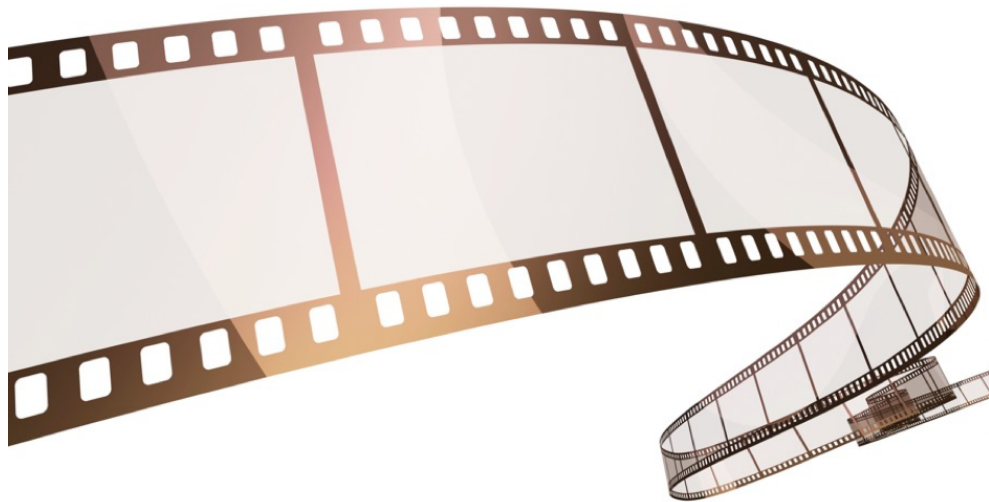


# Aesthetic Investigations

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Articles



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‘The flesh is weak.’ Empathy and becoming human in Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin*

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**Abstract:** Jonathan Glazer’s 2013 film *Under the Skin* offers an unsettling meditation on humanness through the eyes of an alien predator. This essay reflects on Glazer’s film by drawing it into conversation with the later phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with Heidegger, Martin Buber, and with a number of earlier Greek thinkers who together point us towards a more complex and shared definition of ‘contemplation’ or *theory*.

The paper asks: do films watch us as much as we watch films? Through an exploration of the notion of the mask as a means both of disguise and of disclosure, the paper questions to what extent all human relations are masked, screened. So, Glazer’s film can be viewed as an exercise in re-imagining the role of the screen,

turning us from viewers to viewed. This implication of the audience in the film’s scope leads to a concluding focus on empathy as the essential sharedness of human (and therefore of cinematic) experience.

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In 1909 in Paris, a poet and artist by the name of Max Jacob struggles to make ends meet by giving piano lessons, earning just enough to make the rent and buy bread. Max attends classes at the *École Coloniale* where the other students mistake him for someone who comes there to sell pencils. He shares an apartment with Picasso whom he teaches French. He is a friend of Apollinaire, Modigliani, Cocteau and so on. The usual suspects. This evening, however, for one reason or another, Max has a little spare cash in his pocket. And he decides to treat himself to a trip to the pictures. That year, Max could have gone to see J. Stuart Blackton’s biblical epic, *The Life of Moses*. Or perhaps he chose *Mr. Flip*, directed by Gilbert “Bronco Billy” Anderson, only remembered now for its including a first cinematic outing for the ‘pie-in-the-face’ gag. Whichever film it was, during the screening Max experienced a vision of Christ reaching down to him, beckoning him from the screen. It was one of several visions Max describes.

My flesh fell away. I was stripped naked by a lightning-bolt! Imperishable moment! Truth, oh, truth! . . . How graceful and gentle! . . . He turns around and I can see that peaceful, radiant countenance.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of his visions, Max converted to Christianity, was baptised in the Roman Catholic faith (with Picasso standing as his godfather) and went to live at Fleury, the Benedictine Abbey near Saint Benoit-sur-Loire.

Jewish by birth, Max was arrested in 1944 by the Gestapo and died in an internment camp outside Paris a few months later, a visionary and a martyr.

