension due to rhythms, textures, gestures, and silences, far beyond possible intellectual control. The film presents itself as a sensory and emotional experience between the characters' bodies and our own. Thus, body/sensory language prevails, awakening visceral reactions of fear, awe, horror, terror, and reactions of chills and tremor to the skin. The uncanny [15] simultaneously brings about an aesthetic conflict [31] between the beautiful body of the character starred by Scarlett Johansson and our suspended and misunderstood mind, in negative capacity [7]. Resorting to countertransference, Glazer makes us experience the lack of emotional connection transversal to the inhuman character, weaving small and subtle notes of increasing connection to life, emotion, and humanization. As Glazer stated in an interview, he decided to make a film about an *alien creature* and keep her alien from beginning to end: "She becomes more human in the end, but as alien as in the beginning..."<sup>1</sup> The film places us in that position of facing an alien perspective of the human world while she, an *alien*, tries to reach a humanization perspective.

Is she a cybernetic alien, a serial killer predator, a seductive fatal woman, "an intergalactic sex tourist visiting the Earth like an American could visit Amsterdam or Bangkok?" [36]. She has no name, no home, no relationships, no hunger, no sleeping, no cold or pain, no (re)cognized human suffering or pleasure. She has nothing but a (de)humanized body.

The opening scenario is a planetary system. In this generic and universal location of an infinite space, we see light and celestial bodies gravitating and intertwining in eclipses and

orbits, in a primitive scene that reminds us of Genesis and myths about origin and creation. We hear vocalizations, syllables only, like babies learning a language sensorially experienced by the body and gradually transformed, through the parental language immersion/bath without which we are not constituted as humans. Syllables come together and generate words. And the first word said and repeated, is *feel*, condensing and announcing what will be unfolded in the film.

Above all, we are faced with the question of the complex and mysterious human construction of the *feeling-the-feelings* device to paraphrase Bion. An eye appears on the screen, "since the Greeks, considered the sense par excellence" [38]. The eye is presented in closeup—iris and pupil—as a hole through which information penetrates. And we remain uninformed, suspended in unconnected objects, in proto-mental functioning, where the web of connection and meaning escapes us, in a state of unidimensional mental and non-integration functioning.

Leaving the planetary level, the scene now comes to Earth, where a beam of light from a motorcycle at night draws the winding road in an atmosphere of darkness. And we have no hints yet, in the dark, in negative capacity. The road line marked on the roadway takes us to a city, a road, and a parked van. Everything is borderline, everything is fragmented.

The total body finally appears on a white background. An almost *intrauterine* dimension of birth: two women, one alive, one dead. Scarlett, alive, is dressed in the clothes that strip Scarlett dead. Is one being born, does the other one die? Unidimensional life or continuity of life? Self-engendering or cloning? Was the dead woman an alien who allowed herself to be humanized and died? The questions go on and on, in search of a meaning that permanently eludes us. The dead woman paradoxically sheds a tear, the sacred water of feeling (sadness and joy), of humanity. Is it an evocation of the dead mother [18] inside out, in this (dis)encounter with humans, without a body, with *no-body*?

From the dead body, Scarlett removes an ant and observes it, perplexed, moving between her fingers. Is curiosity installed in the face of the unknown? A radical difference is established, due to the disproportionate dimension between the hugeness of the human body in view of the ant's insignificance. Metaphor of our smallness in face of the mystery of the universe and of life? Is it perhaps a metaphor of the long road to be traveled for us to be humanized?

In a city, lights appear over buildings, maybe proposing the arrival of extraterrestrial civilizations, of the unknown, of the uncanny. Scarlett starts driving a van and enters a shopping mall—the first contact with humans—from which she leaves with a fur coat where she tactfully puts her hand, alluding to the primitive-sensory pulsion of the skin. She observes women in beauty treatment and their skin surface with makeup and creams, reflecting the external investment of a feminine (seductive?) being that she takes possession through a lipstick, more in adhesive identification [4, 5, 30] and mimetics, than in a projection/introjection process of identification-communication and symbolization. Both the van that protects her from more skin-to-skin contact with

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZUvIfXKVVc>, 18 Mar 2014 – Uploaded by Film4.

humans on the city streets, and the fur coat, become a pseudo-skin, a second skin). To humanize ourselves, we need to create, by *reverie*, the early relationship, a psychic skin [2], a container skin of a psychism under construction.

A van, a fur coat and a lipstick began to “dress her” for her forays into the city of Glasgow, where she initially encountered an essentially male crowd, coming out of a football game. The human mass “runs over” the van and she, all by herself, is submerged in “others” that she does not recognize internally. She circulates as a predator, chasing men and making sure they are alone, without a family, giving up seduction when she sees they are accompanied. Is our fundamental loneliness touched here?

