

The Cosmic & The Corporeal: Audiovision in Under the Skin

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Recommended Music to accompany this article:

Under the Skin Soundtrack, composed by Mica Levi

<https://open.spotify.com/>

[album/0MJwS1KqklO8tr95IJAcQA?si=ROuWUvMZRCKhNih_WPFVaA](https://open.spotify.com/album/0MJwS1KqklO8tr95IJAcQA?si=ROuWUvMZRCKhNih_WPFVaA)

The Cosmic and The Corporeal: Audiovision in Under the Skin

Under the Skin is a film deeply preoccupied with the human experience. Our protagonist is 'Laura,' an alien in disguise who stalks Glasgow in search of male prey. Whilst the wider implications of her toil remain unclear, we are entirely situated with her throughout — seeing the streets through her eyes, sitting with her in the van during each hunt. She is almost entirely inscrutable, yet she is the conduit through which we experience this world. Our proximity to her complicates the ontological question beyond a blunt dichotomy of Laura and the human subjects. Rather, it's a dynamic continuum whereby Laura might glean empathy while ordinary people are estranged. Indeed, there comes a definitive point at which Laura opts for an inexorable path towards selfhood. The film's audiovisual thrust, in place of dialogue or more conventional narrative arcs, enables this journey. It both expresses the oddity of the terrestrial and Laura's attempted enculturation within it.

The audiovision of *Under the Skin* is the means through which the cosmic and corporeal are articulated. The textual

explications of Michael Faber's novel are reduced to abstract compositions with hinted meanings. I'll explore two of these sequences presently.

Narrative abstraction

Whilst a compelling feat of audiovisual rhetoric in their own right, it is interesting to note that Jonathan Glazer arrived at these sequences both out of sensibility and necessity. In an interview regarding the making of the film, Glazer discusses an embellished earlier draft of the script. In this nascent iteration, the opening 'creation scene' in which Laura materialises would have been a much larger, much longer affair. "Probably a 10-minute scene, a million pounds" as Glazer states. ^[1] Budgetary constraints jettisoned the original plans for this scene. The end result however, is a highly compelling distillation. Notably, Mica Levi's score is our first sensory excitation. *Al niente* tremolo strings and soft mallet cymbals begin to furnish the beckoning texture. We become aware of a pinprick of light in the middle of the frame, seemingly precipitated by a high tremolo C in the violins. It gradually increases in size and intensity before we jump to a close-up of a star at 00:01:57. Particularly striking is the contrast between the visuals and the music: the former exhibit a spacey languor, while the score, dense in texture and bristling with cello triplets, suggests a more purposeful drive. At 00:02:40, we begin to hear the phonemic utterances of a female voice. Through our vococentric disposition, ^[2] we now attempt to make sense of this sequence. It seems as though the speaker is engaged in some speech exercise. Accompanying these vocalisations is another image — abstract, but perhaps also figurative: two spherical forms which are beginning to align. At 00:03:27 there is a tangible synchresis as we hear sharper plosives and cut to the image of the black sphere now docked within a larger structure. The voice is becoming more insistent now, and eventually out of the

[1] "The Making of Under The Skin (2013)," accessed December 9, 2019. <https://youtu.be/M8RkCg7ro0c>.

[2] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 5.

micro-units emerge words ('film' being one of the first). As the voice develops, so too does the image: it increasingly resembles an eye.

Our inkling of this is confirmed at 00:03:27 as a graphic match replaces the abstraction with the real thing. At 00:04:25 we are hit with the title card and a burst of noise (which turns out to be a gushing stream). This palette cleanser marks the end of this first sequence.

It seems as though we have witnessed a genesis of some description, and that superlunary forces (quite probably sinister) are at work. In the gradual assemblage of celestial bodies

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into a literal body part, the cosmic has been enfolded in the corporeal. This enfolding feels corroborated by the shot of the stream at 00:04.29: underscoring this earthly phenomenon are the cymbals which remain from the previous set piece. It seems like a premonition; a hint of the commingling of telluric and extraterrestrial.

