

Mark Fisher in Memoriam, Part 3: Dystopian Modernism (on Under the Skin)

Jon Lindblom

Under the Skin (2013) is a remarkable film,¹ with some of the most extraordinary imagery and music that I have encountered in the cinema for a long time. The (very loose) story centres on an alien posing as a woman (brilliantly played by Scarlett Johansson), who travels along the Scottish countryside with her mysterious partner and preys on men by seducing them and luring them into her otherworldly nest. The film was directed by Jonathan Glazer, who made *Birth* in 2004 and *Sexy Beast* in 2000, and also is known for the music videos that he directed in the 90s (including Massive Attack's 'Karmacoma' (1995), UNKLE's 'Rabbit in Your Headlights' (1998), and Radiohead's 'Karma Police' (1997) and 'Street Spirit (Fade Out)' (1996)) as part of the golden generation of music-video directors that also included Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze and Chris Cunningham, among others. Indeed, all these directors became known as auteurs through their music videos – which allowed them to develop very distinct visual styles thanks to the creative spaces for experimentation that directing music videos may offer. For even though music videos often have been theorised under the aegis of postmodern aesthetics, the much more ambiguous relationship between image and music compared to in narrative film and television may also open up unique opportunities for modernist, formal experimentation. Indeed, when at their best, music videos in fact have a lot in common with the major experimental films – where narrative progression is put aside in favour of formal audio-visual experimentation. This is what these directors were particularly good at, and managed to create some extraordinary work in conjunction with the equally fascinating sonic experiments that they visualised – by artists such as Aphex Twin, Autechre and Björk – and which rotated on MTV at the time in the form of a truly exciting version of the popular.

One of the things that stand out the most for me with *Under the Skin* is how it feels like an extension of the work that Glazer and his peers did as music-video directors during the 90s. On the one hand because of the similar lack of emphasis on narrative and dialogue (which are very sparse throughout the film), and on the other hand because of his extraordinary audio-visual experimentation. The exceptional opening scene feels a bit *2001: A Space Odyssey*/Kubrickian, as some critics have pointed out, and the wonderfully horrific sequences where the alien en-

traps its male victims in its nest are composed of abstracted spaces and disfigured faces that bring to mind the twisted aesthetics of Chris Cunningham's videos for Aphex Twin ('Come to Daddy' (1997) in particular). This is all heightened by the exceptional score by the composer Mica Levi (of the band Good Sad Happy Bad, formerly known as Micachu and The Shapes), which enwraps the alien like an abstract sonic blanket. Since the dialogue is so sparse throughout the film, the music becomes even more important for communicating the ambiguous mental state of the alien to the audience – which it does brilliantly through sophisticated uses of weird pitches and stretched-out warps that really sound otherworldly. It is precisely how the music and images manage to render audible and visible the alien elements of the film which is particularly stunning in a way that brings to mind some of the best A/V-experiments by the great music-video directors of the 90s.

But even though the A/V-experiments in *Under the Skin* are every bit as astonishing as those conducted in these music videos in the 90s, their context is very different. For whereas when I initially watched the 90s music videos it was with a sense that something very exciting was happening in – or, rather, to – popular culture. For instance, the shabby backyards and glossy rap aesthetic in the videos to Aphex Twin's 'Come to Daddy' and 'Windowlicker' (1999) were territories to be invaded and transformed by the disfigured persona of Richard D. James – but in *Under the Skin*, on the other hand, there is no longer any sense of such an invasion. On the contrary, the alien in Glazer's film is itself thoroughly alienated, and drifts through the human lifeworld of nightclubs, shopping malls, cafés and rural small towns with a sense of disorientation and confusion. This is fuelled by the other side of the film's aesthetic, which consists of kitchen-sink realist or almost documentary sequences where the alien is driving around in a van on small-town streets and attempts to pick up men to devour (and these sequences were indeed shot in a documentary way, since they are in fact completely unscripted and had the crew hiding in the back of the van while Johansson drove up to civilians and started interacting with them – and only later were they informed that it was all for a film-shoot) – as well as long sequences where it drifts through the misty landscapes of the Scottish countryside and tries to make sense of itself in the midst of the unfamiliar world around.