The trapped men are taken to a space where a deadly seduction choreography begins. Against an absolute black background (in contrast to the initial white “birth” scene), she walks on her back, stripped naked, and the man follows her, undressing and “dressing” himself with desire. As she emerges to the surface, he is submerged until he disappears in the black liquid. Is he seduced by a mermaid body promising an illusory complementarity? Orgasm inside out, staged anti-relationally in a devouring black web? Is this a punishment for male desire and anguish of expected castration? Hypnotized by a primitive scene, not of life, but of death? Is it a configuration of a flow through the autistic black hole [41, 43].

She moves on and, from a distance, she observes the behavior of people on the street. She reaches a deserted beach where a lonely camper comes out of the sea. The seduction web is interrupted by a rescue emergency. On a near beach, a woman threw herself into the sea to save her dog and her husband throws himself to save her. The swimmer-camper dives and tries to save them. The links in this chain tell us about the emotional intensity of the relationships in the dramatic scene that she watches, undisturbed. The swimmer leaves the sea in vain and, exhausted, falls unconscious. She approaches and kills him by throwing a stone in succession and cruelly at his head, then carrying him to the van.

Meanwhile, we see an 18-month baby, sitting on the beach, crying desperately and alone. This is, without a shadow of doubt, the scene in the film whose invasion of anguish becomes unbearable, due to the alien’s total lack of empathy in view of the baby’s absolute vulnerability. A helpless baby. We think about the vulnerability of the human baby, radically marking the complex issues of dependence—both absolute and relative [45, 47] and the parental loving bond as an unequivocal containing matrix for the development and construction of independence.

Night fell and the baby continues crying desperately on the deserted beach and is again abandoned, in a kind of blindness to the non-self, by the first motorcycle man who arrives to collect the tent and all the camper’s objects, cleaning tracks.

In her *skin-van*, Scarlett stops at a traffic light. We hear a baby cry in the baby seat of the car next to her van. She looks, undisturbed and expressionless, at the baby. Will her look here build the fragile bridge for possible re-cognition? Is there any psychic porosity to affective signs here in *statu nascendi*? Perhaps we could think of proto-permeability, maybe

comparable to uterine hearing experiences. In the film, growing humanization takes place almost imperceptibly, like the fine and subtle changes that occur week-by-week and are witnessed in mother-baby relationship observation [3]. It seems that from now on Scarlett will begin to (dis)organize herself. Feelings do organize/disorganize.

She returns to her predatory activity, daring to get out of the van and is pushed by a group of young women who drag her to a disco. Stunned and frightened, she shows signs of a feeling without representation in the intense melee and skin-to-skin feeling that these environments provide. She ends up dancing with the man she had chased on the street and takes him to his dark side/lake.

Again, a striptease is performed as a macabre-ritualistic dance, but for the first time we have access to what is happening under the lake, what is taking place in this place that is mysterious and inaccessible to the senses [31]. Will she start to come out of the skin surface, to feel, that is, to look inside? We are faced with the hollow, with emptiness. The man floats in a kind of deadly amniotic fluid, hovering like a fetus in a devouring uterus, living up to the *womb-tomb*<sup>2</sup> association. She meets another predated man and touches his hand, as in Michelangelo’s famous fresco in the Sistine Chapel. But this primordial touch, unlike the act of life and Adam’s creation by God, becomes a malignant and deadly touch of Medusa, undoing and disemboweling his viscera, until the skin only, a container without a content, remains. The skin as a boundary between the inside and the outside, as a point of contact with others, is cleaved, separated from all the organs that allow it to feel, process, relate with others. In this cannibalistic plant, the sucked, vampirized interior is then transported on a rolling tray of guts, plunging the viewer into autistic and psychotic anxieties of dismemberment, devouring, fragmentation, emptying [44]. Is it the aim of her relentless hunt to send meat to some starving, deprived planet of another galaxy? Or is her objective to de-flesh and vampirize the man, appropriating his interior to feed a devitalized and almost humanized self?

Getting back to the van, stopped in the traffic. A man in another car is attracted by her beauty and asks the flower seller to offer her a rose. The seller is injured and Scarlett, when picking up the rose, sees blood on her hand. Is a contamination process underway? She suffers a visible impact of curiosity about the flow of life, which she rubs between her fingers trying to reach that unknown man. But she is still far from realizing the possible amorous attempt existing in that rose, let alone the pain of *there is no rose without a thorn* in life.

