

OPENING CHOICES

Under the Skin: Cosmology and individuation

This paper will analyse the opening of *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2014) beginning at the end of the credits (45 seconds) and ending with the film's title (4 minutes 16 seconds). The opening sequence addressed here can be found on the film's blu-ray release, which is closer to the original cinema release than the DVD edition. The brief credits at the beginning of *Under the Skin* take the form of white lettering on a black background, culminating with the name of the star, Scarlett Johansson. For the following 22 seconds the screen remains black and the audio track silent until the appearance of a dot of white light centre screen. The dot becomes the central point of an emerging circle whose edges are partially delineated by two symmetrical curving lines of light. The image is suggestive of an emerging planet, an allusion, perhaps, to the spectacle of perfect, geometric planetary alignment presented in the first scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), which has since become a staple of the science fiction genre. The score by composer Mica Levi commences with the appearance of the dot of light, its lack of recognisable melody and use of rapid tremolos of synthesised strings creating a prickling play of discordant sounds that emphasise the alien, unknown quality of the emerging form.

The emergence of material form and light from darkness can be interpreted in the light of stories of cosmological creation from Greek mythology, which are most fully set out in Hesiod's *Theogony*. In the beginning, Chaos, 'a featureless void', is joined by Gaia, 'the Earth', and Eros, 'the universal principle of generation' (Clay 2003: 15-16). Emerging spontaneously from Chaos, Erebus (Darkness) and Night are the first to be influenced by Eros, their sexual coupling begetting their opposites: Aither (Brightness) and Day (2003: 16).¹ The differential creation of darkness and light marks a transition from parthenogenesis to sexual reproduction. Jenny Clay notes that across the *Theogony* 'negation – absence of qualities – precedes the positive [...] and in some sense receives its definition from its opposite number'; the utter void of Chaos thus precedes and is defined by the emerging forms of Gaia (2003: 15). While *Under the Skin* visually conforms to the classical tradition by presenting a transition from darkness to light, the film's shift from silence to sound also marks the musical score as a vivid presence, forming a contrast with the previous silence, which is retroactively marked as absence and linked to darkness. The music thus becomes a vital part of the diegetic world, the third differential element alongside light and form, joining darkness in a new cosmology.

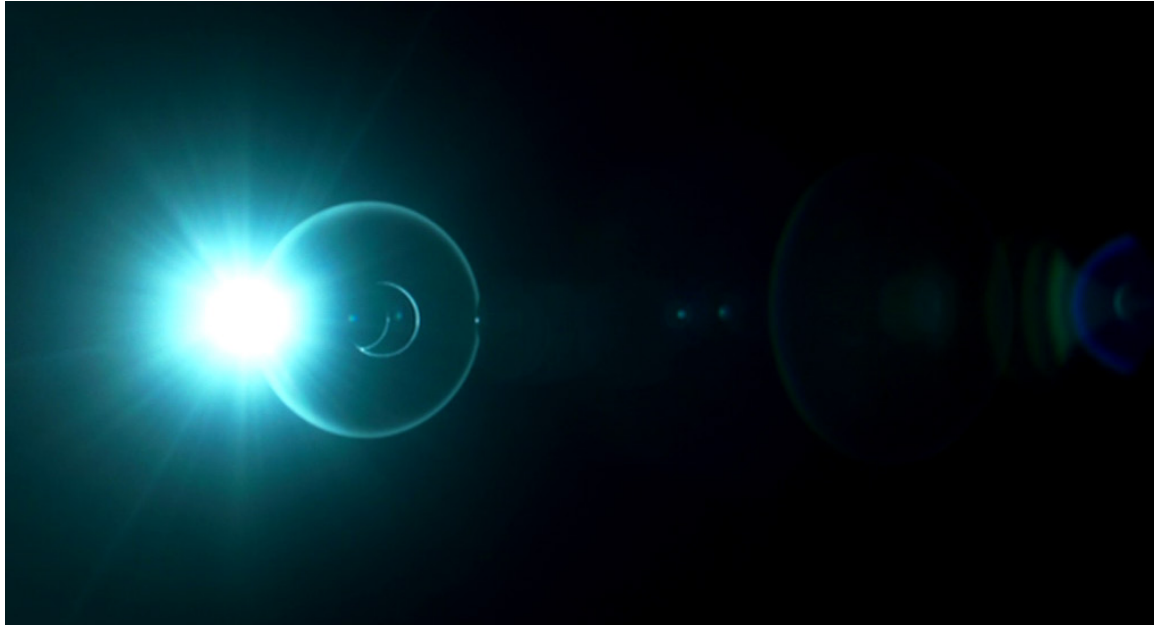
Comparison with the beginning of Kubrick's *2001* is instructive, particularly the version which commences with an entirely black screen for 3 minutes and 15 seconds while the sound of Gyorgy Ligeti's *Atmosphères* acts as an overture. Irena Paulus analyses the sound clusters that create the 'micropolyphony' of Ligeti's music, chords with 'a maximally dense arrangement of tones', which shift the listener's perception of register to a general sense of low, middle and high (2011: 105 fn 24). Michel Chion argues that *Atmosphères* plummets from high to low, offering an evolving single sound from which, 'sometimes individualised sounds emerge', including the trumpet and flute (2001: 96). The music is said to be 'on the threshold of formlessness, so close to what could be imagined as the sound of matter in continual transformation' (2001: 96). While both films commence in darkness, the absence of sound in *Under the Skin* can be said to evoke the nothingness of the void of Greek Chaos, while Ligeti's *Atmosphères* creates

