Encountering Unruly Bodies: Posthuman and Disabled Bodies in *Under the Skin*

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Abstract: Science-fiction cinema offers ample cases of strange encounters, but the most intriguing are those that offer critical insights into our worldliness. The film *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) does exactly this by turning our gaze not to imaginations of the future but to the otherness within, defamiliarizing the category of the human in the process. In this paper, I explore how the category of the human is bound by normative conceptions of embodiment by critically reflecting on the relationship between visuality and embodiment, representation of disability, and the politics of looking at unusual bodies. Taking inspiration from Alison Kafer’s work, I propose that *Under the Skin* deploys a novel perspective on marginalized embodiment, considered from the contemporary context of the political status of disability in Western culture.

Keywords: science fiction, disability, embodiment, human, visuality.

The greater violence would be to assume that the particularity of the other is within our grasp, that the place of the other is fully accountable from the “outside.” The issue, then, is one not only of contesting the epistemological and ontological boundaries of bodies of knowledge and bodies of matter, but of reconfiguring the ethics of relationship. (Shildrick, “You” 161)

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1 This paper builds on my research master’s thesis. A version of this paper was presented at the Unruly Bodies conference in Brussels, 2015.
The title of the film *Under the Skin* (2013) suggests that it will get under our skin, promising a visceral experience. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the expression designates what is there in reality as opposed to what is there in mere appearance, on the level of the skin. Director Jonathan Glazer communicates both these meanings by offering an erotic, horrific science-fiction film in which human and nonhuman appearances are confused. Scarlett Johansson performs the main role of an unnamed alien in human form as she roams the dark and murky streets of Scotland in a white minivan. The alien is on a mission as she preys on unsuspecting men: she flirts and seduces them, after which she kills them. Both the impromptu conversations recorded with hidden cameras and the dialogues with professional actors are marked with a sense of unscripted realism. Johansson dominates the film with her enchanting screen presence, demanding the viewer’s attention. Our relation to the alien is formed by particular visual techniques: long close-up shots of the alien’s face ask the viewer to overcome any distance to her. For most of the duration of the film we either look at the alien, or we look with her as the camera follows her gaze on the cityscape. From the start, this primarily visual experience is an investigation into her body and into how convincingly she can appear as human.

The expression “under the skin” also alludes to how the skin as a site that usually functions as a boundary between subjects and/or objects might falter: something is able to pass through this boundary, getting under the skin. The skin creates the fiction of the unitary containment of the body (Shildrick, “Why” 16). The excess of the body is what gets under our skin. The expression is highly affective, pointing to both a state of feeling and a somatic reaction. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler writes about the way our bodies are given over to the world of others from the start: “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch” (21). In line with an understanding of the body as always relational, I explore how *Under the Skin* enacts an encounter in which the legibility of the body is negotiated. Specifically, I look at a scene in which the posthuman protagonist encounters someone whose face is disfigured (played by Adam Pearson). This moment offers a scene of possibility to critically think of how non-normative bodies are encountered.

This paper is structured as follows: I begin with an introduction to the film *Under the Skin* and a close reading of the above-mentioned scene. In the following section I draw on disability studies (David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson) to analyze how marginalized embodiment
is represented. I pay particular attention to the relationship between visuality and embodiment, representation of disability, and the politics of looking at unusual bodies. I then conduct an analysis on the level of narrative, and argue that the film deploys a novel perspective on marginalized embodiment, considered from the contemporary context of the political status of disability in Western culture. Alison Kafer’s work Feminist, Queer, Crip serves as my guide here. Overall, I illustrate how the film Under the Skin enacts an encounter between various forms of marginalized embodiment that resists familiar tropes of representation, and in fact might offer a radical perspective on broadening the landscape of the “human.”

