

Under the Skin

Frictionless Alien



Motivation

The starting point for the video essay was a traditional academic conference paper. Here, I was required to present my readings of a film related to the conference theme, and to do so in about 15 minutes. It is one of the many minor absurdities of academic conferences that a group of people who spend the vast majority of their speaking (teaching) time parsed into 50-minute segments are now required to condense their thoughts into a 10-15-minute presentation alongside an appropriate PowerPoint. Needless to say, most, in my opinion, do not do a particularly good job, and, to be clear, I include myself in that group for the majority of my career. So, I wanted to go beyond the familiar writing-up phase of a conference paper and produce something that was closer to the essence of film as opposed to writing. What I had to begin with was Jonathan Glazer's film, *Under the Skin*, a highly edited paper, and a short PowerPoint.

Process

In general, academia teaches you to add ideas to your argument, however it is presented. Add supporting data, add supporting references, add authoritative citations, add, add, add... Before, paradoxically, you begin to edit and cut, summarize, footnote and so on. The aim is to produce a well-evidenced and coherent text that is not impenetrable due to over referencing, yet, shows the outline of its foundations of scholarship it is built upon. Such an approach cannot be simply transferred to a video essay. One approach that is familiar, is to add a voice-over to an edited stream of images as a way to replicate something

of the discursivity of writing. So, I started with that and recorded myself reading the paper in a voice-over style with the aim of supplementing this with selected visuals. After a considerable number of attempts at finding a way to do this I decided quite firmly that this was not what I wanted from the film. I am not commenting upon anyone else's productions but for me it came down to the principle of articulating the ideas fundamentally cinematically rather than textually, a version of 'show-don't tell'. However, given that this is an essay and not a cinematic narrative it did need something of a conceptual framework for the viewer to engage intellectually. Hence, my use of quotation that appears throughout the film. In essence, my motivation was a Bressonian 'less is more' principle, with the aim to cut everything beyond the film clips themselves. To paraphrase Deleuze, you don't start with a blank canvas, rather, you start with canvas overflowing with cliché, text, representation, communication. Creative work is clearing away all of this stuff, a laborious process.

The Essay

The video essay is an examination of how Glazer uses the motif of friction and the frictionless in relation to the alien character, as played by Scarlet Johansson. There is no suggestion that Glazer approaches the film with any specific reference to this, it is more a symptomatic reading of the film more than anything else. My angle was to consider how the advent of the CD signalled a shift in culture away from the analogue-friction to the digital-frictionless. The four thinkers whose words I make use of are cultural philosophers who, through their work, have sought to map out the points at which such changes are perceptible. The video essay uses primarily clips from the film itself with two video inserts sourced from google searches using key terms, two still images, and some sound effects from the BBC online library. The editing was done through Premiere Pro.

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