

Under the Skin (or aliens from another social class) and *Mood Indigo* (more inventiveness from Michel Gondry)

David Walsh

16 December 2014

Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* is loosely adapted from Michel Faber's 2000 science fiction novel of the same title. A visitor from another planet (Scarlett Johansson), whose appearance is that of an attractive young woman, drives a white van around Glasgow picking up strange men on the street. She appears to make certain each is unattached and alone before luring him into the depths of a building where he disappears into some sort of black liquid. The flesh is shipped off through space for some unknown, but presumably disagreeable purpose.

The "woman" and her "male" accomplice, who rides a motorcycle and assists her in her operations, seem cold and without feeling. In one sequence, she attempts to accost a swimmer, a foreigner, on a beach. He breaks off the conversation when he sees a couple in trouble in the rough surf and goes to their rescue, although without success. When the swimmer pulls himself exhausted onto the shore, the alien-woman strikes him on the head with a rock and drags him to her van, while her helper disposes of his belongings.

However, an encounter at night with a man suffering from a serious facial disfigurement, whose loneliness and longing go very deep, seems to affect the woman. She lets him live, abandons the van and takes off for the Scottish Highlands. Her growing awareness of her "humanness" enables her to establish some sort of relationship, briefly, but it also makes her vulnerable and creates the condition for a tragic denouement.

We know from media reports and interviews that many of the scenes were unscripted. Johansson, wearing a wig and disguising her American accent, was generally not recognized and improvised the dialogue in the various sequences, which were filmed with hidden cameras. (The participants were then asked if the footage could be used.) A scene in a crowded, hectic dance club was shot in the same fashion.

Johansson is appealing and pleasantly unself-conscious in her snippets of conversation. The images of decaying or industrial Glasgow and the Highlands are all striking. However, *Under the Skin* is a foolish and empty film in large measure. That many lonesome and desperate, and sometimes pained and inarticulate individuals walk the streets of Scotland's largest city (as well as Tokyo and Berlin and Moscow and Chicago...)

is not a revelation, at least to anyone who has the slightest contact with that reality. Glazer's work does not at any point delve deeper than registering that self-evident fact.

The film tells us nothing of significance about the people at whom it directs its various recording devices. If Johansson had been asked to speak to Glasgow residents in depth about their lives and conditions, their thoughts and feelings, *Under the Skin* might have had genuine value. The technology obviously exists for such impromptu and intriguing discussions. What real drama might have been uncovered!

Instead, we get this contrived and tepid piece, which almost seems to go out of its way, despite possibilities staring the director and his collaborators in the face, to avoid making important contact with present-day social realities. How is that seemingly odd and counter-productive choice to be explained?

The filmmakers, and this is a serious drawback when it comes to creating art, are not terribly interested in real life. What interests them are images and situations that might be considered "provocative" or "transgressive" and will generate the desired response from critics (which, of course, they have) and a certain portion of the film-going public.

Meanwhile *Under the Skin* conveys almost nothing concrete or meaningful about contemporary life. If anything, the inevitably skewed results of the film's impressionistic glance at present conditions will simply confirm the condescension or contempt the affluent middle class feels for the more impoverished layers of the population.

Glazer (*Sexy Beast*, 2000 and *Birth*, 2004) made his name directing music videos and television commercials. His work is clever and slick, but without much substance. He told an interviewer from *CineEuropa*: "The film talks about death, sex and other things, but these themes were not goals as such.... I don't make films by thinking about themes, I rather focus on the impression I get from the screenplay and on the feeling I want to communicate to the spectator. Here, it was really about...communicating this feeling of not belonging to our world." Speaking of his character's travels around Scotland, he told the *Economist*, "This is a person seeing ordinary life for the first time and trying to see how she fits in."

The true alien here is not Johansson's character, but Glazer and his crew, who might as well be from another planet as far as their understanding and feeling for the oppressed are concerned. *Under the Skin* has been listed as one of the best films of the year by supposedly reputable film publications. One can only shake one's head....

Mood Indigo

The latest film by the imaginative French-born filmmaker Michel Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, 2004; *Be Kind Rewind*, 2008; *The We and the I*, 2012), *Mood Indigo* bases itself on the 1947 novel by French writer Boris Vian (1920-1959), *L'Écume des jours* (in English, literally, *The Foam of Days*). Vian's book has been popular with generations of French adolescents and others for its comic-romantic, quasi-surrealistic, jazz-flavored, vaguely anarchistic sentiments.

The film's central character, Colin (Romain Duris), is financially comfortable when the story opens, single and looking for love. He enjoys the food and advice offered by his remarkable cook and advisor, Nicolas (Omar Sy). With his "pianocktail," one of numerous inventions, Colin makes drinks that vary with the notes played. An active and expressive mouse (Sacha Bourdo) also makes his home in Colin's apartment.

When Colin's friend Chick (Gad Elmaleh), a devoted follower of the philosopher Jean-Sol Partre, finds a partner, Alise (Aïssa Maïga), the former finds it almost too much to bear. Colin soon falls head over heels for Chloe ("Have you been put into an arrangement by Duke Ellington?," he asks her in the novel, referring to the 1940 jazz recording), whom he meets at a party where they dance the "biglemoi," complete with wildly elongated limbs.

After an excursion on a portable cloud and other adventures, Colin and Chloe eventually marry. On the honeymoon, however, she becomes ill. It turns out she has a water-lily growing in her right lung. At the same time, Chick's relationship with Alise is going nowhere, primarily because he spends every penny and every waking moment obsessed with Partre.

Colin's money is gradually disappearing, much of it going to medical bills. The formerly bright and sunny apartment grows dim and shrinks in size as Chloe's condition worsens. ("People don't change, only things!" proclaims Colin.) He looks for work, including in a facility that uses warmth from the human body to "grow" weapons. In the end, tragedy befalls almost all the characters.

To describe the events hardly does justice to Gondry's film, which is inventive and playful throughout. Appliances and food and pills come to life, churches turn into amusement parks,

characters seem to navigate under water without getting wet, birds make announcements over public address systems, rain falls in one half of the screen while the sun shines in the other, and so on.

Vian, who was a friend of the satirized Jean-Paul Sartre, was an interesting figure. An imaginary America was one of his enduring fascinations. He loved jazz (he writes in the foreword to *L'Écume des jours*, "Only two things really matter—there's love, every kind of love, with every kind of pretty girl; and there's the music of Duke Ellington, or traditional jazz") and wrote hardboiled novels under the name "Vernon Sullivan," an imaginary African American writer. His *I Spit on Your Graves* was a great success in France.

Vian's family had money, but the Wall Street Crash made life far more difficult. He suffered from ill health during his childhood, and a heart condition eventually led to his early death. He rushed through life, doing many things, some of them well, some of them not so well.

The provocative bohemianism and individualism of *L'Écume des jours* has its charms, but also its irritations. "The main thing in life is to leap to every possible conclusion on every possible occasion. For the fact is that individuals are always right—and the masses always wrong," he comments in the foreword. And adds that "the story is completely true since I made it up from beginning to end."

Vian's romanticism seems genuine enough. "An enormous silence spread out around them [Chloe and Colin], and the major part of the rest of the world faded into insignificance," he writes. And Vian has Colin assert, "It will take months and months for your kisses to quench the thirst they have inspired in me. It will take years and years to extinguish the kisses I want to shower on you—on your hands, on your hair, on your eyes, on the nape of your neck...."

Gondry's film captures some of the spirit of the novel. It will not be everyone's cup of tea, or even half-cup, but *Mood Indigo* is empathetic and amusing, and it is a pleasure to watch.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact