

## Under the Skin (2013)

“My task is to make you see.” – D.W. Griffith

### Major Credits:

Director: Jonathan Glazer

Screenplay: Walter Campbell and Jonathan Glazer, from a novel by Michel Faber

Cinematography: Daniel Landin

Editing: Paul Watts

Music: Mica Levi

Cast: Scarlett Johansson (The Female), Jeremy McWilliams (The Cyclist), Dave Acton (The Logger), Adam Pearson (The Deformed Man)

### Background:

[In accordance with D.W. Griffith’s self-admonition above, these notes have been left deliberately brief in order to allow viewers to experience this original film through their sensory perceptions without an excess of preconceptions.]

Jonathan Glazer has worked extensively in music videos and commercials while directing just three films to date. *Sexy Beast* (2004), his first feature, reconfigured the gangster genre, as *Under the Skin* presents an original take on science fiction. With the singular exception of Johansson, the cast is comprised of non-professionals and ordinary Glaswegians captured on tiny hidden cameras in the mall, on the streets, and inside the van. The production involved an enormous number of technical problems, including editing more than 230 hours of uncut footage, which are described by the crew in the Special Features section of the dvd.

### Cinematic Qualities:

*Under the Skin*—like its contemporaries *Gravity* and *All is Lost*—is virtually a silent film. What little dialogue it contains fails to advance or clarify the plot; in fact, much of the conversation cannot be easily comprehended because of the Scottish dialect. The film tells its story and constructs meaning entirely through cinematic terms: camera placement, editing and montage, non-diegetic music (“birdsong from a harsher planet,” as Ty Burr memorably described Mica Levi’s soundtrack). As the mysterious opening sequence makes clear upon reflection, *Under the Skin* has been designed to be, quite literally as well as figuratively, a *visionary* film.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. The turning point of the story—occurring exactly halfway through the film—is a street scene in Glasgow shot from three different hidden cameras (a van, a storefront, a third floor apartment window) depicting the protagonist falling on the sidewalk. The moment seems irrelevant to the plot yet carries a mysterious significance. Beyond the literal action, the documentary moment, what is happening in this scene?
2. Michel Faber’s original novel is much more explicit about the backstory—the alien’s intention and methods, the ideas she serves, the material nature of her world—than Glazer’s film. Details such as the cyclist’s identity and function, the victims’ ultimate

fate, the political issues involved remain subjugated to the cryptic experience of watching the images unfold. Is it possible—or desirable—however, to create an allegorical structure for comprehending what the film might be *about*? For example, can *Under the Skin* be understood as a self-reflexive examination of the fundamental activity of cinematic *voyeurism*, or as an examination of the implications of *surveillance* in post-9/11 society (particularly relevant to ubiquity of CTT cameras in UK), or as a sustained feminist analysis of the toxic *gender relationships*?

3. Critics, who were almost universally admiring, remained remarkably silent about the film's ending, the twenty minutes or so involving The Female's last "victim" and her journey into the woods. How do you make sense of the story's turn at the end? In particular, how do you process the film's final image?