

AN EYE FOR AN EYE: THE FEMALE GAZE IN ACTION IN JONATHAN GLAZER'S UNDER THE SKIN

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Abstract

This research paper conducts an inquiry into an alternate narrative of female gaze in the Jonathan Glazer film Under the Skin (2014) through an alien-woman protagonist whose alienness puts patriarchal and gender binary concepts into perspective. The study investigates the heroine's alien ontological status which equips her with aggressive sexual agency arising from her hybrid and liminal identity. The analysis utilizes Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, Mary Anne Doane's concept of the femme fatale, Lee Edelman's analysis of reproductive futurism and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze/female gaze to shed light on the pervasive masculine, heterosexual gaze and its many ramifications in cinema. The film represents an inversion of the cinematic construct of the omnipresent male gaze in action by replacing it with the female gaze and the threat it poses to hegemonic patriarchy.

Keywords: female gaze, male gaze, abject, femme fatale

INTRODUCTION

The way we gauge the world through the collective speculum of a patriarchally stratified society has been sculpted from an insidious sexual imbalance that has conditioned the visual gaze in cinema to be overwhelmingly male. Not surprisingly, this has created a permanent fissure in the historical representation of women's experiences and realities on celluloid. The deep-seated pleasure of looking or in other words, scopophilia invoked in traditional cinema is a key concept defined by film scholar and theorist Laura Mulvey in her iconic 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She elaborates on the notion of the male gaze as a mode of viewing that privileges men over women, where the woman is primarily utilized as a tool of visual consumption and treated as a by-product of heterosexual male desire. The woman is compulsorily a "spectacle" with aesthetic value and the man is necessarily the "bearer of the look" with women's authentic experiences taking a backseat over their sexualization and objectification. Decades of naturalizing the male gaze in music videos, television shows, films, internet, and other forms of media have conditioned society to accept the male gaze as the default mode of perception. This paper is an attempt to place the female gaze as a response to the male gaze and deconstruct the female gaze as a subversive strategy against the masculine and heterosexual gaze. I seek to evaluate an alternate narrative of female gaze in the film Under the Skin through the alien-woman protagonist whose alienness puts patriarchal and gender binary concepts in prospect.

Under the Skin (2014) is a science fiction horror film directed by Johnathan Glazer based on Michael Faber's novel of the same name. The Scottish Highlands with perennial overcast shadows and misty hills sets the grim tone for the story that unfolds. The eerie geographical setting is a befitting choice, as the terrain is as mysterious and gloomy as the narrative. The alien protagonist slash serial predator is an anomalous black-hued life form from another planet, who along with her solitary motorbiking associate, is on a mission to harvest human flesh presumably to be used for their extra-terrestrial agenda of passing as humans. The alien female life form, brilliantly played by Scarlett Johansson, is disguised in an unknown woman's body whose identity is not revealed. The heroine's abduction plan consists of cruising the crowded streets of Glasgow in her van, scouring through unwitting male strollers who belong to diverse age groups and sizes, mostly glued to their cell phones. She lures the clueless men by initiating small talk and inviting them in the shady van using her seductiveness and physical attractiveness. The nameless protagonist usually leads with the line, "Do you think I am pretty?" which flatters the victims but also catches them by surprise. After a few unsuccessful attempts, she manages to pick up men and takes them to a dilapidated house where the men begin undressing while gradually stepping into a vicious black liquid abyss that swallows them and finally eviscerates their bodies.

THE HYBRID HEROINE

The unnamed heroine is a hybrid creature; an alien taking upon a female human form. The strange black alien mass is the product of a merger of a human carcass with an alien form which is echoed in Mary Ann Doane's words. The enigma of the nameless hybrid heroine is contained in the following words of Doane:

"Her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbours a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable... transforming the threat of the woman into secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered. (1)

An amalgamation of animal and the corporeal, the heroine is as alluring as she is powerful in a suspense filled, horror set up that ultimately defines her as monstrous. Her unabashed routine drill of hunting down men is reminiscent of tigers hunting in a jungle, wandering around and smelling the fear of her victims. The consequent liminal and hybrid subjectivity results in the synthesis of the known and the unknown aspects of her mysterious identity. The transitory nature of her corporeality enables her to exist in a liminal space, occupying an in-between identity where transgressive couplings are left to the imagination. The sensory experience of the erotic, murderous theatrics transpires in this in-between space where terror and lust serenade each other. This mode of subjectivity is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject which is described as a state of liminality located between two peripheral positions resulting in category breakdowns between human and non-human, raising alarms for the status quo of one's "corporeal reality". The heroine's puzzling corporeality creates a cognitive dissonance by placing the alien form within a female body which is desirable to the male, heterosexual eye yet turns into a source of anxiety for the male identity.