On the car radio, we hear the news of the disappearance of the couple and the baby on the beach, but she is still deaf to others, to their disappearance. In a movement contrary to that of his characters, Glazer seems to empathize with the suffering of the viewer who is highly impacted—not to say traumatized—by this tragedy held in suspense. Once again, the family echoes in us as a loving matrix that is fundamental to the emergence of the human, trying to save an animal in a hyper-sensitive act, contrasting with the touching testimony of her versus the

2 Shakespeare – Romeo and Juliet, II, iii, 9-10, and James Joyce – Ulysses.

motorcycle man. We approach Bion's L, "which may be more related to "indifference" [29]. Regarding primitive emotional processes, it is confirmed that "one had to postulate the existence of an initial merciless object relationship" [48].

Almost imperceptibly, however, the alien becomes more observant of the vast world around her, as if her feeling-and-thinking apparatus began to reverberate, to resonate, even if in homeopathic doses. Like a song already existing but still inaudible, like waking up from a long coma, or maybe like the newborn on the threshold of the fusional universe with the mother, very gradually leaving the primary illusion [47].

She goes back to the black lake, this time to see the motorcycle man. Who will he be? Her loving mate? A pimp-gigolo who paradoxically protects and vampirizes her with some indefinite purpose for us? A link between the extraterrestrial world and the human world, not allowing humanity to contaminate her? A guardian, not allowing alien women to taste the *apple* of affection-knowledge? He seems to suspect that she has begun to have feelings and inspects her body, as if it were an object. He observes her face and focuses on her iris and pupil... We know about the importance of the gaze [25], an outer umbilical cord that mirrors us, allowing the double connection to *see-and-be-seen*. We are also aware of the importance of the mirror function in the mother's eyes [46], which structures and unifies our subjectivity. Would the alien be infected and contaminated with a possible humanization?

For the first time, she decides to expose herself—*seeing-and-being-seen*—walking through the city streets, stripped of the van/second skin, in a more intimate contact, more hand-in-hand, with others. Expressing human vulnerability, she falls on the street. Several people come to help her, and she experiences compassion, solidarity, in short, the empathy that links libidinal and universally humanized beings. This nearness leads to the rupture of the contact barrier [6] taking her to a whirlwind of unrepresentable lights and noises [8, 9], a sensory confusion whose apparatus she cannot process without *reverie*. The proto-emotional hurricane is experienced, figures-(dis)figures, composing the image of a golden-ethereal-divine woman, like those portrayed by Klimt. In the next scene, her impermeability to feelings is confirmed. She returns to the van, where a man tries to seduce her, contrary to the usual. Attacked by a delinquent gang, she runs away, without fear and without realizing the dangerous situation. And we know how protective fear is.

The next captured man wears a large hood that covers his face. Scarlett does not react to the brutal physical impact of his severe deformation when he gets in the car. She leaves to the viewers the striking aesthetic conflict—his extreme deformation versus her extreme beauty—, feeling uneasy with the disturbing strangeness and strange familiarity. The seduction scene, however, has a different affective quality in this case: the touch. She feels compassion when he tells her he never had a sweetheart or any friends and does his shopping at night because people simply ignore him. Do they ignore his interior because of his deformed looks? Are they as ignorant as her indifference versus his naive confidence? She takes his hands (touch) and makes herself touched by him, who says:

*this is a dream*, and she says *yes, we are dreaming*, transporting us to the dream-like dimension of relationships. To be touched (physically or emotionally) is a dream. And to dream is also to be touched by the unconscious, by our deep black lake, *under our skin*. Does a body whose surface is deformed put us in contact with our interior more directly? In other words, can superficial beauty separate us from the place of true affective encounter?

She takes him to the black lake and here a new element goes almost unnoticed: when entering and leaving, an all-black alien appears as in a flash. Is this man forcibly alienated from his humanity, due to his terrible deformation, or will he begin to see himself alienated from a possible humanization? We are alienated if we remain in the superficial view of a monadic body (self-engendering, *body for one*). We know that it is only through relationship and imagination that we can reach the interior of others, building a dyadic body (alterity, relational body). Is it not the dimension of interiority and intersubjectivity, a primordial strangeness, an alien that has inhabited us since the beginning?

When leaving the black-lake house, he is faced with a mirror—gaze—where he sees his own image [46, 25]. He has an epiphany, an *in-sight*, and is amazed by the discovery of subjectivity, and such beautiful scene ends with a fly trapped against a glass door. Does he realize his imprisonment in a (de)humanized body, an inverted Kafkaesque metamorphosis? When looking at his face in this integrating gaze, we see the *feeling-thinking*, the turning point of the film. And being mirrored (in the face and in the maternal *reverie*) is also the foundation of the construction of psyche and humanization.