I want to argue here that the story of Max Jacob’s conversion experience may offer us a surprisingly useful picture of how we relate to cinema, how we engage with films. I do not want to rehash the somewhat hazy (if appealing) notion that watching a film is a mystical or devotional experience:

I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor or model for our being, a model which had the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of spirit, and to become a form of devotion.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, I want to reverse that refrain and narrow the field a little: to argue, not that cinematic expression smacks of or models the sacred, or borrows sacred modalities in order to transform and evoke, but rather (and

more specifically), that sacramental representation or witness always has a cinematic quality. Am I suggesting (as Dorsky does) a metaphorical relation between the cinematic and the sacramental? No. I mean, literally, that sacramental articulation is always essentially cinematic and *vice versa*. On what grounds do I feel able to construct such an argument? On the grounds that the sacramental and the cinematic share a common root. We can think of this root as a movement or a gesture. And this movement or gesture is captured, I think, in Max Jacob's vision; Christ *turns around*, and beckons to Max *from the screen*. If, as I am suggesting, cinema and the sacramental share a common root, it is also, as roots tend to be, hidden.<sup>3</sup> Exposing this hidden taproot reveals, I suggest, something fundamental in how we engage both with the putatively sacred through sacramental expression, and with cinema. Ultimately, it may reveal something essential to human experience in general. And the key to this 'something essential' requires my using a forbidden word in this context: theory.

In its ancient Greek use, *theorein* essentially means to look or observe. *Theoria*, as Aristotle uses it, say, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or in the *De Anima* is generally translated as 'contemplation.' But in his work on Parmenides, Heidegger suggests we have lost or mislaid or forgotten a crucial aspect of *theoria's* original meaning. He argues that the Greeks understood 'seeing' or 'contemplating' not as we have come to use the term.

Θεάω, "looking," in no way means "seeing" in the sense of representational looking upon and looking at, by which man turns towards beings as "objects" and grasps them. Θεάω is rather the looking in which the one who looks shows him or herself, appears and "is there."<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger's analysis of Parmenides has had a profound influence. Some would say an invidious influence. We find ourselves a few short steps from Derrida's (or of course Gadamer's) productive interpretation, or critical hermeneutics, or whatever you want to call it. Here I am not permitted (or indeed inclined) to let theory loose in its postmodern incarnation. But I do think it worth allowing this ancient notion of theory (albeit with a Heideggerian inflection) just to point us towards a potential understanding of what I am calling the shared hidden 'movement' of cinema and the sacramental.

In his masterpiece, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber draws a fundamental distinction between experiencing the world as an It, and relating to the world as a Thou. 'A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons.'<sup>5</sup> For Buber, the appearance of the person is a function of, or is conditional upon, an entering into relation. He goes further still: 'Where there is no sharing there is no reality.'<sup>6</sup>

Max Jacob's vision, and the works of Heidegger and Buber all return us to a more ancient conception of knowing, of seeing. That to know, to see entails being known and seen. That the way to engage with the world is

to be turned towards it, openly related to it in an I-Thou relationship, as opposed to a representational looking-at, looking upon, a grasping of objects. To start to think about this in cinematic terms, we can reflect on Tarkovsky’s description of the function of art:

the allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good.<sup>7</sup>

Max Jacob’s vision, when considered in the light of Tarkovsky’s claim, is thus properly apocalyptic inasmuch as it reveals or unveils this hidden two-way movement, a mutual ‘turning’ towards one another that is always present, I suggest, in both the sacramental and the cinematic. So, it has been said, speciously in my view, that cinema offers itself as a presentation of the world to us without at the same time requiring us to be present to the world.<sup>8</sup> In other words, cinema teases us with a taste of transcendence; it is, according to this view, an exquisite uncoupling of ourselves from the world. It is an instrument with a use and a function: propagation, exemplar, and so on. But in fact, I think cinema – and all art, as Tarkovsky argues – rather than offering us an illusory grasp of an objectified world, a taste of transcendence or uncoupling, works radically to reconnect us *with* the world, ploughing us, harrowing us, implicating us. Even converting us, in the sense of *turning* us together.

The fourth century Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.395), denies the possibility of our ever being able to achieve a genuine uncoupling, true transcendence. In his seventh homily on *Ecclesiastes*, Gregory says,

The whole of creation is unable to stand outside of itself by means of an intuitive knowing grasp, but always remains within itself; and whatever it sees, it sees only itself, and if it believes it sees something beyond itself – well, it is not of its nature to see beyond itself.<sup>9</sup>

And Gregory again, this time from his first homily on *Ecclesiastes*:

O human beings gazing on the all, recognise. . . your own nature!<sup>10</sup>

This unavoidable reflexivity, the ultimate impossibility of looking upon, looking at, the inevitable I-Thou sharedness of experience gives rise to our most human gesture, perhaps the singular identifying gesture of the human being: empathy. Empathy entails being always in the middle, sharing, between things, seeing and being seen, knowing and being known, being open to the world. So, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty, argues that ‘what is is that upon which we have an openness,’ rather than ‘that upon which we can operate.’<sup>11</sup>

It is this risk-laden stance of empathetic openness to the world, this falling into the middle of things, of being caught, unable fully to stand outside, of *Dasein*, as Heidegger would express it, that acts as the dramatic, narrative and visual context of Jonathan Glazer's 2013 masterpiece, *Under the Skin*. The film stars Scarlett Johansson as an apparently heartless alien predator combing the streets of Glasgow for men whom she lures to a strange fate (see figure 1). During the course of her spree, however, something changes. She appears to become less alien, and more human.



**Figure 1:** Scarlett Johansson in *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

*Under the Skin* begins by problematising and dismantling ‘the ontological conditions of the motion picture’ itself. The film opens effectively without a screen, denying the screen with a blackness that lasts for a pronounced length of time. This is a bold and challengingly uncinematic, even anti-cinematic, opening. Cinema, after all, is *the art of light*. Here, in the sustained opening darkness of *Under the Skin*, it seems both projector and screen are redundant. The means and the medium (light and surface) are set aside. We are left sitting in the dark, literally and metaphorically.

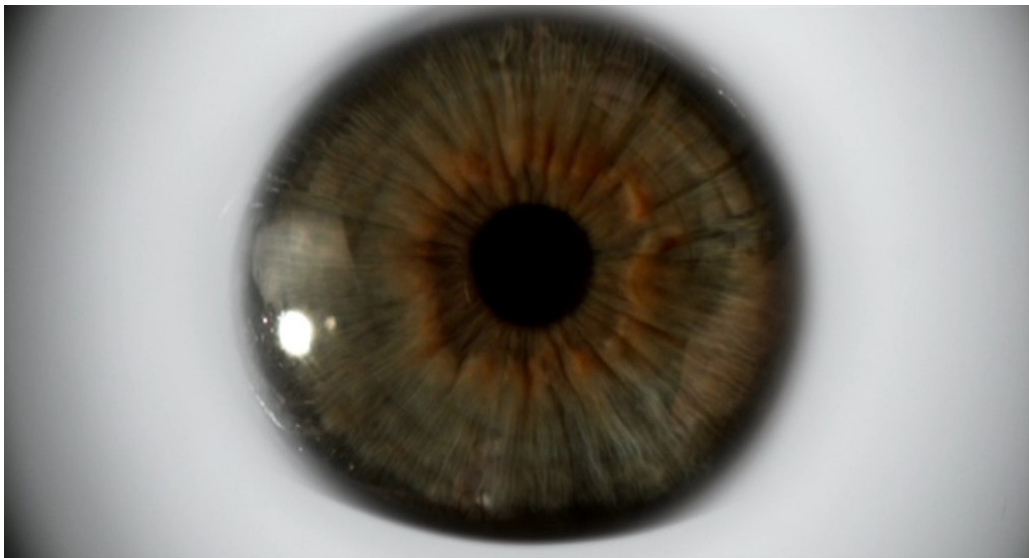
Then the blackness on the screen is punctured by a single prick of whiteness that suddenly bursts into a bright, glaring light. There follows a series of images that appears to depict abstract curvilinear shapes, like planets, sliding in and out of alignment. Over the top of these images we hear muttered syllables, repeated vocal sounds and consonant clusters, the sound of language emerging. The phonemes evolve into recognisable words, reversing the structuralist, Saussurian idea that language as grammatical structure, as frame or medium, necessarily precedes the speech act. Here, structure, order, *langue* are emergent. And this sets a pattern for the phenomenological wiring of the

film. Along with Johansson’s alien, we are thrust into the pre-existing middle of things. So, Merleau-Ponty could almost be writing a pitch for *Under the Skin* here:

[The act of reflection] must plunge into the world instead of surveying it, it must descend toward it such as it is instead of working its way back up toward a prior possibility of thinking it – which would impose upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it.<sup>12</sup>

Because, in a nutshell, this is what the alien must learn, that we cannot impose control on the world, or *langue* on language, *from above*. We must descend, and this descent, this Fall, will have complex dramatic entailments.

Finally, the spheres and ellipses coalesce to become an extreme close up of a human eye (see figure 2).



**Figure 2:** *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

Here, at last, is something familiar, perhaps the most familiar thing in the world. For a moment, it feels uncannily, looking at this eye, that we have been *turned* from watchers to watched. We are not watching a film; the film is watching us, as Christ watches Max down in the cheap seats of the Gaumont.