THE ALIEN (FEMALE) GAZE

The story unfolds through an alienesque lens, forcing the audience to adopt an outsider's viewpoint that attempts to capture alien consciousness in its narrative. Very few films have been courageous to portray alien subjectivity but *Under the Skin* provides a brilliant rendition as it ingeniously enmeshes the alienesque with the feminine experience. The film narrative unfolds through the gaze of an alien observer which results in a thrilling and occasionally terrifying cross examination of human society. It can be argued it is the heroine's alien ontological status that equips her with the agency to act with absolute sexual aggression. A biological woman is incapable of exercising such freedom, partially due to the social conditioning she is subjected to from a young age, and partially due to the threat of violence lurking behind such behaviour. It is therefore not farfetched to conclude that the only scenario in which a woman might fathom getting away with being sexually brazen, is if she were a literal alien (Osterweil 47). The transformation of the heroine from an emotionless, cold killing machine, unafraid of retribution to an alien who comes to terms with her corporeal humanity and femininity, reveals the underlying message of the world we inhabit.

In the first half of the film, she moves like a swift predator, fearing no consequences, exercising her victimizing tactics and employs the female gaze unabashedly. However, her transformation meets an abrupt end when she begins empathizing with her victims and develops a connection with her material body, allowing the fatalistic male gaze to take control of her narrative. The more she begins connecting with her humanity and empathizing with her victims, the more she becomes vulnerable due to her status as a woman.

The Economist observed "there is some aggressive sexuality in the film: women seem very vulnerable but then men's desires are punished" ("*Under her Skin*"). Critic Leo Robson for *The Guardian* added, "In the society she enters, and to which she brings nothing besides a body, [she] is a sex object, in dress and demeanour a kind of sex toy; she might have come to Earth to prove a point about male expectations of women . . . If *Under the Skin* communicates any gender-politics message, it does so through the disparity in excitement between the male characters' reaction to [Johansson] and that of the camera." ("*Scarlett Johansson in Under the Skin: 'prick her and she doesn't bleed*").

The nameless heroine fits the femme fatale trope as she uses her sexuality and allure to destabilize gender relations and potentially threaten the human species. She subverts the sexual power dynamic by gaining control over male desire. The camera frequently lingers on her bright coral lips through the van's rearview mirror which is an interesting directorial choice. The sexual connotation of the coral lips makes her eligible for the role of a fetish object, inviting the unassuming men to fall for her physical allure, including her voluminous hair, pouty lips and strategically angled breasts. The heroine leads the men into a black lagoon of nothingness and watches their bodies disintegrate, carrying out a literal extinction of men.

She utilizes a crummy white van to pick up men, which is an interesting move as it subverts the 'sketchy white van' cliché, notoriously used to commit crimes against women. *Under the Skin*'s premise "creates a reverse of contemporary rape culture where violence against women is so common that women are casually warned to be ever alert for those who might harm them . . . By and large men don't worry about their safety in the same way when walking home late at night. But in the world of *Under the Skin*, they absolutely should" (Puchko, "*Scarlett Johansson's Under The Skin Has A Special Message For Men*").

She peruses the streets looking for the perfect victims, employing the female gaze in the role of the infamous voyeur looking through the windshield glass. The ubiquitous male gaze through which women are constantly subjected to, is subverted by the nameless heroine's purpose of looking at men as objects for pleasure. She zeroes down on her victims who are alone on the streets and pulls her van closer to the curb to ask for directions. This becomes her go to conversation-starter as she projects the image of the helpless damsel in distress in front of the male, to create the illusion of control. Theorist Barbara Creed's theory of the femme castrice is embodied in the protagonist who "arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion [in men]" (Chaudhari 102).

Screenwriter Walter Campbell refers to this as a "sexual trance" wherein "they are transported and their imagination is leading them on, and they are betrayed by their own instincts." Her agency and uninhibited disposition in selecting her sexual partners lead the men to fall into the seduction trap. The male gaze is clearly subverted through her operational strategy as she uses her sexuality to entrap men which has been historically used as a tool to suppress women. The male gaze has notoriously consumed the woman as a cultural sexual object but the protagonist uses her female gaze to literally consume the male victims she traps.

Literary scholar Ara Osterweil explores the heroine's experience of being an openly sexual woman wandering freely in the world, with no repercussions; a privilege that is not available to women without facing castigation or violence. However, the only way the heroine's sexual prowling comes to be justified is due to her alien status. The brazenness with which she flirts and propositions the men is met with a shock, both by the male victims and the audience simultaneously. Amidst a backdrop of traditional cinematic male gaze, the representation of the female gaze is a rarified phenomenon which makes the protagonist the ambassador for a unique feminist perspective. Not of the earth and without Edenic origins, the female alien is absolved of pathos or morality which qualifies her to immerse herself in games of desire without the slightest semblance of shame or morality. As Ara Osterweil notes, "how strange to experience the female gaze saturated with desire but unencumbered by care" (47).

The movie seems to substantiate the message that a woman must be a literal alien or an otherworldly being to be liberated from sexual codes of patriarchy. Film critic Leo Robson pointedly notes that Johansson's character is "both a watcher and predator of men. In the society she enters, and to which she brings nothing besides a body, [she] is a sex object, in dress and demeanour a kind of sex toy; she might have come to Earth to prove a point about male expectations of women . . . If *Under the Skin* communicates any gender-politics message, it does so through the disparity in excitement between the male characters' reaction to [Johansson] and that of the camera." ("Scarlett Johansson in *Under the Skin*: 'prick her and she doesn't bleed").