By seeing herself as a single person and as a separate person, her first act of compassion and humanity will be to free the deformed man from his black-lake side. This will, however, be recaptured by the motorcycle man in his relentless function of clearing traces, and then he will start searching for her. Has she become weaker in her alienating mission of a body without feelings, starting to experience *being-in-a-body* [28]?

Thrown into uncertainty and strangeness, she plunges into a whirlwind and *goes blank*, in a deep sense of "*I ness*" [41], of unreality, of non-existence. The scene ends in the absolute black of the lake, when she comes out of the black hole, from the meaningless, in claustrophobic, *uni-bi-dimensional mode* [30], to the blank scene, the unknown, the emptiness, the helplessness of the agoraphobic-multidimensional landscape. From here, she leaves the van and the fur coat, abandoning the second skins that had protected her. She leaves the city, opening herself perplexed to contact with others and with mother-nature (countryside) on the threshold of a possible humanization. Has she gone from *looking* human to *wanting to be* human? She, an alien who does not eat, does not sleep, does not feel cold or pain, goes to a restaurant and tries to eat something. Mimetically she tries to *incorporate*, no longer according to the cannibalistic and carnage of the seductive dance of the black liquid, but she attempts to incorporate/introject the food. But she can't swallow the food...

She feels confused. On a bus, now unprotected from the cold, without her fur coat, she reveals that she has not yet built a thermoregulatory system between the outside and the inside

temperature, allowing her a gradual homeostasis. She accepts the help of a man, who realizes her helplessness and confusion. She accepts her dependency. He offers to help her wear her coat. He shelters her, now offering her a relational-fur-coat.

She enters a house for the first time and observes human behavior on a television program. She taps her fingers at the rhythm of the music. Is she beginning to tune into the universal rhythms of early dialogues [26, 19]. In the guest room, she has access to her naked body in a mirror. From the initial and partial gaze of her face, she is now surprised by the recognition of her entire body, a total body.

Meanwhile, four motorcycle men go apart at an intersection, in the four cardinal directions, to map her disappearance, and her host walks with her in the forest. Not as a predatory *bad wolf*; on the contrary, as a caring and protective figure. They visit a ruined castle, the setting of historical ancestral lineages, where for the first time she feels afraid. When they come down from the castle tower, she is to one that follows him and is no longer followed, as it happened in the black lake. What will her story be then? What is her name-identity? Who is she? Where does she come from? What is her mission here?

“The body is considered the place where we find *others*, where the meaning of similarity and difference, of dependence and separation needs to be negotiated” [40]. On the way back from the tour, she allows herself to start a sexual intercourse experience, whose tender (pre-genital) flow she accepts, without being able to continue the sensual (genital) flow, to achieve orgasmic pleasure. Penetration is impossible... She is frightened and investigates her genitals in surprise: what is going on *down there*? What is this unknown about sexuality, that Freud had the courage to discover? And we know that this is the moment of rupture, of disruption in all humanization processes: the construction of a sexuality not instinctively dictated, but full of pulsion, that is, demanding from the psyche the complex task of organizing it, through the relationship with others [14].

Has she perhaps discovered her impenetrability, her lack of interiority? What will there be *under her skin*? Leaving the narcissistic autistic-contiguous relationship [32], and moving towards a more genitalized relationship, requires a long process of mourning and identification.

Frightened, she flees to the forest, where we will witness the eruption of her perverse-polymorphic dimension, disaggregated and fragmented from the pulsion: “the child is a perverse polymorph” [14].

Like *Little Red Riding Hood*, Scarlett finds a lumberjack (not as protective as the man who took her in, not as savior as in the children's story; on the contrary, the incarnation of the *big bad wolf* who seduces her, telling her that she can walk freely because... “*She won't get lost. There are many paths marked for walkers*”). She wanders without direction and he marks her path.

She finds a shelter for walkers and listens carefully to the natural sounds of rain and wind, in a first contact with the manifestations of the natural world. She feels tired, afraid, vulnerable and, therefore, more humanized. She falls asleep for the first time. This micro-death (*Morpheus is Thanatos' brother*)

of restful sleep is allowed against the previous hyper-vigilance and hyper-reality. And she dreams, building the fundamental bridge between two worlds. Connecting the outside and the inside, she creates her own interiority and subjectivity. She dreams in communion with nature. There is a feeling of belonging, being part of mother nature and being able to tune in to a primary fusion-illusion, from which she could then separate and start, through *reverie*, her humanization.

