Under the Skin (2013)

Under the Skin, a Scottish film directed by Jonathan Glazer, aims to make some sort of statement about being out of place in the world as well in one’s own skin. Unfortunately, a lot of the plot elements are left to the viewer’s imagination, which makes it difficult to interpret the message. What the film lacks in clarity, it makes up for at least partially in visually interesting symbolism.

The film opens with what looks like objects aligning in space, with a sort of count down heard in the background, then some sort of smooth black egg forming. Nothing is stated directly, but the overlapping circles give the reader this effect. The jarring music gives the viewer a sense that whatever element this is is of an alien nature. Throughout, the very eerie and dissonant soundtrack helps to put the viewer in an unsettled mood.

The choice to cast Scarlett Johansson seems to have been made in order for her to clearly stick out as an american among actors with very pronounced scottish accents. When the actor’s character speaks, it is very clearly an outsider. As an american viewer, I had some trouble understanding other actors without subtitles, which left me relying on her lines in a lot of scenes. The are, however, sparse lines in general, which leaves the viewer a bit lost. Relationships between characters are not clearly defined, but implied, as is the case with the motorcycle-riding man who seems to clean up after what is revealed to be a smooth, featureless alien. The motorcycle character appears at different points to help the alien and to be her earthly guide, for example providing her with a dead body whose clothes she can steal, disposing of its victims’ bodies, in the case of the facially disfigured boy, and helping her to disguise herself.

There is a recurring theme of layers of skin and deception. The alien’s character puts on different clothes, and applies makeup to complete her transformation. Her disguise helps her to lure her victims, which we see her do in real life (her asking for directions, asking leading questions, etc) but also in a sort of dream environment in which we see her somehow trap her victims inside a pool where they will waste away until their bodies become bloated from the water, and they are absorbed, leaving only the skin. During this process, no explanation is given, but the victims do, in a way, become like the alien, with separation of body and skin. It is unclear whether the alien absorbs her victims. The main character is shown to examine her own body in a very section-driven, non-cosmetic way, as if she does not know how to interpret her own disguise. She is shown to not be alarmed at the boy’s disfigured face, but also to later abandon him naked in the middle of nowhere, so it is not from a human sense of empathy, but implied to be from her lack of familiarity with the human form.

The disrobing sequence at the beginning as shown as a transformation, while the disrobing at the end happens during a rape scene, and results in the alien being exposed. She is so clearly unnatural that the man in the forest comes back just in order to set her on fire. It is
unclear why, at the end, she is running from the man in the forest, but honks at him as well. It is established that she knows how to drive, so this was no mistake. Maybe she meant to lure him close, without understanding the different dynamics of this encounter. The alien’s skin peel reveal is framed as the climax of the film, yet fails to give the viewer any closure. Her origins and viewpoint are left a mystery, and no explanation is given for any of her choices. She is the focus of the film, but we do not learn her motivations. This seems to be meant as a disorienting tactic, to put the viewer in the alien’s shoes, in a way. The director has stated in an interview that it does not concern him if viewers do not understand everything. Clearly, this is not the aim of the film, then. It does a good job of putting the viewer in a position of confusion, bewilderment, and fear, which seems to be the alien’s general state, despite her ability to lure victims, she is unable to successfully navigate and live the world.