Back to Heidegger’s *Parmenides* in which Heidegger makes the famous (infamous) etymological connection, almost certainly unwarranted, between *theo* and *theos*. Thus, on his reading, the divine becomes the ultimate Watcher.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the dubious etymology, to the Greeks, the gods were indeed, first and foremost, guards keeping a watchful eye. So, in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* we find the following relationship described:



Thrice countless are they on the rich-pastured earth, Zeus' immortal watchers (φύλακες) of mortal human beings, who watch over judgements and wickedness, clothed in darkness (ἠέροα).<sup>14</sup>

In the theatre, clothed in darkness, are we not gods? We call some of the seats in the theatre, 'the gods.' Yet here, as the eye at the beginning of *Under the Skin* makes explicit, we sit somehow between projector and newly watchful, godlike screen; we are watchers of humanity, but watched in turn, caught between our mortality and divinity: an in-between space, aliens to ourselves. The darkness at the centre of the eye is a projector in negative, drawing us in. The screen is reversed. By repeatedly framing dark objects or dark openings within surrounding opalescent paleness or vagueness throughout the film (see figure 3), Glazer continually echoes the eye, calls attention to this watchful screen, this reversal or sharing of the process of watching:



**Figure 3:** Echoes of eyes, from *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

Glazer is constantly reminding us that the watching here, the looking is shared, is reflexive.

And this reversal of the screen, this doubling-back, the sense that we are being watched is further emphasised in *Under the Skin* by the use of hidden cameras to secretly film members of the public unsuspectingly interacting with Scarlett Johansson who moves through society without being recognised, without being watched. We are watching someone being *not* watched. The process of watching becomes the subject of this film. The star, whose role it is to be noticed, becomes unnoticed. And at the same time, our status as privileged unviewed viewers is profoundly problematised. Those hubristic claims to pornographic, uncoupled transcendence, to looking at, to grasping objects are all shown to be false, deluded. We are vulnerable, exposed, being watched even as we watch.

In one of the film's early scenes, shot in stark silhouette, the naked alien strips a dead girl's clothes and puts them on (see figure 4).

To be human or to pass for human is to be clothed, hidden, un-naked, as though we require something to be added to us in order to be ourselves.



**Figure 4:** *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

And that ‘something’ is a covering, a surface, a screen for others to watch and read, even for the gods to watch and read. The biblical parallel here is obvious:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’<sup>15</sup>

This ends badly, as we know. And even before we reach the troublesome climax of the story, we are left with the idea that to be human is to hide.

The Greek word for person is *prosopon*. This literally means ‘in front of the face’ or before the face. In other words: a mask. It is the word used for the masks worn by actors on the Greek stage. The Latin word *persona* has the same meaning. It literally means ‘sounding through’, ‘that through which sound or speech passes’. Or again, a theatrical mask.

And there is a doubling, inherent in the idea of the mask, which lends *Under the Skin* much of its uncanniness. The mask, like a screen, can obscure, anonymise, but at the same time, it can be a means or medium of display, perhaps threatening display. Either way, or rather on account of the doubling



effect that affords the mask both functions – disguising and displaying, it invests the wearer with power. The classic example of a mask used to frighten or scare occurs in the earliest Greek literature and it serves as the prototype for the alien in *Under the Skin*. According to myth, the Gorgons were sisters with poisonous snakes for hair and whose gaze, when *turned* on the unfortunate viewer, changed them to stone. They are petrifying, literally. The face and gaze of the Gorgon was appropriated and used throughout pre-classical Greece as an apotropaic motif on buildings, on weapons. Or perhaps it is the other way around. Robert Graves suggests that in fact the idea of the petrifying mask predates the myth of the embodied Gorgon. ‘There never was a real Gorgon; there was only a prophylactic ugly face formalised into a mask.’<sup>16</sup> Graves’s point is that the mask, the disembodied head antedates the corporeal monster. Nowhere in Homer, for example, is there any reference to the Gorgon as a fully embodied creature. She appears in the *Iliad* only as a prodigy, a *monstrum*.

And over her shoulders [Athena] slung her shield, all tassels  
flaring terror – Panic mounted high in a crown around it,  
Hate and Defence across it, Assault to freeze the blood  
and right in the midst the Gorgon’s monstrous head,  
the rippling dragon horror, sign of storming Zeus.<sup>17</sup>

The idea that the mask precedes the monster suggests we need to reconsider what it is that makes the mask uncanny, what lends it its apotropaic power.

At the Yerkes Laboratory of Primate Biology in the 1940s tests were conducted to ascertain what it is that chimpanzees most fear. Of all the objects shown to the chimps, the greatest panic was caused by the introduction into their cage of a disembodied head, the head of a shop dummy, or a skull.