While she sleeps unprotected, the woodcutter appears and the alien, having been previously a predator, now becomes the prey. Previously a stalker, now she is chased. She flees and hides in terror. She feels fully but also feels the nameless terror of helplessness and loneliness only. A victim of the pulsion not genitally organized, polymorphous and partial sexuality is staged here. In the antipodes of the seductive subtlety of the death ritual choreographed *in black* where they did not even touch each other, the raw and cruel physical struggle of a violation highlights the pulsion violence and her feminine vulnerability. And it also points to a nascent subjectivity because she *does not want*, she *does not desire*, and her *negative* side is one of the first three signs of subjectivity [39]. She does not want what others want. She seems to reach the roots of a desiring, desirable, and desired body [28].

In this fight, he gets a piece of her skin in his hand and runs away in horror. The skin ego [2] is torn apart, denouncing the lack of cohesion of its infra-human functioning. It starts snowing. She then undresses her humanoid skin, her second skin, a pseudo-container, as the border membrane of her true self: an *alien self*. A somatic, rather than psychic, skin. A membrane rather than a psychic envelope [22]. The *black* alien finally undresses the *white* human face and with it in her hands, she looks at her human face. Is there a possibility of a humanized look inside out? Her eyes blink and this subtle but syncopated opening and closing of eyes, like the teardrop of the body's farewell in the beginning reminds us of life-death.

The woodcutter reappears and throws fuel at her, setting her on fire. This confirms the unbearable of the unknown, the difference, the uncanny, the other. Is it necessary to destroy the “uncanny self” [1], the *alien* that inhabits us? The skin, via humanization, is the first part to be destroyed by fire. Is it punishment for an embryonic interiority and incipient humanity? The *alien*, a living torch, falls in the snow. *Black* smoke is released from a burning body against the *white* sky from which snowflakes fall. At the top of a mountain, the motorcycle man reappears...

The film therefore seems to intertwine the discovery of humanization through feeling, that is, the construction of a device to *think thoughts* [6], only possible through a device to *feel feelings*.

Feeling (body) and thinking (mind) are indelibly interconnected. The (de)humanized body and the related proton acting out primary and violent unconscious fantasies, are faced in a mirror with the image of their own face, then evolving into the first exchanges. These approaches, not being able to be represented, expose the continual failure of an interiority to be built that is only enabled through reverie.

The body is the *via regia* of humanizing affections.

Embodied in a self-skin, container of emotionality and self, “it is the living testimony of our interdependence, that we cannot give birth to ourselves” [27].

### 3. The Film as a Subjective Construction: a Free Association Reading

Jonathan Glazer has worked on this film for nine years, building a thesis based on Michel Faber’s book.

From *dark space to light*. Like an eye that opens, the beginning of life. Human voice noises suggest the journey of birth, the origin of fantasy life. Mica Levi’s unsettling music introduces us to the path of mystery. Probably within the mystery, the alien can remember the Sphinx [37] that proposes riddles such as “*decipher me or I will devour you*” or maybe the opposite, *devour me or I will decipher you*. In Oedipus’ confrontation with the Sphinx, the hero faces this monster, a crossroads.



**Figure 1.** Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1878), oil on canvas, 189 x 144 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.

A complex world often without an answer or explanation. As a work of abstract concepts, it provokes what is most profound in us. The idea of mystery goes back to secrets, to undisclosed paths, such as the coming of this alien to our world, which is not explained to us, and which does not say for what purpose, but which is there, it exists. Like the human soul, full of secrets so often misunderstood by us. The viewer is taken by curiosity and by the mystery that is involved in this creative piece of work. It mobilizes us and transports us into the unknown: it crosses our body, skin, and mind.

We can think of situations that refer to *skin*. *Wolf in lamb skin*. It reminds us of the idea of one who disguises himself under a skin that does not correspond to what he really is. A skin worn as a *mask*. A skin that is built as a portal that keeps all mysteries. Emotions running high like a *flower/emotion under the skin*. An expression that puts the skin as the first manner to feel. The skin shivers when we have sensations. A *flower* because it is like feelings inside us that spring up. As if the skin were fertile soil to materialize feelings. *The second skin* as a protective cover. Something that protects the skin. In this sense, *under the skin* is like something protected that is

not shown. *Feeling on your own skin*. To feel in the skin is to experience. The skin is then what protects the being and what makes him communicate with the outside world. Thus, the skin is a rich means that leads us to live in the world.

