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## TIFF13 Review: Under the Skin (2013)

Posted by Jared Bratt | September 11, 2013 | 1 Comment | 1958 views








I'll say this right now at the top (sans any longwinded build-up) in my humble summation, Jonathan Glazer's feature-return to cinema, *Under the Skin* (after a ten year absence from filmmaking) is an excellent film, dare I say masterpiece, but mark my words here... it is indeed a movie for a specific audience. I genuinely assure you, this isn't some film festival-induced hyperbolic hype of a tangent, but simply an honest reaction to a film that immediately captivated my jaded attention (call it "love at first sight") the instance its slew of visually arresting, hallucinogenic, almost Kubrickian, cluster of imagery smashed on screen.

Upon leaving the screening, I had no choice but to listen to the discontented rants of the thirty-something couple in front of me, "What'd you think?" the guy asked his girlfriend. "It made me want to go into a coma," she replied. The unfulfilled "hipsters" (sorry, I had to...) then started to compare and contrast the film to Edgar Wright's *The World's End* repeatedly emphasizing how slow they thought *Under the Skin* was.

First, let me just rhetorically say: Don't you just hate when you come out of a film so obsessively in love with it and you're then unavoidably subjected to someone's absolutist-talk about how much they think the exact film you're ready to proclaim "masterful" is not worth the very paper its ticket was printed on. I'm sorry, yes, taste is subjective, I've stated this before, but sometimes people's pompous tonal-delivery can throw my rational-sense out of whack, see last-night. Secondly, the film is only 108 minutes long, I mean come on, by today's standards, that's practically a short film — Was this movie actually, legitimately molasses-paced or maybe the fact that you're comparing it to something like the kinetically constructed *The World's End* says it all right there... no "in your face" action à-la Hot Fuzz translates into "boringggg." I don't know maybe I'm pretentiously spewing here, but I just don't get it sometimes. We just walked out of an intentionally designed "Art-House" Sci-Fi/horror flick from the director of *Sexy Beast* and *Birth*, and all people can use to classify its merits is by way of comparing it to *Lethal Weapon* — Okay, rant over, but like I said, this film is not going to be everyone's cup-of-tea — But please, I

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implore you, even if that's the case, please don't let personal taste in tone dictate *Under the Skin*'s label as a bargain-bin, direct-to-DVD watch because it most certainly is not. This is a film that is beyond competent, exquisitely well-acted, shot, composed, and cut.

Sporting short, pitch-black, biker-chick hair and red-ruby lips that seem to never lose their lipstick luster, Scarlett Johansson plays an alien freshly arrived on our planet and aching to learn more about her new found surroundings and the very species that inhabit said new found surroundings. In femme-fatale mode, we then follow Johansson's creature-of-the-night as she prowls contemporary Scotland on the hunt for drifting single-men of the loner status-quo. From there, the film gradually shifts into more of an odyssey-based structure where (always from Johansson's perspective) we begin to see how this "fish-out-of-water" becomes aquainted with the all encompassing joys and hardships attributed to that delicate, almost unclassifiable conduit of emotions known as the human condition.

Johansson's performance is first and foremost one that is entirely based in the realm of physicality than it is dialogue-driven. She probably only has a total of twenty-plus something lines in the movie, and the rest is left up to her demeanor, posture and facial expressions, or lack-there-of. Now I'll actually admit that there was indeed a point in the film where I found myself thinking that Johansson's persona was in fact so cold and distant that I was questioning whether or not I was truly with her, and behind her, on her earth-bound journey. While I recognized that this was the exact point (she's playing an alien Jared!!) I still found myself internally saying: "Come on, give me something to latch onto here." Nevertheless, with great testament to her quietly seducing performance, by the end of the film I was utterly invested in her role, 100% on-board and backing her every subtly-powerful move and gesture.

In a similar tonal-league as *Enter the Void*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or something like 2013's *Upstream Color*, *Under the Skin* firmly sits, virtually impenetrable by any sort of mainstream formulas, this is a film that makes no apologies for being affectionately crafted as an hypnotic cerebration of all things Lynchian. Fueling this alien-based lyrical-romp (again this is not hyperbolic regurgitation, I've had 16 hours to reflect on everything I'm writing here) the film possesses what is quite possibly one of the best instrumental scores to a film that I've heard all year, maybe even in the last two years. Picture a more titillating version of the score from *There Will Be Blood* combined with the eeriness derived from Danny Elfman's soundtrack for *Batman Returns*, and that should give you an idea of the soundscape throughout *Under the Skin*. In the Q&A after the screening, director Glazer mentioned that the score was actually written and composed by a 26 year old girl who had never composed music for a feature-film in her life (let that be a lesson to all of us... just because we haven't done it, doesn't mean we're not capable). *Under the Skin*'s music is one of the film's major characters here, and on many occasions, we don't learn anything through the movie's imagery or character actions on-screen, but through listening to the film's mood-inducing score, this is what guides us along the picture's ambient timeline. The film's music is what informs us of any truth-happenings.

I definitely recall when everyone and their mother were ranting and raving about *Sexy Beast* (I eventually peeped it once it hit DVD) and admittedly, I've never seen *Birth* in its entirety (though this has now climbed to the head of my to-do list) so I went into *Under the Skin* on somewhat neutral ground prepared to love it or hate it. I have to stress again, or shed some more light on my scale of standards here, but for me, something like Francis Ford Coppola's *Twixt*, that could arguably be representative as being a "bad" film... but *Under the Skin*, au contraire, this is not that. I mean all tonal taste aside, on a technical filmmaking level, you can just feel the masterful craftsmanship at work here which is why I would argue anyone claiming this film to be hackishly embarrassing. I just don't think this is the case with this one, and believe me, I was prepared to lobby otherwise.

Loosely based on the novel by the same name, Glazer has concocted a fresh/unorthodox take on the "alien comes to earth" genre of film that at times also reminded me of the experimental works of Stan Brakhage. It took ten years for Glazer to produce a film post-*Birth*, so here's hoping we don't have to wait another ten until his next outing, as I am now genuinely a fan of the man's brainwork. Here's a writer/director who is confidently thinking outside of already being outside the box, which is to stay if he gets any further away from said box, he'll be operating on whole other stratosphere, a whole other plain



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of existence... kind of fitting in regards to a film like *Under the Skin* – Keep watching the skies, I guess.

## Screening Times for Under the Skin

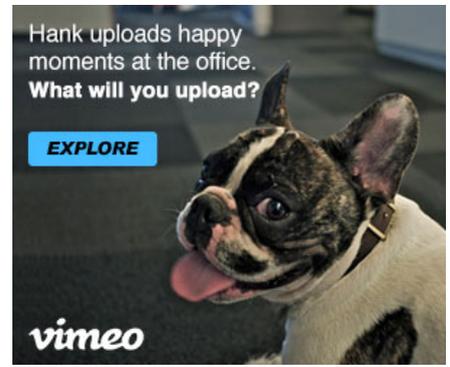
Monday September 9 Princess of Wales 10:00 PM

Tuesday September 10 Visa Screening Room (Elgin) 2:30 PM

Sunday September 15 Ryerson Theatre 3:00 PM

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## About Jared Bratt



Born and raised in Montreal, now based in Toronto, Jared is a writer/actor/editor/director keeping up the good fight against all things non-creative & soul-sucking.

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Film where main job of lead actress is to appear underwear or nude in every ten minutes or so is hardly excellent film let alone masterpiece. Another style over substance dud.

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