The head was placed behind a small ledge so that the actual termination of the neck was not visible (although the chimpanzees ‘knew’ from familiarity with the cage in which the test was made that there was no space large enough for a body beneath the head). The chimpanzee was then admitted from a detaining inner room. A marked fear response occurred immediately, before the lapse of enough time to make the unresponsiveness of the head abnormal.<sup>18</sup>

The results of these experiments led the researchers to claim that the bodiless head prompts a spontaneous, and therefore non-learned fear response in all primates. The disembodied Gorgon mask is an expression of that fear; she is confusion, panic personified. While to the Greeks, the Gorgon’s mask is a disclosure of non-human power, the mask in *Under the Skin* is a disguise of that power. A mask is used here in order to blend in, to pass unnoticed. Yet,

it is the destiny of all masks to be pulled off, so Perseus cuts off the Medusa’s head by the clever use of a reflective surface, a mirror. At a key moment in *Under the Skin*, almost exactly halfway through the narrative, the alien stands in front of a mirror on the stairwell of a derelict Glasgow tenement, staring, apparently transfixed by its human reflection. The film turns on the surface of that mirror; from this point on, the alien’s power is neutralised. She releases her latest victim, and goes on the run from her handlers.

Perseus, once he has cut off the Gorgon’s head, is able to use its power to his own ends. And in the film, the alien’s mask will also be violently removed, cut away. But now the removal of the mask represents power divested, brokenness, a hollow sacrifice. We live in a culture that is suspicious of masks, grown used to the idea of the person being the exact opposite of the mask. Masking our true emotions may sometimes be necessary, we might say, but juxtaposing the idea of the mask with *true* emotions, we thereby make the mask the bearer of falsehood. ‘Person’ is the term we use for a putative inner self, the private, hidden centre or locus of unmasked consciousness and identity. For the ancients, a person is not hidden, but is necessarily shared, outward facing, performed, relational. It follows that our modern understanding of masks, rather than being revealing, is veiling, a form of hiding. And yet Glazer’s film is not simply a pulling off of the mask to reveal the reality of the alien under the skin like the revelation of the monster under the human mask in John Landis’s prologue to *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (dir. John Landis 1983). Instead, Glazer asks us to reflect on the possibility that the Greeks had a point. What if nothing is under the mask? What if the mask – as in the case of the original Gorgon – is all that there is? Not just for the alien, but for all of us. So, the shedding of clothes, the shedding of the superficial appears in Glazer’s film to be the shedding of the self, a deliberate nulling of our individuality. As her male victims are led to their doom, they follow Johansson into a strange, apparently boundless darkness. And as they follow her, they shed their clothing, pulling off shirts, shoes, trousers and underpants. It is a sort of nightmarish parody of that coy, romcom cliché – the trail of hurriedly discarded clothes leading to the bed. Only when they have shed their covering, their clothes, their own masks, do these unfortunate victims begin to be absorbed into the darkness. Literally sinking into the floor, just as the Gorgon’s victims were turned to stone.

What becomes of them then? Floating in the endless dark, one of her victims appears to have become nothing more than a membrane that bursts and becomes darkness, nothing. It seems, the film suggests, we are our clothes, our painted nails, our hairdos, our public appearance, our chat up lines, our reflections in the mirror, masks: nothing but our skins, our readable surfaces, our screens. To be human may be to hide, as Genesis suggests, but to hide is just to turn our surfaces into screens, into masks.

When, in the final scene, Johansson’s character finally falls victim to human, male violence, she is stripped of safety, dignity. She is brutally stripped

of her clothes, and finally she is stripped of her skin. So, what is *under the skin*? A solid blackness, like a mannequin. This blackness, this void within is left cradling its flayed skin; it looks down at the face, once studied in a mirror, now held in its hands.

And the face looks back at the inner darkness. In a sense, we are dealing here with the reverse of Hebb's experiments on the chimpanzees: the disembodied head, the Gorgoneion, is here able to look back at itself. It has become the object of its own gaze, petrifying itself. This doubling-back of the gaze offers us the most frightening image of a frightening film: the mask looking, not out at the world, but in at the nulling concavity of its non-self (see figure 5).