In that regard, *Under the Skin* has much in common with Nicolas Roeg's cult-classic sci-fi *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), in which David Bowie plays a similarly alienated alien stranded in New Mexico while on a mission to bring back water to his home planet. Not so much on a formal level – since both narrative and dialogue are firmly in place in Roeg's film (although with sporadically crazy editing and weird continuity-gaps that only directors such as

him could get away with) – but on a thematic level the two films have much in common. Indeed, what I think is significant with Roeg's and Glazer's films is how they reverse the relation between alienation and the alien that is crucial to modernist art. For whereas modernism indexes an encounter with an alien outside that transforms alienation into a productive resource – insofar as it no longer is construed merely within the confines of the human lifeworld, but through a kind of cognitive distancing from it – then these two films yet again significantly reverse the relationship between alienation and the alien, so that it is the alien itself that now is alienated in its encounter with the human lifeworld. There is obviously something deeply pessimistic about this – since it seems to suggest that there are no outsides capable of overturning the dreary everyday life of human culture – which certainly converges with Mark's diagnoses of a naturalised postmodern culture where previous modernist outsides progressively have been eliminated. Thus, like modernism in postmodern culture, the aliens in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Under the Skin* have been thoroughly suppressed by the human lifeworld – to the point where they no longer represent an outside force capable of subverting it. In that regard, Bowie's and Johansson's aliens are somewhat like embodiments of the decline of modernist outsides in an emerging and established postmodern landscape. Rather than agents of the outside, they too are confused and alienated drifters in our contemporary vacuous world.

Under the Skin is thus an example of what I have been thinking of as 'dystopian modernism'. More specifically, whereas classical utopian modernism was organised around the principle of aesthetic formalism as an index of a future utopian world, in dystopian modernism formal experimentation has been drained of its utopian promises and instead been reverted back towards the present as such. Dystopian modernism thus refers to works that utilise aesthetic formalism not for alluding to future utopian worlds – but for dissecting our mundane present through various formal experiments that allow us to gain outside perspectives on our own collective alienation (the formalism in dystopian modernism indeed comes down to experiencing the dystopia of the present from an outside perspective – which partly is what distinguishes it from postmodernism). Michelangelo Antonioni's films are useful to mention here, for instance, insofar as the alienating cinematography and mise-en-scène that he became recognised for is a good example of dystopian modernist formalism. And another recent cinematic example of the same phenomenon is David Cronenberg's adaptation of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2012), which follows the young finance capitalist Eric Packer and – much like the novel – operates through a kind of *semantic formalism* in the form of DeLillo's brilliantly stylised dialogue, which indexes Packer's existence as a *connective abstraction* incapable of having normal conversations with

other people (indeed, at one point in the film he says: 'I like people talking. Isn't this how they talk?'). In that way, the film dramatises the theorist Franco Berardi's hypothesis that 'the mediatisation of communication and the consequent rarefaction of physical contact, can provoke pathologies in the affective and emotional sphere. For the first time in human history, there is a generation that has learnt more words and heard more stories from the televisual machine than from its mother'.²

Of course, Berardi's work is useful also for teasing out a more general trajectory of dystopian modernism. For instance, in his book *After the Future* (2011), he argues that whereas 20th century culture was driven by utopian imagination and beliefs in a different world, the culture of the early 21st century is steeped in dystopian imagination and in an inability to imagine different worlds than the one that we currently inhabit. This trajectory is also detectable in the trajectory of art since the end of the 20th century, as he points out:

But the century taught a bitter lesson to its utopians. At its end, the utopian imagination tended to turn dystopian: the nightmare of consciousness and science fiction were the central laboratories of this reversal. Once upon a time (in the days of Jules Verne or Isaac Asimov), science fiction was the elaboration of ever-expanding human dominance in space and in time. In the late century, SF imagination of the future vanished, became flat, narrow, and dark, and finally turned into a[n] infinitely expanding present.³

The dystopian thread remained hidden in the folds of the artistic and literary imagination [of classical modernism], in Fritz Lang, expressionism, and a kind of bitter paranoid surrealism from Salvador Dali to Philip K. Dick. In the second half of the twentieth century, the literary dystopias of Orwell, Burroughs and DeLillo flourished. Only today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, does dystopia take center stage and conquer the whole field of artistic imagination, thus drawing the narrative horizon of the century with no future.⁴