Glazer's composition is characterised by echoic shots and sequences that resonate with what has come before. This can be said of the 'Meat to Maths' sequence. The scene unfolds in the void in which Laura traps her victims and is the first time we

are immersed in this unfathomable sepulchre. One of the men looks on at a longer held captive, his musculature atrophying psychedelically. The decaying prisoner then implodes. There is a reprise of the creation music. It soundtracks the lifeless skin of the hollowed detainee, balletically treading the deathly undercurrent. At 00:01:32 we cut to a shot of what appears to be blood running down a chute towards a glowing red terminus. The chilling suggestion of a production line is compounded by a change in scoring—high, randomly intoned oscillations in the first violins and tremolos on a triangle connote some terrible industry taking place. [3] Things further intensify at 00:01:54 as we seemingly follow the blood to its destination. A screaming quintuplet figure in the violin propels us through an unreal environ of pulsating red. There is an energy here; a palpable causality in the harvest of the victim and the hum of this alien landscape. We are experiencing the inverse of what took place in the opening (what we could call ‘Maths to Meat’): here, we are witnessing the transfiguration of a human victim into fuel for some incomprehensible purpose. Taken with the ‘Creation’ sequence, we could say that these two scenes evince the fluctuating dual-morphology of cosmic and corporeal that occurs throughout the film.

[3] Mica Levi, *Under the Skin* (Chester Music: London, 2013), 30.

The Othering of the Mundane

Under the Skin is remarkable in the way it treats its human subjects. In an interview with Channel 4, Glazer discusses the importance of maintaining ‘the alien lens.’ [4] It was vital that the story be told from Laura’s perspective. The upshot of this credo is our alienation from many of the human subjects in this film. We experience this in an early scene. After a period of relative stillness, where Laura pulls off into the murky dawn light, we cut to her descending a shopping centre escalator at 00:10:20. The sound is overpowering in this paroxysm of human activity. As is the sight of all the people whom Laura passes by. There is no styling here. [5] Rather, Glazer’s unfeeling

[4] “Jonathan Glazer on *Under the Skin* | Film4 Interview Special,” accessed December 9, 2019. <https://youtu.be/hZUvIfXKVVc>

[5] “Jonathan Glazer on *Under the Skin* | Film4 Interview Special”.

camera assesses the masses as Laura would: a convoluted hoard of obscure individuals, glimpsed briefly in the austere fluorescent light.

Abetting this sense of dislocation is our familiarity with Scarlett Johansson as a denizen of the Hollywood A-list. Of course she would appear alien in the context of *vértié* Glasgow. But because of our adjacency with her throughout the film, we also feel alienated from all the ostensibly normal people she happens upon. This is especially evident in the interactions she has with the men she attempts to pick up. These are almost entirely improvised conversations with non-actors unaware of the camera. Ensuring a natural feel in these encounters meant that they had to be captured in one take. And in order for that to happen, there needed to be a sufficient amount of angles to be drawn upon for the edit. These requirements resulted in the build of 10 specialised cameras to be deployed clandestinely throughout the van.^[6]

The result is a series of encounters that are deeply strange, owing to the very ordinariness of her targets. The upmarket seduction of Johansson's London cadence further estranges the thick, oft incomprehensible brogue of the men. Indeed, the minimal dialogue of this film has no plot-driving purpose. It's a tellurian murmur that Laura decodes for the essentials.

Exacerbating this othering of the men is the way in which they are depicted in the frame. Sometimes, they float entirely outside it as a disembodied voice. Most often, we see them from the vantage of the van window. As Ara Osterweil points out, our view is "At least triply mediated to see the world simultaneously through alien eyes, the van's windshield, and the lens of the camera."^[7]

While the audiovision of *Under The Skin* makes the prosaic exceptional, it relays wrenching drama as a passing curio. In a particularly devastating scene, Laura chats with a swimmer on the coast, her intentions undoubtedly malign as

[6] "The Making of *Under the Skin* (2013)".

[7] Ara Osterweil, "Under the Skin: The Perils of Becoming Female," *Film Quarterly* 67, no.4 (Summer 2014), 46.