In a trivial sense, of course it is true – under our skin it is dark. To illustrate, we could do worse than reflect on the words of a popular song. In 'Turning Japanese' by The Vapors, the obsessed and incarcerated narrator sings of how he would like to instruct a doctor to take internal photographs of the object of his obsession so that he might be able to view the desired person from the inside too. There is something repulsive and deeply unsettling in this image, but it is also fascinating for our purposes here. We might ask, in what sense is a photograph of our insides a photograph of ourselves at all? After all, it is not our insides that are turned out to face the world, that are recognisable to others. And it goes without saying, of course, that a photograph of your insides would be entirely black, unless light is artificially introduced. *But* introducing light is just to turn your insides into a screen, to recreate self as surface.<sup>19</sup> The inevitability of surface becomes what Karl Jaspers called a *Grenzsituation*, a limit situation, something we cannot circumvent. We are limited creatures; perhaps that means we are necessarily *masked* creatures. So, Gregory of Nyssa claims that 'The perfection of everything which can be measured by the senses is marked off by certain definite boundaries'.<sup>20</sup> This marking off is, for us, necessarily a masking off. Only by masking ourselves *from* the world, are we – perhaps paradoxically, perhaps tragically – able to relate *with* the world.

Scarlett Johansson is famous for being alluring. (Not for a moment do I mean to suggest she is famous only for being alluring. Johansson proves in *Under the Skin*, as she has proved in many other films, that she is one of the most intelligent, intriguing, and daring actors of her generation.) But here, in Glazer's film, it would be possible, in a manner of speaking, to claim she is *only* alluring. Luring prey to a strange doom; she is allure personified. A lure is a type of bait generally mimicking the outward appearance or surface of that which is to be trapped or caught. It might tempt us by means of our appetites for food or for a mate. But the lure – and surely this is part of Glazer's point – is the perfect analogue for the self. Lure, mask, surface, screen, skin – these are all ways of looking at ourselves *and of being looked at*.

Back at the scene where Johansson strips the body of the dead girl, she notices an ant. She scoops up the ant, examines it crawling over hand. The

‘THE FLESH IS WEAK.’

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**Figure 5:** *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

implication is, of course, that Johansson's character's feelings towards the naked girl, towards any of her victims, are the same as those towards the ant. They are objects to be looked at, grasped. But they do not touch her; she shares nothing with them. They are It. In a sense, she is doing philosophy without *theoria*. She looks out at the world without recognising that in so doing the world is looking back at her. When she thought she was outside, unfallen, she was really inside, and falling. 'Theory', remember, is not here being used in a way that is explanatory or practical or normative, as Horkheimer would have wanted, but as the Janus-like contemplation that Heidegger draws from Parmenides.

By the end of the film something fundamental has changed for the alien. The crucial turning point is one of the most extraordinary encounters in cinema. A meeting between Johansson's alien predator and a character played by the actor Adam Pearson who has neurofibromatosis, a rare condition that causes tumours to grow on nerve tissue.

To Johansson's alien, one assumes, all humans look alike. Like ants do to us. They are pests or prey. She asks Pearson's character the same questions she has used to lure other men throughout the story, she deploys the same chat up lines – you've beautiful hands, do you want to look at me? would you like to touch me etc.? And Glazer chooses to include a close up at this point of Pearson's character pinching himself, squeezing the skin on the back of his hand, as though he does not believe this is happening (see figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Adam Pearson in *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

Then, sensing the clichéd action has revealed something shameful and silly he wants to keep hidden, he covers the place where he has pinched the skin, drawing attention to the surface, the skin, and then covering, masking that



surface with, necessarily, another surface, another revealing screen or mask. There is no getting beyond or outside the surface. It is all surface, all mask. We are watching an illusion (light on a screen) in which a character is pinching himself in order to prove to himself he is not living an illusion. As Pearson’s character is lured to his fate, he mutters, ‘Dreaming, dreaming.’ And the alien confirms: ‘Yes, we’re dreaming.’ But we know he is not dreaming.

And yet in another sense, of course he is dreaming. Because this is all an illusion, a fantasy, a dream. But it is ours, not his. Should we not be pinching *ourselves*? The question calls to mind our own ambiguous position here. We are wilfully subjecting ourselves to an illusion in which the nature of reality is being called into question. And yet the agonising familiarity of this intimate human gesture – Pearson’s pinching himself – pulls us up. We find we are moved, and frightened for him. In short, we are invested, personally. What does that make us? It makes us human, sharing in the predicaments of our fellows. We are zeroing in now, I suggest, on that hidden ‘movement’, that ‘gesture’ lying at the root of both sacramental and cinematic expression: empathy.