When starting to ride in the van, the alien begins her terrestrial journey in Scotland. A profound strangeness is perceived in view of the new: *shopping, lipstick, mirror*. She becomes more beautiful and attractive when trying to be part of the human world.

The *alien* starts her search, like all humans who go through life looking for answers. From the inner world to the outer world. The skin: the bridge between self and the outside world. The limit.

She looks for a way to get in touch with lonely people. That contact fulfills her needs.

The *alien*, in her natural human environment, moves to the penetrating sound of the symphony, of different calibers and functions, by Mica Levi. The strings give a rhythm and symbolic meaning to the heartbeat and arouse concerns from beginning to end in the filming setting. And the soundtrack slowly wraps around every space in our mind and body. Gloomy, but in tune with the rhythm and melody of the scenes in the movie.

She drives her first prey to the place where she voraciously *kills* her hunger and engulfs him, leaving only his skin. An envelope, a container without a content. She takes the human into herself, appropriating it. Thus, the entire human universe wins. And by putting on that skin, she reaches the bridge between the inside and the outside.

The alien continues her search.

This is what is evoked by the mud of blood left by the shredder where only the skin, an envelope with no content, remains. Which reminds us of the memory of the dark river where bodies are transformed and processed into a *delicacy*, leaving only the skin as if it were a packing to be discarded.

Then, we recall the painting *Flaying of Marsyas* [23], by Titian, who dared to challenge God Apollo in a musical competition.

That visceral cruelty of the *Marsyas Myth* constitutes an unsolved psychoanalytical enigma, but provides elements that make us think that there can be no human subjectivity without the *cutting out* that demarcates the border between the non-human that separates the mind from the body. The *Marsyas Flaying* myth may be the result of Apollo’s envy [24] towards *Marsyas*. Repentant, Apollo pays homage to *Marsyas* by making a river to give birth from his blood.

Mica Levi’s most subtle strings touch us. The strings play in the outside world and reverberate inside us. The strings touch us... In contrast, the insensitivity of the alien also touches us. This generates discomfort. And on her journey, the alien experiences human sensations: she bleeds, she watches the news. In this state, perhaps borderline, she is followed by the look of the motorcycle man who seems to blame her for being curious about human diversity.

The motorcycle man, another type of *alien*, follows her footsteps. He observes. He can be the viewer who is challenged to experience discomfort and obscurity. Nothing is



obvious. Just a few dialogues. Reality and fiction mix. Cameras capture humans in their daily lives. Mystery involves the viewer and the film characters, who do not know what their mission on Earth is, and what is the reason why they are here. They are unable to understand their own worlds.

A situation mixed with the human experience of threat. Seduction does not always work. It depends on the condition of the individual, perhaps here comes a doubt. She falls on the street. Is this the human frailty aspect? Does she feel weak and hungry?

The images are followed by our eyes... Can the movement of eye opening and closing suggest the image of life/death always pulsating?

It is a transforming moment when she seeks her prey and is faced with a deformed man, a stranger who has never had any loving experience with a woman. A question arises: who is the *alien*? The music becomes more intense and she seduces him to devour him afterwards.

A prey that seems to mobilize her.

We wonder if he—a pure being, almost a child—did not meet the requirements of the woman/machine; or maybe his tenderness makes him escape. Perhaps his simple and true manners touch her.

Uncanny.

What is uncanny?

The uncanny resembles what is frightening, what causes fear and horror, certainly.

A stranger on the bus offers help and invites her to his home. She is faced with the daily routine of human life: TV, radio, music... When she finds herself alone in a bedroom, she does not know what it is like to lie down or what it is like to sleep... She closes the door and discovers the mirror.

She strips naked and is perplexed by the figure reflected in the mirror. Who's there?



**Figure 2.** Tiziano Vecelli / Titian (1490-1576), the Flaying of Marsyas (1570-1576), oil on canvas, 212 x 207cm, National Museum in Kroměříž, Czech Republic.

Does she touch herself as if wanting to recognize herself? An instigating attitude. Another trace of the alien's humanization path.

In the touch, in the approximation, the curiosity about others is aroused.

For the first time she feels warmth, coziness, and perceives that sex can mean death! She does not understand that she cannot be penetrated. Voracity comes to eliminate the other with her mouth. By devouring him. In her alien system, she does not know those fantasies of allowing herself to be devoured without death.

Frightened, she goes out into the forest in search of answers, staggers, suffers cold in her humanized skin: she seeks shelter. Emotions and pain, perhaps loss of the arrogance of the pleasure of being nourished by others.

Now that she is alone and helpless, she is chased by the mountain guard, voraciously chasing her to make her his prey. The man is predatory. The situation begins to change, from victimizer to victim and from observer to observed. She becomes vulnerable and begins to demonstrate humanized traits. As she gradually gains human traits and becomes weaker. She is now aware of her limits and impossibilities.

Our *alien* in raw flesh, her delicate and fragile skin...

In this climate of terror and fear, her eyes express panic. Without skin, her fragility appears. She is undressed!

Enraged, the man returns and sets the *alien* on fire.

The human is scary.

Skinned... cheated on this alien-to-human crossing?

Ester Bick [4] suggests a non-integrated internal state that leads to terrifying anxieties, which generates a frantic search for an object, a light, a smoke that can integrate what is not integrated momentarily.

This takes us back to the work of Anish Kapoor (anishkapoor.com/) in his modern version of *Flaying of Marsyas*, in which the artist comments that his art piece permeates the physical and the psychological aspects.

He works with polarities such as presence/absence; to be/not to be, being/not being; occupying/not occupying.

That sculpture premiered in *Tate Modern* in 2002. It is a 155-m long, 23-m wide and 35-m high piece. His piece of art at *Turbine Hall* surprised by its gigantic dimensions. Made of fiberglass, steel, and plastic, *Marsyas* can be described as an acoustic sculpture. A magnificent and long-lasting piece of art!



**Figure 3.** Anish Kapoor, Marsyas (2002), sculpture in PVC and steel, 475 x 282 cm, Tate Modern Gallery, London. Photo by John Riddy. ©Anish Kapoor, 2017.

Kapoor's sculpture dismantles concepts not only of space, but also of time.

Food for thought!

What remains is smoke...

Was the smoke the Unattainable?

The Intangible?

The *alien* in all humans.

A hard task...



Figure 4. Anish Kapoor, *Marsyas* (2002).

#### 4. The Film as an Aesthetic Object: a Perspective Implicated in Art

Considering the rules of the genre, *Under the Skin* is a science-fiction film. There are scary *aliens* and swamps, but the scenes do not take place in the outer space, there is no combat with scary-looking beings, there are no monsters. The story is developed in Scotland today, with ordinary people in everyday scenes, except for the presence of an unnamed *alien*, who runs through the entire movie seducing men and killing them in the same way, in a bizarre way.

Director Jonathan Glazer, responsible for other unusual plots like the one of *Reincarnation* (*Sexy Beast*, 2000), has a taste for artistic strangeness. And this is a rare science-fiction film, combining art films from major festivals – after all it was selected in Venice and London – with a typical theme of trash productions, for associating *aliens* with explicit and admittedly free eroticism.

Any interpretation of this film, however, even psychoanalytic interpretation, seems to be mere speculation, because the images and the plot are so open and so close to the random, that practically any reading is allowed and is equivalent to a relativism that makes all readings pure nonsense like the film, in the words of Glazer in an interview. This voluntarily strange project deserves to be seen for the unique experience it represents, but, as critics pointed out, it failed both in the commercial circuit, for being too atypical, and in the art circuit, due to the vulgarly trash theme.

The search for love may be the greatest of horrors [20, 21] – this may be one of the suggestions of *Under the Skin* (2014), director Jonathan Glazer's first film after ten years of the last one he made (*Birth*, 2004). As an adaptation of the eponymous novel

by Michel Faber, which Glazer read only once before adapting it to the cinema, the film can be seen as a mixture of Michelangelo Antonioni (*The Night*) with Richard Benjamin (*My fiancé is an extraterrestrial*). What *Under the Skin* brings to this subgenre, the drama of incommunicability, is a typically British sense of horror, a tradition that goes back to Nicolas Roeg (*Bloody Winter in Venice*, 1973; *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, 1976) to Ben Wheatley's recent films (*Sightseers*, 2011; *Down Terrace*, 2009).

Glazer uses the inland and coast of Great Britain as a horror setting, which is attractive because of its vastness – and in *Under the Skin* it is explored by car, across the road, under mists that make the whole horizon more infinite – but that, in such vastness, implies isolation. The *Under the Skin* scene in which a woman at sea is caught in the sea current and cannot swim back to the beach epitomizes this drama, that is, the desire to seek the horizon but being unable to do it.

Jonathan Glazer, recognized for his vast curriculum in music videos and advertising spots, addresses Michel Faber's homonymous story in a markedly distinctive style, with an enigmatic visual in which our world, through the eyes of an *alien* entity, is gray and melancholic, distant from the social organization that characterizes human beings. In this apparent social disorganization, the predator/alien starred by Scarlett Johansson captures her prey relatively easily, with nothing in the human organization to protect or realize the lack of one of its members.