A significant scene valuable to the conversation surrounding gaze is one when the heroine undresses herself later. What lies 'under the skin' is not highlighted from a voyeuristic perspective and questions of her gender, identity and sexuality remain a mystery abruptly ending at the borrowed human skinsuit she dons. The male gaze is guilty of placing even the most complex female protagonists with motivations in scenarios that aid passive masculine gaze. However, undressing takes a peculiar turn in *Under the Skin*, when the heroine is taken in by the only hospitable man in the film. This gives her an opportunity to inspect her nude body up close in a full-length mirror. As she explores the nuances of her female body for the first time, she experiences acute awareness of her human identity as well as female identity. Scarlett Johansson, the voluptuous Hollywood star known for her husky voice and oozing sexuality, is shown completely naked in the scene; a scene which has the potential to trigger craze and furore among fans, but interestingly found no acknowledgement in mainstream media (Gittell, "Scarlett Johansson's Vanishing Act"). The voyeuristic aspect of the scene is removed as the alien woman delivers a performance where she is devoid of any personality thus, taking the sexual component out of the scene. The cameras do not resort to sneaky angles or strategically positioned nude scenes. Johansson makes the autonomy over her body quite clear by dominating the screen that communicates her command over her body to the audience. The male gaze is averted as the nude scene barely registers a sexual undertone. The montage represents an inversion of the cinematic construct of the omnipresent male gaze in action, disrupted and inverted by the very object it seeks to objectify.

The cinematography and sound direction of the killing scenes lend a poetically haunting effect to the unfolding of events in the strange black room. The men walk towards an abyss following her as she undresses, and find themselves submerged in an unknown pool of liquid that swallows them up gradually. An underwater shot shows the atmosphere of a womb, except this womb-like environment, is a life-taker rather than a life-giver. The men's bodies shrivel up into brittle bones and a film of skin, finally reducing into a foetus-like object while the rest of the skin gets sucked into an alien red hot lava orifice. The entire process mimics the foetal development process in reverse; the men eventually being returned to their cellular existence, floating in amniotic fluid. As the femme fatale heroine alters sci-fi's obsession with reproduction, she substantiates anxieties surrounding human origins. The heroine's ability to reject the maternal shifts the focus towards her agency and intellect, making it the origin of her powers as well as the source of male anxiety.

One of the most impactful scenes takes place in the first half where she attempts to seduce a male Czech surfer on the beach. On the same beach, are a set of parents who end up drowning owing to a treacherous current while their infant sits unattended on the coast. The surfer tries to rescue them but is washed ashore instead. In a split second, the toddler becomes an orphan, wailing on an isolated beach while the heroine watches the

events unfold indifferently. The surfer struggles for life but the nameless heroine decides to play god and ends his life by smothering him with a rock. The cries of the infant echo the lifeless beach but the alien heroine shows no signs of empathy or remorse. This heart-wrenching scene has no impact on her as she casually drags the surfer's body to her van, ignoring the helpless screams of the child. This scene is hard-hitting for the audience, especially because of the blatant lack of maternal instincts shown by a woman. Her gaze remains empty, unemotional, and animalistic, introducing her as the anti-maternal figure who only views humans as the means to an end.

In his book, *No Future*, queer theorist Lee Edelman deconstructs reproductive futurism and the pervasive symbolism of the child as the basis of universal politics. The figure of the child becomes the beacon of hope for the future that has "unquestioned value and purpose" (4). How could one possibly be against fighting for the children? To see a woman behave nonchalantly towards a stranded child on barren land is evidence enough to banish a woman for being a selfish, abhorrent self-concerned female. The femme fatale imagery is typically typecast into the anti-maternal clan, as Mary Anne Doane in her book *Femmes Fatales* writes, "the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis of the maternal -- sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production" (2). A woman who declines the maternal loses her claim to humanity from the patriarchal purview.

Under the Skin triggers a conversation around the meaning of humanity, and more specifically femininity. The unfolding of events in the film sheds unflattering light on the current paradigm of gender politics i.e. to be a woman in this world is a dangerous game, one that comes with no guarantees. Although the heroine meets the stereotypical end of the femme fatale, she nonetheless dies giving an important message about female sexuality and female desire.

CONCLUSION

The film *Under the Skin* is a testament to the female gaze in existence which navigates the overcast streets of Glasgow from the unnamed woman's point of view while providing a commentary on what it feels like to be a woman in a man's world by inverting the all-familiar patriarchal equation. Although the protagonist uses her body and sexuality to stimulate the male gaze, she subverts the masculine, heterosexual gaze by deliberately using it to her advantage as a part of her overarching goal. The male gaze stems from an unconscious patriarchal desire to control the second sex but the protagonist's conscious choice of using her sexuality to lure men into their own traps takes away the scopophilic pleasure primarily involved in the male gaze. The film challenges the hegemony of the male gaze by not only providing a concrete example of the female gaze on screen but also deconstructs how the act of mere looking can spiral uncontrollably in a human society.

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