Unruly encounters
A critical reflection on what the “human” entails provides the framework of my interpretation of Under the Skin. The film, based on a novel by Michael Faber (2000) with the same title, invites the viewer to conspire with the alien’s perspective of this world. The cinematography and soundscape of the film deliver a truly alienating experience in which our world suddenly appears strange. As the alien imitates rituals of gender performance by going to a shopping mall and learning how to dress and put on make-up, she makes the well established and the mundane seem unfamiliar. The film reveals a horrific storyline as the alien’s seductions culminate into macabre but visually stunning killing scenes in which the bodies of her victims are eviscerated. Due to the prominent screen presence of the protagonist, subtle changes in her demeanour are directly noticeable as signs of a critical character transformation. Where at first she seemed distant, mechanic, and cold, she later appears confused, unsettled, and empathetic. The transformation takes place in a scene featuring a strange encounter, one that pierces through her script, undoing the alienness programmed in her body. She abandons her extraterrestrial mission and becomes an unruly alien that desires to be human.

The film’s concern with the process of an alien becoming human provokes reflection on the tenuous boundaries of the nonhuman and human. The director has made the choice to present the alien in human form, rather than a form that would make it more unfamiliar. The difference we come upon in Under the Skin is that between human and nonhuman, but this difference is hard to trace in the embodiments encountered by the viewer. It becomes unclear if there is an ontological distinction to be made between the human appearance and that
which supposedly lies behind the human form. From the film I discern an explicit questioning of the role of the body in occupying the category of the “human.”

The film’s posthumanist perspective creates an opportunity to re-evaluate the normative regulation of what kinds of embodiments are considered human. Judith Butler has argued that there are strong normative notions on what kind of embodiment the human has, and that one’s racialized and/or gendered body or bodily abilities may not suffice for occupying the category of the human (Precarious Life 33). From this framework, I specifically track how marginalized embodiment features in this film.

The scene I would like to discuss here is set on a dark, rainy evening, and the alien is driving her white minivan through deserted streets on the lookout for another prey. She spots a man walking on the sidewalk, parks the van ahead, and waits for him to walk by. She calls him over to ask for directions, and we learn he is on his way to the supermarket. His face is hidden underneath his hood, and when she offers to give him a ride, only his silence indicates his hesitation. The film was shot using only natural light sources, creating intensely dark scenes like this one. In the blinking indicator light of the car we can roughly see patches of his face, but it remains hard to discern. The scene creates an atmosphere of suspense. On the one hand, the viewer knows more than the man does: we know what kind of fate he will meet by entering the van and we might hope he turns down the offer. On the other hand, we might also worry for her safety. By hiding his face under his hood, the passerby gives an ominous impression. For a moment, it becomes unclear where the element of danger is located in this situation.

He enters the car, buckles his seatbelt, and they drive off. He takes off his hood and uncovers his face. The alien says, “That’s better.” She wants him to feel comfortable in order to reach the intimacy that will allow her to seduce and annihilate him. But the moment she says “That’s better,” is also the moment we see the side of his face, illuminated by the ceiling light of the van. He has a disfigured face caused by neurofibromatosis: non-cancerous tumours grow on his face. I can locate his eyes, but they are hardly visible from this angle, clouded by lumps on his face. He turns toward the camera and toward her, carefully checking if she is staring at him. But instead of staring, she starts a conversation. The alien takes him home and as they undress it appears the man will meet the same fate as the other victims. However, the alien changes her mind and lets the man escape. We see him walking into a field – stark naked – with city lights visible in
the distance, and fear the violence he will face trying to get home. This encounter functions as the major turning point in the film. It is the first time the alien refuses to carry out a murder, thereby abandoning her mission and escaping the surveillance of her handler. In the remainder of the film she tries to blend in as a “normal” human which creates many awkward and comical scenes.

The premise of *Under the Skin* both depends on, and plays with, patriarchal culture. Ostensibly, the alien can succeed in her mission on earth by showing off her attractive body, following particular sexual and gender relations in the public sphere. This deployment of the gendered body does more than just repeat images of a woman as a hyper-sexualized object. It utilizes these images to create a horror film in which the gendered distribution of death and killing in patriarchy is inverted. She is a sci-fi femme fatale who uses the status of the female gendered body in Western culture for the purpose of her extraterrestrial mission. The explicitly voyeuristic nature of her encounter with men on the street undoes the male gaze we are accustomed to in Western visual culture, and the viewer conspires with her objectifying stares. The viewer might fear for her safety, but the alien has yet to discover the dangers of misogyny – which she does: she is assaulted by men on the street and realizes that the body she uses to get access to men is also at risk of violence. She is in her van when several men try to open the doors, bang on the windows, and scream at her. She manages to drive off, and moments later she picks up the man with the disfigured face. Shocked into awareness of her female gendered body, she learns of the risks of femininity. This risk remains to haunt her and culminates in the final scene, where a logger chases her through the forest in an attempt to rape her. Her human body unravels in this sexual assault, revealing the shiny, black mass that constitutes her alien body.

Her awareness of the risk of femininity is highly relevant to her encounter with the disfigured man and for understanding why this particular encounter changes her. I interpret this scene as a moment of recognition: both subjects know what it means for your body to be excluded by society, to the point of always being at risk of violence. By encountering a form of marginalized embodiment, she recognizes her own subject position in the human world for the first time. Having gained insight into the violence that accompanies marginalized embodiment, she decides to abandon her deadly mission. In the following two sections I explore this representation of marginalized embodiment on a visual and on a narrative level.
The visuality of non-normative embodiment

The disfigurement of the unnamed character features as part of a rich archive of representing non-ablebodied embodiment. In their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explore the “meanings assigned to disability as a representational identity” (1). They examine the ubiquitous presence of disability in narrative art and argue that disability features a “disruptive potentiality” which is used to differentiate a character from the norm (47-49). Consequently, Mitchell and Snyder propose, “one might think of disability as the master trope of human disqualification” (3). In Mitchell and Snyder’s critique of narrative art they show how disabled bodies and minds are disruptive for the plot – a function in narrative that can only work by virtue of real life disqualification – and are always in need of repair through a prosthesis (8). A prosthesis is understood to compensate for a lack by bringing the deviance marking the disabled body back to a corporeal regime of acceptable deviance (Mitchell and Snyder 6). Consequently, a narrative prosthesis occurs when a disabled body or mind is marked as improper to the social context and the narrative aims to overcome this problem (Mitchell and Snyder 47, 53).

In *Under the Skin*, the particular disfigurement of the man appears to be the same as the subject featured in David Lynch’s film *Elephant Man* (1980). By casting an actor with neurofibromatosis, the film explicitly engages with the most prominent case of facial disfigurement in cinematic history. *Elephant Man* has been criticized for crafting a spectacle out of deformity following the tradition of the freak show (Mitchell and Snyder 23). The freak show haunts representations of disability. In this archive of disfigurement as a spectacle, the assumed way of looking is as a non-disabled spectator, and the physically different body is marked by its shock value. With its sentimental and moralizing qualities, the film *Elephant Man* and its representational style follow the formula of narrative prosthesis that Mitchell and Snyder put forward (Durbach 35).

At a first glance, it seems that *Under the Skin* perpetuates this practice by depicting the man hiding in the dark evening under his hood, bringing his face under a beam of light, and focusing on his face through voyeuristic close-up shots. These techniques employ disfigurement as something to be revealed and to be lingered on. The light from above emphasizes an exhibitionary setting. We can think of W. J. T. Mitchell’s pertinent question: “What do pictures want?” and respond: This image wants us to stare.
However, I suggest that the interaction between the alien and the disfigured man does not represent disfigurement as either a spectacle, as a problem to overcome, as a familiar trope of characterization, or as a deviance in need of repair through the narrative. The film does not indulge in presenting disability as located on the site of the body and instead shows two marginalized subjects whose interaction leaves undetermined which body is improper to the social context. Disfigurement as it is evoked here is not the ultimate disqualification that is used to visually differentiate a character but instead functions as an unsentimental moment of recognition between two subjects.

Due to the infrequent presence of dialogue and the lack of voice-over narration, the encounter is primarily visual. The moment the disfigured man enters the van I wonder what will happen. Perhaps my main question is: Will the alien notice? Whereas previous scenes left the audience to wonder if the alien would pass as human in de midst of all the mundane humanness, this scene elicits curiosity to see if the man will pass as human for the alien. The man seems to wonder the same, as he hesitantly looks her way to see if she is staring at him. But she affords him the same look as any other object in the environment she is exploring, while also noticing that this encounter is different from her previous encounters with men. This scene evokes a moment in which the bodies are looked at in new ways.

Even when analyzing this scene, I am prompted to rethink how I encounter this body: how I describe it and how I write about it. Are “disfigured” and “disabled” appropriate categories to use in my analysis? Are the connotations of the term “disfigured” not bound to reproduce a normative reading of unusual bodies, which I am actually trying to challenge in my argument? What are the advantages for me to describe his face as disfigurred and his appearance as disabled? The film does not offer me help here, since the character is claiming no identity of disability. In this absence, I am motivated to classify his body and it is made completely my choice. I am immediately compelled to bring his disfigurement into the discursive regime of medical knowledge by saying “he has a disfigured face caused by neurofibromatosis….“ I can refer back to interviews with Adam Pearson to find out that, indeed, disfigurement is a term he uses himself, and that his role in Under the Skin has led him to reflect more on disability on display in narrative film (Day; Pearson). His use and experience of these categories allow me to reproduce them. But I could also insist that his disfigurement is crucial to my argument. The disfigured face brings attention to
what it means to inhabit an unruly body. “Disfigure” is primarily used as a verb, where one destroys the beauty of, or deforms, something. It is a negation of the figure, in this case of the form of the human body. Questions are opened up: Who is doing the disfiguring? Which human figure is maintained? Disfigurement haunts the boundary of the human form, of what a human body can look like. My reaction only highlights how the materiality of the body cannot be met outside of how I have always met bodies through the lens of particular corporeal norms.

The complex relationship between the visual encounter of bodies and the knowledge that arises from that encounter is at the heart of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s book *Staring: How We Look*. Garland-Thomson explores the staring encounter in order to dissect the ways we see each other and the ways we are seen (10). She analyzes a very common interaction: an unusual body catches someone’s attention. The attention takes the form of a staring interaction, the “starer” fixing the other in the position of the “staree.” We stare at bodies that contradict our expectations of what a body can look like. The starer-staree transaction is imbued with power relations and possible actions or developments. The staree can stare back, redirect the gaze, educate the starer, or account for the stareable sight and thereby explain the inexplicable interruption of the visual field. In some cases, staring might lead to an acknowledgement between fellow outsiders or an empathetic relation. But in the end, what will happen in the encounter is unpredictable. In Garland-Thomson’s analysis of staring at extraordinary bodies, the visual presence of disability leaves the outcome of the encounter uncertain since the usual cultural guidelines do not suffice (86). When we stare, we try to make legible what at first sight seemed incomprehensible (*Staring* 15). For Garland-Thomson, the staring interaction is motivated by a desire to gain knowledge about the bodies that catch our eye, and therefore “can offer an opportunity to recognize each other in new ways” (15).

Films, images, or paintings can grant us “permission to stare,” turning the social blunder of staring into a productive encounter (*Staring* 81). This is not to say that mere visual representation of unusual bodies can function as an assurance of negating oppression. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, the social erasure of disabled people has occurred in the midst of the creation and circulation of images (6). The challenge is to enlarge the visual landscape and to expand the range of bodies we expect to see, without building on sentimental representationalist tropes, or turning visibility itself into a precondition for disability justice. In *Under the Skin*, the viewer experiences a prolonged exposure
to bodies that often make people feel uncomfortable, drawing the staring interaction and the discomfort to the foreground. The impulse of staring can turn into a contemplative looking, creating an opportunity to unlearn the prejudice associated with disfigured bodies.