a sense of chaotic materiality within which moments of order can be briefly discerned.

In *2001*, *Atmosphères* is followed by 'Sunrise' from Richard Strauss' *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which accompanies / orchestrates the spectacle of planetary alignment. Chion notes the 'vertical and triumphant quality of this theme': '[t]he opening musical phrase [...] begins with a long, low, "primitive" sound, and then turns into an ascending theme of extreme simplicity [...] the most basic intervals in music: perfect fifth, perfect fourth, octave.' (91). Kubrick's use of two very different classical pieces creates a shift from dense tones with occasional recognisable instrumental sounds to the separate intervals of an ascending melody. The separation of the notes of the melody and the geometrical revelation of each aligned planet creates a strong sense of a process of ordering, which is being carried out by a non-human / divine consciousness. The ascending, triumphant grandeur of Strauss' theme links the cosmological and the transcendent.

In contrast, Mica Levi's score for *Under the Skin* renders the emerging symmetrical structures of light profoundly unfamiliar and disturbing. The jagged sound of the rapid tremolos, both ascending and descending, works against the geometry of the image. The fluttering, multiple, pulse-like rhythms suggest a random, generative principle rather than the triumphant emergence of a single order. There is a cut to a closer shot of the light source its star-shaped form projecting multiple lines of white light, a pattern resembling a pupil surrounded by the lines of an iris, while concentric circles of brighter light emanate from its centre. The absence of scale means that the first two images of *Under the Skin* conjoin the cosmological – a new planet – with the individual – the emerging eye / I. At this point, the sustained crescendo of the music and the rapidity of the tremolos suggest a quickening that is forming a particular new life. The combination of music and image thus conveys the contingent emergence of new life from a chance combination of primal elements: light, form, darkness and sound, rather than charting the unfolding of a transcendent order.

This sense of a desecralised cosmology is emphasised in the third image. It resembles a scientific diagram and offers a side-on view of the structures featured in the previous image.



On the left, the star-shaped light source projects linear rays of light that illuminate the curves of a sphere, revealing a central hole. While on the right, a conically shaped source emits curved linear forms resembling sound waves, which change colour from blue to green. The sexual combination of the two elements, light and sound, creates a third manifest form. This initially appears as an insubstantial shadow of the sound waves, gaining dimension and dark solidity as it moves across the illuminated surface of the sphere, blocking the light, while the source of the sound waves gradually disappears.