When the alien turns from predator to prey, when she finds herself cast tragically as a John Smith figure in a weird twisting of the Pocahontas story, when she succumbs to deception, and finally to murderous male aggression, how do we feel then? Rob van Gerwen has made the fascinating suggestion to me in a series of emails that Johansson’s alien and her ‘male’ handlers seem almost automatically to be comparatively unsophisticated compared to the humans on which they prey.<sup>21</sup> According to van Gerwen, humans will tend to feel the aliens are not a dominant species. He argues we can only ever empathise horizontally, or downwards, never upwards and that is why we might assume Johansson’s alien cannot empathise with human beings at first. She is not as ‘advanced’ as we are; she is more interested in the ant than in the dead girl because she has more in common with the ant. Because the ant is a simpler creature she has less trouble observing and understanding its behaviour. This is a fascinating alternative reading of the film. And while I do not share van Gerwen’s view, I agree with him that the empathy Johansson’s alien begins to feel (or wants to feel) ‘elevates’ her – at least in our eyes – above her impassive handlers.

There is a good deal in van Gerwen’s reading, but it seems to me nonetheless that human beings are somehow conditioned or predisposed to see ruthlessness and physical superiority as markers of the ‘higher.’ Think of Ash’s description of the creature in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* as, ‘a perfect organism; its structural perfection matched only by its hostility... A survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse or delusions of morality.’<sup>22</sup> And this is where challenging theological notions begin to surface, calling into question our deepest (Ash-like) intuitions concerning our own power and vulnerability. We are told, ‘the flesh is weak.’<sup>23</sup> And yet, as van Gerwen’s reading of the film suggests, it is our very weakness which we value, which makes us us. *Under the*



*Skin* becomes a hymn to humanity; if we are higher, the film implies, we are higher *on account of* our weakness. And more still, we are vulnerable to the alien not in virtue of a physical or intellectual inferiority, but because of a heightened emotional susceptibility which we ourselves, as audience, are prey to. Whether or not the alien is an apex predator, when it suffers and fails, when it begins to shake itself free of its handlers, and makes vain attempts to join human society, we are moved. Despite what we have seen of its past actions, we are able nonetheless to empathise. Or rather we cannot not empathise. The difference is crucial, a litmus test for humanity, as a patellar reflex test determines the functioning or not of the neurological system. You cannot fake it, mask it.

And suddenly there breaks forth the evidence that yonder also, minute by minute, life is being lived: somewhere behind those eyes, behind those gestures, or rather before them, or again about them, coming from I know not what double ground of space, another private world shows through the fabric of my own.<sup>24</sup>

The Johansson character, the invulnerable alien predator, makes a choice as a result of what she sees in the humans around her and what she sees them see in her. There is a sudden breaking through of the fabric of her mask, her screen. The people around her come to her help when she falls over in the street, they trust her, they share information, affection, living space, cake. She recognises herself in the world, in the middle of things; she recognises herself as subject among subjects. In short, she chooses (or cannot fail to choose) to become human, to empathise, to be weak as flesh. To do so, she has to remove the mask as disguise in order to put on the mask as disclosure. In short, she has to make a screen of herself, the screen as dependent, as radically and essentially receptive, passive, offered, a sacrifice. The screen is the opposite of a mask conceived in the modern, western sense, as a disguise; but it remains a mask in the Greek sense: the medium of disclosure, sharedness, Merleau-Ponty's 'double ground of space.' And this clearly has sacramental import.

We tend to forget that ancient sacramental ideas of offering, of sacrifice, incorporated willingness into the ritual. It was hoped that the sacrificial animal would press forward voluntarily to the sacrifice. Priests would sprinkle water over the head of the animal at the altar causing it to nod its head, a sign of assent. Or sometimes a bowl of water was put before the animal in order that it would bow its head in approval, acceptance of what was to come.

We leave the alien in Jonathan Glazer's film, accepting, kneeling, broken and burning.

What Glazer visually and mythically depicts here, I think, is the secret movement of cinema and sacrament. It is, to coin a new term (or rather to find a new use for an old term) iconic. In the same, broad way that the grinning gorgon masks are iconic. The stricken, kneeling, naked alien



**Figure 7:** *Under the Skin* directed by Jonathan Glazer. 2013; London: BFI & Film 4. DVD

becomes an image, an icon of sacrifice, like the martyrs depicted in so many icons, wounded men and women, stigmatised. Or the beheaded Medusa, herself a sacrifice. After all, to sacrifice just means to make sacred, to become expressible sacramentally over and over again. Perhaps the Gorgon has to die, to become a sacramental type, a repeatable mask (her reality), in order to be imbued with power.

