

Under the Skin Frictionless Alien



Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film, *Under the Skin*, is a quite remarkable film, dense in detail and uncanny imagery that is still unsettling today. It is the primary subject of the video essay *Under the Skin: Frictionless Alien*. Arguably, Glazer's film is a work that gets close to what could be called 'film-thinking', pushing the boundaries of what this artform can do whilst never resolving into a singular stylistic trope. As an example of a cinematic sensory encounter, an attempt to show rather than describe the experience of being in a body, an embodiment, it links us to an-other

reality, one that can potentially activate new thoughts. There is a clear sense that the range of images and techniques used in the film emerge from the long, ten-year process of development that Glazer undertook before deploying them as a precise expression of an idea. Indeed, as you approach the limits of the possibilities of the cinematic image things necessarily begin to break down, become confusing, unclear, perplexing. No doubt it is easy at that point to judge, to say how it fails. Yet, I would argue that a 'failure' of this quality in cinema is superior to many films that 'work', as in being recognizable, coherent, resolved.



What, then, is the idea that sparks the experimental process we see on screen?

For Glazer after that period of incubation and distillation from a source novel: to film via the detached perception of the alien. An alien transported to earth to be clothed in the skin of a human victim and who can then pass. A character played by Scarlett Johansson, the archetypal Hollywood, A-List, Star. Then, in sharp contrast, shooting predominantly in the Scottish working-class city of Glasgow. The alien is never named but her job, and it is work for her, is to locate and seduce single, unattached men whom she can eventually process into a kind of meat glop, presumably a delicacy, for transportation back to the home planet.



Many today believe that alien visitation is simply a fact. Yet, if they are already here, one can ask: when did they arrive? Perhaps it was in 1982 when we began the

wholesale shift from analogue to digital in consumer culture. The peril inherent in the notion of the alien among us is not just that they can pass as human but that the ontological essence of the human is jeopardized. We are forced to ask ‘what makes us who we are?’ The anxiety is that if they do come, we will be seduced. But we have already been seduced. By the digital, by the device, by speed. Seduced and bewitched as the doomed men in *Under the Skin*. Bewitched as affected by or as if by witchcraft or magic. Marx talks of fetishism as a kind of magic quality endowed with a will and soul of its own. Beauty, it is no revelation to say, is fetishized, yet today it is the smooth that has become the singular most defining quality that is considered desirable.

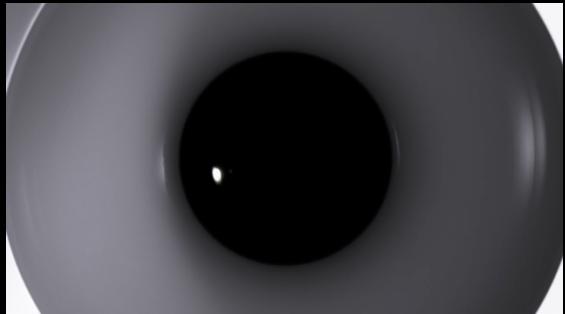


Fred Moten observes that to work today we are asked to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction. Friction is the force generated when different surfaces come into contact. Without friction there is no walking, driving, or writing. It is caused by microscopic imperfections and irregularities on the surface of objects that get entangled as they touch. It seems that entanglement is a problem for the alien-digital. Human speech itself is a result of friction, something the alien in the film has to learn. Once assembled, she immerses herself in human culture before taking the wheel of her seduction-abduction machine. From here on, it is the male victims who are ultimately immersed in the alien viscous fluid that processes them.



Smoothness has become the central motif of digital capitalism and if this is taken to its extreme it becomes devoid of any human qualities. These qualities are a hindrance, they interrupt, slow down, interfere with the smooth functioning of capital and its dream of unmediated exchange. Byung-Chul Han pointedly articulates the shift to the smooth and the digital as seeking to dispense with any notion of the other or alien that disrupts its mirrored surface. Yet it is precisely a trip, a catching of her foot, that begins an unravelling of this mission. Now passers-by hands reach out to help her to stand and they brush against the fur of her coat, just as she felt the textures of the clothing that would disguise her. This leads to an encounter with a human subject, a male, who very definitely cannot pass, who hides and walks only in shadows at night. It is her invitation for him to touch her face that triggers a switch in her role. The anthropologist Anna Tsing titles her book ‘Friction’ and describes certain sites of interconnection inherent to globalisation as places that can generate culture, where this is defined as awkward points of

friction. Glazer designs this scene precisely as one of awkward exchange.



The video-essay sought, then, not to somehow extract an idea hidden within the work but to consider it as a starting point for something else, to respond to it as an atmosphere for thought, as one commentator describes this particular way of engaging with cinema. In this way, the video-essay works with the film to build another line of thinking, around the concept of friction, as described above. Rather than a tracing of the film, it is a reconfiguration of certain scenes, with the addition of some found-video inserts and textual references that map this line of reflection. A folding in of the alien and an unfolding of the human.



Under the Skin, Jonathan Glazer, Film4, 2013.

Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, Continuum, 2008 (1985)

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative*, Zero Books, 2009

Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, Polity, 2018

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press, 2005

Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Autonomedia, 2013