

Out of Hours Film

ALIEN FLYTRAP

Under the Skin

Directed by Jonathan Glazer

*"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us, To see
oursels as ithers see us!"*

To A Louse — Robert Burns, 1786

There's just not enough poetry in these pages so it's appropriate, given *Under The Skin*'s west of Scotland setting and its subject matter — in the guise of a beautiful, enigmatic woman, an extraterrestrial (Scarlett Johansson) cruises the streets of Glasgow luring men to a very nasty end, discovering a few truths about humanity and developing her own identity and sense of self along the way — to reference Scotland's Bard, Rabbie Burns. It also helps that Burns uses language as impenetrably alien to most ears as Johansson's willing and eager victims.

Writing in Broad Scots dialect, the subject of Burns' fascination is a louse, a common insect at home in a gentlewoman's bonnet where it hunts and feeds, forcing the poet to the realisation that ultimately we are all just prey, meat for parasites, and to lament that if we could but see ourselves through the predator's eyes, we'd be humbled. Nine years in the gestation, Jonathan Glazer's

loose adaptation of Michel Faber's cult novel *Under The Skin* invites us to do just that, to look dispassionately at humanity in all our bestial savagery and loving, glorious compassion from the perspective of Scarlett Johansson's alien siren as she hunts and renders into meat any man foolish enough to follow her home thinking he's in for the night of his life. We see ourselves as she sees us and what she sees is often as self-deluded as the young woman Burns' louse has chosen for its nest.

Inducing an almost trance-like state of creeping horror and wonder through its glacial, beautiful abstraction, the film ditches the overt politics and satire of Faber's novel in favour of deconstructing identity, female sexuality, masculine power, and the violence of the male gaze through Johansson's interactions with a largely non-professional, unsuspecting cast. She starts off in control, she need only playfully ask one ardent suitor, 'Do you fancy me?' and he's signing his own death warrant with the Cyrano-like compliment 'Aye, you're brand new!' Little does he suspect how right he is; we witnessed her birth at the beginning of the film and over its course we observe her slow evolution from dispassionate predator to uncomprehending prey as she learns to feel empathy, curiosity, and even

love, sampling the delights humanity has to offer (ok, cake, sex, and Scarlett Johansson exploring her nude body at any rate) before patriarchal society brutally reasserts its power over her.

In almost every scene, Johansson is wonderful, her alien Venus Flytrap a sexy, almost serene presence, an unfeeling, remote ideal of voluptuous femininity, capable of great cruelty (though never through malice) and compassion, whose exposure to humanity baffles and infects her, her flowering sense of self ultimately pruned as she gropes towards discovery.

Dark, hypnotic, and squalidly beautiful, *Under The Skin* is unique in today's cinema, a head-scratching poetic riddle willing to dazzle and disappoint audiences in equal measure.

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