Icons are sometimes described as windows on heaven.<sup>25</sup> They offer views out of this world, and into the Kingdom of God.<sup>26</sup> Or so the thinking goes. In conclusion, I want to suggest there may be another way to consider both sacred icons (sacramental images) and cinema screens. Rather than seeing through the icon or the screen to another world, a fantasy or a kingdom to come, icons and cinema screens encourage us to consider the (endlessly repeatable) sacrifice taking place at the surface. It is at the surface, the ‘double ground of space’ where the magical empathetic blending of subjectivities takes place. Rather than the simple, linear relationship suggested by the notion of a transparent window, we find the complex triangularity of a reflective surface, or a surface that offers the possibility of turning back to us an image of ourselves transformed, converted, or which can petrify us. This is the contemplative insight of St. Clare of Assisi, friend of Francis and founder in 1212 of the Franciscan Order of the Poor Clares. In a letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare writes

Place your mind in the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation.<sup>27</sup>

And we have come full circle. Clare's contemplation in the mirror of eternity is surely close cousin to an Aristotelian-Heideggerian notion of *theoria*, of seeing by being seen. Mirror, brilliant light, image, contemplation, transformation. This is Max Jacob's visionary experience; it is also an instruction manual for the building of a cinema of the soul. A cinema that *turns* aliens into humans, weak as flesh, receptive as screens, turned to face the transforming light.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Jacob 2004, 49.
- <sup>2</sup>Dorsky 2007, 407.
- <sup>3</sup>Paradoxically perhaps, though this root is hidden or secret, I aim to show that it is 'hidden in plain sight,' literally staring us in the face.
- <sup>4</sup>Heidegger 1998, 103. Note Heidegger's emphasis on *turning towards* as a crucial component of how the Greeks understood contemplation.
- <sup>5</sup>Buber 2013, 44.
- <sup>6</sup>Buber 2013, 44.
- <sup>7</sup>Tarkovsky 1986, 43.
- <sup>8</sup>Stanley Cavell's thinking about cinema tends in this direction. For example, he asks, 'How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen' (Cavell 1979, 40). It is on this account that Cavell is able to argue that 'the ontological conditions of the motion picture reveal it as inherently pornographic' (Cavell 1979, 44).
- <sup>9</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, In *Ecclesiasten* 7 (Migne 1886, PG 44:729B); my translation. The text is obscure, and English translations hard to come by (or non-existent). Here is the Greek: Οὕτω καὶ πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις ἐξω ἑαυτῆς γενέσθαι διὰ τῆς καταληπτικῆς θεωρίας οὐ δύναται, ἀλλ' ἐν αὐτῇ μένει ἀεὶ, καὶ ὅπερ ἂν ἴδῃ, ἑαυτὴν βλέπει, καὶ οἰηθεὶ τι ὑπὲρ ἑατὴν βλέπειν, τοῦ ἐκτος ἑαυτῆς φύσιν ἰδεῖν οὐκ ἔχει.
- <sup>10</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, In *Ecclesiasten* 1 (Migne 1886, PG 44:625B); my translation. ὦ ἄνθρωποι, εἰς τὸ πᾶν ἀποβλέποντες, τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν νοήσατε.
- <sup>11</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, 18.
- <sup>12</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, 38-39.
- <sup>13</sup>Heidegger 1998, 104.
- <sup>14</sup>Hesiod 1988, Op. 252-253.
- <sup>15</sup>Gen 3:7-10 (NRSV).
- <sup>16</sup>Graves 1961, 231.
- <sup>17</sup>Homer 1990, Il 5.846-850.
- <sup>18</sup>Hebb 1946, 262.
- <sup>19</sup>We can profitably turn to Merleau-Ponty again. Although he is thinking about subjectivity and introspection here, the question is pertinent, I think, in our case: 'for where, when, and how has there ever been a vision of the inside?' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 18-19).
- <sup>20</sup>Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 30.
- <sup>21</sup>Van Gerwen, pers. comm.
- <sup>22</sup>*Alien*, dir. Ridley Scott 2004.
- <sup>23</sup>Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38.
- <sup>24</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, 11.
- <sup>25</sup>For example, Madeleine L'Engle defines an icon as 'an open window through which we can be given a new glimpse of the love of God' (L'Engle 2016, 19).
- <sup>26</sup>David Talbot Rice claims icons 'are themselves fundamentally religious, of the other world rather than of this' (Talbot Rice 1954, 150). He also argues an icon's 'significance lies below the surface' (ibidem). I am arguing precisely the opposite: the icon's significance is readable off the masklike surface.
- <sup>27</sup>Clare of Assisi 1982, 200.

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