It is in this sense that *Under the Skin* is a dystopian modernist film. Yet here I also need to make an important distinction, insofar as what sets the film apart from dystopian modernist films in general – as we just saw – is that the subject at the centre of the film is an actual alien. This is important in the sense that it allows the film to sidestep the implicit conservatism of much dys-

topian modernism, in that what is suppressed here is not 'the human' but the outside as such. Contrast this with *Cosmopolis*, for instance, which – again, similar to Berardi's work – seems to approach the cognitive and social impact of the 'connective' digital technological sphere with nothing but pessimism (indeed, Packer's journey in the film is like a reversed Landian acceleration: the reterritorialisation rather than deterritorialisation of the subject at the heart of late capitalism). Yet, crucially, in *Under the Skin* it is not the human that is suppressed by technology, but the alien that is suppressed by the human. Thus, rather than the outside undermining the inside, here it is the inside that is annexing the outside – which is significant insofar as the pessimism at work here has nothing to do with the threat to the integrity of the human lifeworld, but with the suppression of the forces oriented towards subverting it. In that regard, I think that the dystopian modernism at work in *Under the Skin* overlaps with how Mark understood hauntology, insofar as it similarly articulates the persistence of the outside in a culture where the augmentation of the inside has become the unacknowledged norm. Indeed, Johansson's alien is like a wandering formal alienation: a black hole that abducts humans into an outside beyond phenomenal manifestation, but who ultimately itself is devoured by the at this point seemingly total human lifeworld that its progenitors (e.g. Grace Jones, Sun Ra, Aphex Twin and, of course, Bowie himself) successfully infiltrated and transformed all throughout the post-war decades.

In that regard, the alien may also be read as an avatar for popular modernist subjects today: alienated drifters in a world they feel existentially disconnected from and for whom the perspective of the alien ironically is easier to identify with than with those of the 'normal' humans (indeed, I always think a lot about Mark in this way whenever I watch the film).⁵ For one thing I think that it manages to do better than *The Man Who Fell to Earth* – because of its formalism – is to provide an experience of the human lifeworld from a genuinely outsider perspective. Watching the film, you really feel like you are experiencing everyday life from an alien's point-of-view, which again points to the reversed formal alienation at work in the film – how its cognitive estrangements no longer index vast alien outsides, but the suppression of the alien outside by the human inside.

Crucial here is also Scarlett Johansson's performance as the alien, which compellingly overlaps with her appearance as a computer operating system in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013). The many parallels between *Under the Skin* and *Her* are indeed intriguing: not only did the two films premier in the same year and both feature Scarlett Johansson in the leading role as an alien intelligence, but they were also directed by two of the central figures of the 90s golden

age of music videos, and they both address similar confrontations with alien intelligences from the perspective of the cultural and existential alienation of postmodern stagnation. In *Her*, it is the disappointing communicative alienation of present forms of digital culture and connectivity that make up the core of this problematic, and which stands in sharp contrast to the cyberpositivism of the 90s (although it does also incorporate a similarly intriguing post-human twist). But going back to Johansson, what first and foremost stands out with her performances in these films is the contrast between the acting necessary for the alien intelligences that she portrays in them. For whereas her performance in *Her* rests solely on her voice – she is never seen onscreen throughout the entire film, since she portrays a software-program inside a machine – in *Under the Skin* she is onscreen all the time but barely has any dialogue, so instead has to rely even more on her visual appearance and body language. She also appears in her first nude scenes in the film, but they are distinctly asexual in a fascinating way for such a massively scrutinised sex symbol – because of the role that she is playing and the fact that her skin is just an empty vessel that eventually will be sloughed off. This also points to the central question that lingers at the end of the film: When will human culture be ready to do the same?

Notes

1. I should immediately mention that the film is based on a novel of the same name, which was written by Michel Farber and published in 2000. I have, however, not read it; mainly because I have heard that it is in fact much inferior to the film.
2. Berardi, F. (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions), p. 36-37.
3. Berardi, F. (2011) *After the Future* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press), p. 51.
4. Ibid. p. 41-42.
5. Mark in fact published an analysis of the film from a somewhat different perspective in his book *The Weird and the Eerie*. See Fisher, M. (2016) *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books), p. 103-109.