In my opinion, this film thus manages to successfully set up a visual encounter, both between the two bodies on screen and between those bodies and the viewer, that troubles assumptions about the resonances of the disabled body in contemporary Western culture, allowing them to be reassessed. If the epidermis is the prosthesis that allows the alien to mimic the human, the disfigured man signals to the skin as the site of bodily differentiation. The film does not construct an image of how we are all alike under the skin, but sticks to the situatedness of particular embodiments. I take this scene to offer an image of what a non-appropriative relationality might look like that does not ignore the materiality of bodies but that leaves space for looking at bodies in new ways.

**Politicking embodiment**

On the level of visuality, *Under the Skin* manages to portray disfigured embodiment without crafting a spectacle out of it. In addition, I propose that the implications from the film’s narrative are quite extensive. After all, the basic premise of the film is that this alien is a murderous creature who does not shy away from killing men and eviscerating their bodies. I understand the alien’s decision to let the disfigured man escape as a re-imagination of the place of disability in society.

Ableist imaginations of the present and the future are a prime concern in Alison Kafer’s book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. She analyzes how disabled bodies are seen as a symbol of an undesired future, where the “value of a disability-free future is seen as self-evident” (2). Kafer examines a wide range of theories and social movements and tracks both how disabled bodies are seen as having no future, and how the future is imagined as having no disabled bodies. Time, money, and effort is put into reproductive technologies that promise a future free of disabled children, while services for actual disabled people are cut, ensuring that disabled people do not live long lives (41).

*Feminist, Queer, Crip*’s theoretical punch comes from the political/relational model of understanding disability that Kafer proposes. Her argument is situated in the wake of both the medical and the social model of disability, which according to her fail to take the political nature of disability into account.
consideration (4-8). She defines disability as neither an exclusively medical problem nor an exclusively social problem: disability is not pathological and neither just a matter of social exclusion, but a social phenomenon with material, embodied experiences (6-8). A sharp distinction between the embodied experience of disability and the social exclusion of disability leaves the issue of social exclusion as the only possible site of contestation (7). This has as an effect that the social exclusion of disabled people is seen as undesirable, but often leaving intact the all too common assumption that impairment and diverse forms of embodiment in the world are undesirable. For Kafer, the point is to understand the physical impairment of the body or mind as a political issue as well, and not something which has a self-evident meaning. I find her analysis very fruitful because it emphasizes how the body is a political category, and we can hold on to the materiality of disability while simultaneously understanding that the meaning of disability is open to change.

*Under the Skin* is intensely situated in the present-day, but by virtue of its science-fiction genre and futuristic elements often comes across as an anachronism, inhabiting both the present and future at once. According to Rosi Braidotti, the genre of science fiction is concerned with “the defamiliarization of the ‘here and now’ rather than dreams of possible futures” (184). Indeed, this film does not offer a utopia, but new ways of imagining the present. By analyzing the status of disability through the focal point of futurity, Kafer exposes how orientations to the future depart from ableist imaginations. As she notes, “the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently” (28). The unfolding of events in *Under the Skin* emanates an affective sense of doing the present differently. The alien had seduced the disfigured man and brought him home to be eliminated, and then she decides against it. In the contemporary context of the undesirability of non-normative embodiment or disability, this scene imagines otherwise and makes a political statement on what kinds of bodies we can consider as belonging to the human landscape.

**Reimagining the present**

In this paper I have set out my argument that the film *Under the Skin*, and specifically a particular scene of encounter in this film, allows for a reimagining of non-normative embodiment, by troubling typical meanings assigned to disabled
bodies in representations. In addition, the posthuman perspective presents the viewer with the challenge of looking at how bodies may or may not fit into the normative category of the human. The film affirms the potential of visual culture to unlearn a regime of corporeal norms that maintains the marginalization of particular embodiments.

The following quote from Judith Butler captures the aim of my analysis: “What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to be something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?” (Undoing Gender 35). Images like the ones in Under the Skin defamiliarize how we look at bodies and thereby enable encounters that sustain non-normative bodies, ideally translating new ways of looking at bodies on the screen to the encounters between bodies on the street.

**Works cited**