Jonathan Glazer reverses the trend of ordinary narratives and makes his storyline as expository as possible. The dialogues are few and poor—the ones that happen are merely circumstantial—and the story, as in a videoclip, advances visually, to the sound of Mica Levi's bewildering and suggestive music. The spectator is forced to interpret, to make sense of each scene, of each event, at the risk of losing the storyline and understanding nothing. Jonathan Glazer relies heavily on the intelligence of his audience; his bet works, but the line he follows is thin and winding, and the narrative is lost when the visual suggestion loses quality in the second half of the film. That moment occurs at the time when the alien seems to be pitiful and approaches the human condition. In that moment of compassion, the alien refrains from her coldness as she seems to recognize an element of human organization that feels as extraterrestrial/alien in the world as she does and begins to have feelings and concerns. Unfortunately, Glazer is unable to give the same aesthetic and sensory treatment to this more delicate part of the narrative.

Most of the characters' performance is conducted by non-actors, i.e. ordinary people; in most scenes, actress Scarlett Johansson starred with men she approached in the streets, in conversations not planned in the script, filmed with hidden cameras, in a kind of reality show, pleasing the taste of the new generation of Tate Gallery's British artists, such as Gillian Wearing [10].

In an interview, Glazer states that men, after a first conversation, were asked how far they could go in the continuation of the scene; they were asked about the limits of their personal possibilities, considering that they were aware of what they were doing [33-35].



Motorcycle racing champion Jeremy McWilliams was invited to do the scenes in which a motorcycle man runs down winding roads in bad weather. The owner of the inn that was rented to make the film was invited to represent himself; and the disfigured man was also hired with the support of an assistance institution, since the director did not want to use prostheses. In this case, Adam Pearson, who has neurofibromatosis and had worked on some television programs, was chosen.

In a nutshell, this brief discussion about the film allows us to show that the film is much more than what you see and serves to support the thesis that psychoanalysis applied to art only finds its purpose at the end of its application, that is, the psychoanalytic theories on which the interpreter was based. What needs to be considered to escape this vicious circle is that a work of art cannot be treated as a dream, as a subjective production, to be interpreted by the theories applicable to it, considering that it has a creative path, a poetics, which necessarily permeates the culture in which it is rooted. In this sense, it is the psychoanalyst who is interpreted by the work of art and not the other way round, because before the work it is the interpreter who associates and exposes himself. This way of reading the pieces of art is what we call “implicated psychoanalysis” [11], that is, it is not a pre-established model that adjusts the object to its theoretical-conceptual requirements; on the contrary, it respects the singularity of the works of art and constructs interpretations for them, in their just measure [12]. In this sense, just as the psychoanalytic listening allows the free course of the patient's associations, it is characteristic of the implicated psychoanalysis to work with the singular manifestation of the object in the relationship with the interpreter-spectator... a unique discursive construction, valid for the pair in question, that is, patient and analyst (work of art and spectator) whose subjectivities are involved in the work of interpretation. [13].

In the case of Jonathan Glazer's film, *any association is possible*, because the film is placed as a kind of visual trap for the interpreter to project whatever comes to mind. And this seems to have been the director's idea—to propose the film as a playful object in which, like the men seduced by the *alien* and swallowed up in a dark and gelatinous substance—the *film* of the movie?—the viewer is drawn into it, entangling himself with his own imagination without being able to leave it. *Under the Skin* is thus a beautiful metaphor for what goes on in the film's relation with the viewer that exposes for himself, and possibly for others, what goes on inside, *under his skin*, when seduced by *nonsense*.

## 5. Conclusions

The film *Under the Skin* provided an excellent opportunity to discuss some ways of reading a cultural object. In this sense, the three different approaches that are presented in this article express different ideas about the same object: the importance of *reverie* to create a bodily perspective; the body as *a via regia* for humanizing affections; the project of its director realized in the structure of the film as vehicle that transport us

to the unknown. Several points related to the film are presented, corresponding to the three different ways of approaching the film: 1) the film as an object that illustrates the psychoanalytical concepts applied to it; 2) the film as an imaginary object that evokes the subjective associations of the interpreter through the application of the free association method and 3) the film as a cultural object whose artistic specificity is interpreted in the light of the articulations between psychoanalysis, aesthetics and art criticism, in view of the apprehension of its psycho-aesthetic uniqueness. The first two ways of reading the film correspond to the so-called “psychoanalysis applied to culture.” And the third way accomplishes what is called “psychoanalysis implicated in art”.

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