ever. It then becomes apparent that a tragedy is unfolding: a woman is spotted swimming fully clothed in the vicious swell. Her husband soon follows, barreling into the waves. We soon realise that the woman has gone in after their dog, who is trapped in the treacherous riptide. We see no close-ups of these desperate people: as the swimmer runs towards them at 00:24:57, Laura remains impassive and the catastrophe is observed from the cool remove of several wide-angle long shots. This very human struggle, motivated by empathy, appears almost farcical through her gaze.^[8] It is a cause and effect that she observes, but cannot identify with. Underscoring the scene is the same cymbal texture from ‘Creation,’ spiring us further upwards into Laura’s cosmic apathy. At 00:26:24 the swimmer collapses back on the shore, exhausted from his attempted rescue. It is here that Laura sniffs an opportunity. We hear the simple bass drum–snare figure that induces the seduction music (more on this anon), which has up to now been associated with Laura’s cruising for prey. It seems this situation is no different to her. It may have been argued that a frisson of sexual charge, of *some* feeling, might have been a motivating factor in the liquidation of her suitors. But as she clubs the back of the prostrate swimmer’s head with a rock and drags him across the shingle, we are at our furthest remove from Laura. She is a killing machine, operating with upmost precision and without remorse.

Laura’s acculturation

The audiovisual abets two thematic enquiries: both Laura’s estrangement from the world and her attempt at assimilating into it. Particularly notable is the softening of Mica Levi’s scoring in the second half of the film. At this stage, Laura is taken in by a kindly man (billed as ‘The Quiet Man’) who spots her adrift on a bus. He asks her whether she needs help and upon her answering affirmatively, he takes her back to his house.

[8] “Under the Skin - The Alien Lens,” accessed December 9 2019. <https://youtu.be/nteRfDiMui0>

“She is a killing machine, operating with upmost precision and without remorse.”

After bringing up a cup of tea, and turning the bar heater on in her room, he says goodnight. At 01:16:22, we have a lingering shot of Laura and the reddening heater. One can't help but think of the terminus from 'Meat to Maths.' It is a thought-provoking composition that just might afford some insight into what Laura may be thinking: that perhaps she could survive on the warmth of human kindness rather than the death-heat of anthropoid fodder. At 01:16:42, Laura once again peers at her reflection in the mirror. It is markedly different this time however. There is a tangible sensuousness here in the warmth of the chromatic field, the delicacy of Levi's score and most obviously in Laura's undress. Her body is no longer weaponised; her nakedness is her own, the germ of self-identification.

The music abets this new sense of understanding: a bare yet consonant fifth, swelling and subsiding in the strings (what is heard in the film is even simpler than what appears in the score).

It foreshadows the fuller imbibition which takes place at 01:22:32. Here, Laura further partakes in the human experience: it seems as though she will sleep with the man. The music is at its most ardent here. Levi has spoken about wanting to connote the first romantic experience of a teenager^[9] The juxtaposition of real and synthesised strings imbue the scene with a swooning quality reminiscent of Vangelis' work for *Blade Runner* (1982).^[10] Once more, the music connotes Laura's interiority which we may not fully ascertain from watching her — she still seems somewhat aloof in this moment and

[9] Mica Levi, “Under Mica Levi's Score,” interview by Adrian Rapazzini, *Interview Magazine*, April 3, 2014. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/mica-levi-under-the-skin>.

[10] Vangelis, *Blade Runner (Music From The Original Soundtrack)*, Warner Music UK Ltd, 1994. <https://open.spotify.com/album/6NkuCdMz5tGmHbOXAWbtCW?si=GGcAiG36QbmAEVbSfAGN8A>.

bemusedly stiff in the act. But the music feels as though it very much belongs to her. A modulating pitch wheel is conspicuous in a synthesiser melody that is dulcet and pining, yet off-kilter. It feels as though Laura embodies these microtonal oscillations. They are the burgeoning romance within her, or her straining to experience it. They are her wish to transcend her limits.

This expedition is cut brutally short. It's evident that something is wrong. Laura springs from the bed and grabs a lamp, pointing it at her genitalia (or at the place where it should be). It is now clear that there will be no consummation of her personhood. As Elena Gorfinkel states "This sex act feels like an end, the arc of a timeline, a reproductive and relational horizon forestalled, a dysphoric recognition." [11]

This forestalling of Laura's humanisation is reflected in the score. From here on in, we will hear none of the mesmeric swoon of strings and synthesiser. The next musical moment of note is, chillingly, a reprise of the seduction theme.

I briefly alluded to this thematic material earlier on, and it would be worth revisiting it in a little more depth. It makes its initial appearance at 00:12:33, bar 11, in the violas during the first cruising scene. Accompanied by a menacing pulse of sampled bass drum and snare, this music becomes associated with Laura's hunting. Throughout the opening sequence, it intensifies through an increase in tempo and an embellishment of the disquieting three-note motif with ancillary lines.

As her first victim follows her into her lair, the reverb of the bass drum and snare dissipates and we are left with a drier, more focused pulse. There is a deft moment of synchresis at 00:19:34 as a descending fifths figure in the basses and cellos precipitates a tracking shot from the perspective of the man as he walks into the interminable void.

This combination of atypical tracking shot, perspectival shift and scoring transports us to this new, liminal space. There is a moment's breath as the man follows Laura deeper into the void before a thickened texture of piccolo, violins

[11] Elena Gorfinkel, "Sex, sensation and nonhuman interiority in *Under the Skin*," *Jump Cut*, no.57 (Fall 2016). <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-GorfinkelSkin/index.html>.

and violas plays a wilder elaboration of the theme. It is here that Levi's interest in chopped and screwed music becomes especially apparent.^[12] The processed melody lends a distinctly unworldly flavour to the scene. This is Laura's siren call and it has thoroughly hypnotised her prospective internee. The narcotic caterwaul beckons him to follow her and he descends almost obediently into the viscous black. This seduction music reappears and develops throughout the first act. It is reprised in the beach scene explored earlier as well as two further seduction scenes (00:33:53 and 00:56:29).

The denouement takes place in the woods, where Laura has fled after her failed attempt at intercourse with The Quiet Man. After an encounter with a logger who patters innocuously about walking trails, she finds a bothy where she stops in to indulge in another human pleasure: sleep. Her reverie does not last long. She is roused from her rest by the malevolent logger who gropes her awake. She flees into the depths of the woods and hides behind a fallen tree. Upon resurfacing, she reencounters the logger who pursues her this time. Fatefully, we hear the strains of the seduction music. It is of course associated with the annihilation of male targets in the first act. The tragedy here, besides the brutal abjection she will suffer at the hands of her assailant, is that she chose to abandon her life as a cog in the malign alien apparatus. But in relinquishing her preternatural power, and opening herself up for construal as a gorgeous ingénue adrift in the world "...the so-called norms (of whiteness, masculinity, humanity) are implicitly challenged, even as they inevitably hold sway."^[13] Her allure, the previous source of her formidable proficiency, is nicked and re-weaponised fatally against her. There is a captivating moment of stillness amidst the assault. Stripped of her sartorial and epidermal cover, the alien gazes down at her own face which she holds in her hands. We float for a while at this boundary of ontological limit, suspended in the high microtonal wavering of flute and violin and the low tremolo of synthesised strings. Then

[12] Mica Levi, "Playlist: Mica Levi on her Musical Influences," March 27, 2017. <https://londonsinfonietta.org.uk/stories/playlist-mica-levi-her-musical-influences>

[13] Osterweil, "Under the Skin: There Perils of Becoming Female," 50.

the culminating wrath of male hegemony is visited upon her. Her violator douses her in accelerant and sets her alight. This moment is scored with a reposeful Db9 chord, diffused through the strings and flute. It is the sound of a strange world being set to rights. An aberration remedied with the native pathology.

Final Thoughts

Audiovision is the primary channel through which the cosmic and corporeal are explored in *Under the Skin*. Through Glazer's maintaining of the 'alien lens' (as well as an alien audition) the subject of humanity is ravelled. No true elucidation is ever offered. Rather, the question appears as a fluxional iridescence we glimpse from afar. The audiovisual is also the means through which we may have some access to Laura's inner life. We glean some notion of her experience in the second act. Though there is still an awkwardness in Laura's embodiment (her odd poses in the mirror by the heater, her rigid passivity during intercourse), we still get an idea of her emotional development through the adopted softness of Levi's musical language.

The continuum of the cosmic and corporeal is also intriguingly articulated in the 'Creation' and 'Meat To Maths' sequences which were previously discussed. Music, sound and visuals combine to create condensed abstractions that convey the interflow and transvaluation of the bodily and extramundane. These sequences are the most conspicuous audiovisual manifestations of a process that in fact thrums throughout the entire film— and arguably drives it. This propulsive reciprocity finally abates at the end. Just as the seduction music originally conveyed her victims to the cosmos, it now conveys Laura to the earth. Her ultimate enculturation is in death. As her body burns, her particulate matter will synthesise with the atmosphere and return in the falling snow. ^[14]

[14] Gorfinkel, "Sex, sensation and nonhuman interiority in *Under The Skin*."

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