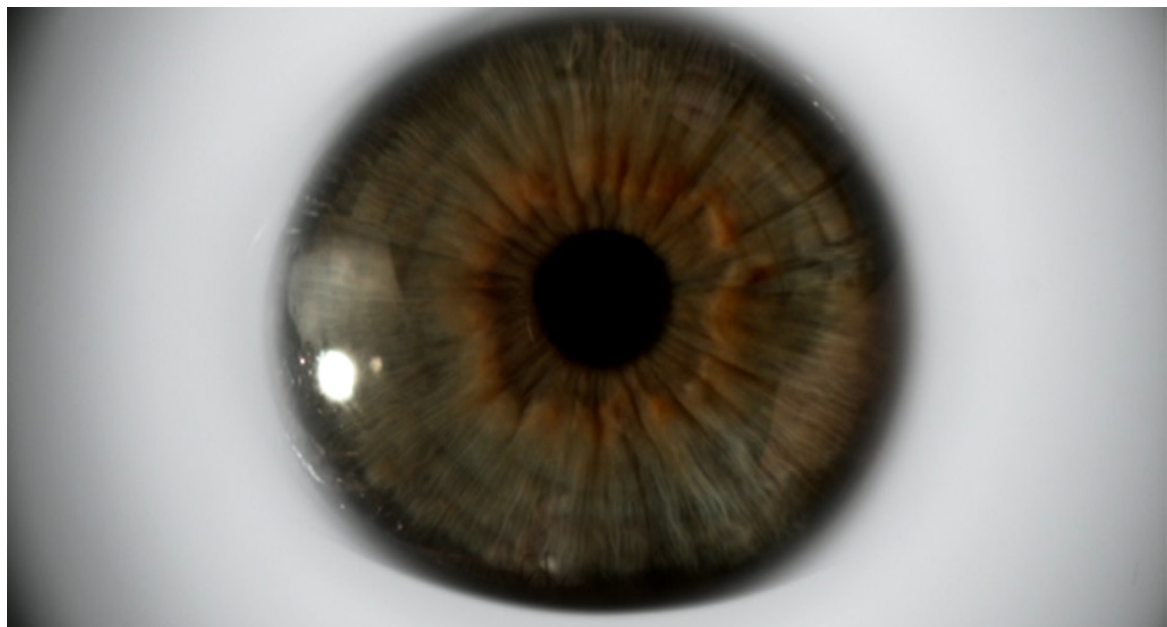
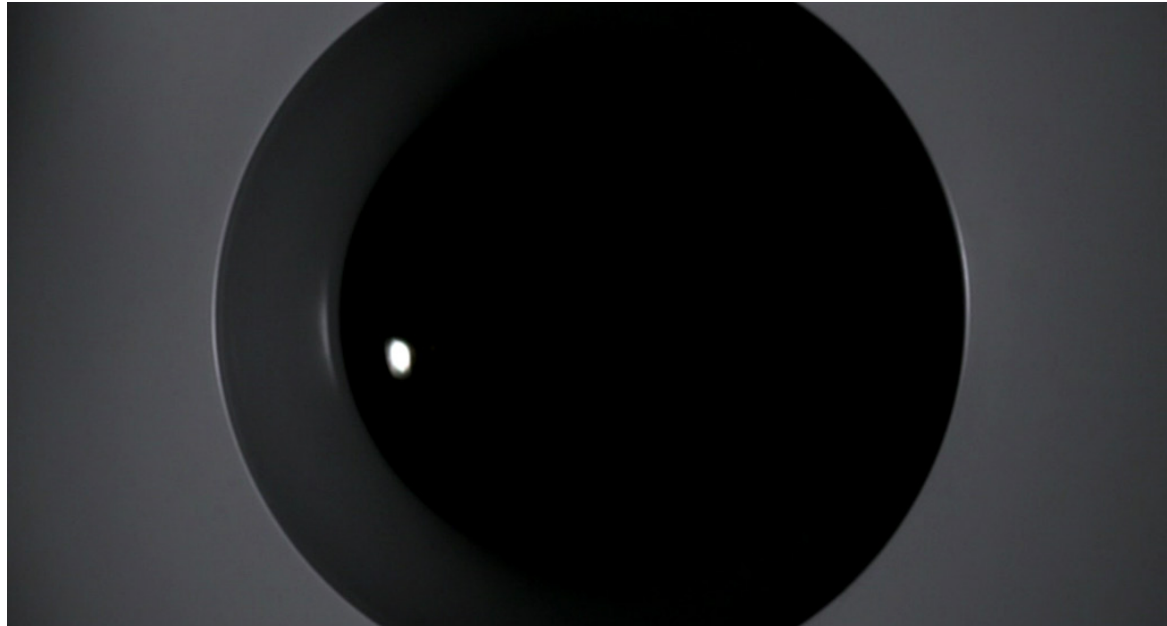
As the third form is made manifest the soundtrack changes, the music held in balance with a human female voice reiterating the sounds of consonants from the English alphabet including 's' and 't'. The film parallels the increasing materiality of the central form with the acquisition of the phonemes that constitute the basic building blocks of language. Sculpted from sound, this form of life is intimately and materially related to the sounds it emits. Interestingly, this differs profoundly from structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of language acquisition in which the structures of language are imposed upon a prior materiality. For example, Lacanian accounts construct immersion into the Symbolic order (the order of language and culture) as a rupturing of an initial harmonious materiality (Grosz 1989: 22-23). In contrast, the film's first presentation of sound as an intangible yet visible form creates a continuum between the primal element and language, which expresses the process of becoming material.

The movement of the third form across the surface of the sphere gives it solidity and density and it takes on a cylindrical shape as it gradually approaches the sphere's central hole. There is a cut to a closer, side-on view of the moving cylinder, its approach to the sphere resembling a space ship docking onto the mother ship. In line with familiar tropes of these scenarios in science fiction, the abstract circular and phallic shapes suggest a heteronormative sexual conjunction. As the cylinder penetrates the sphere the reflected light draws different patterns, taking the momentary form of a crescent moon before being eclipsed. The tropes of space exploration and planetary movement act as a continual reminder of the alien, non-human life form that is coming into being. At the same time, the soundtrack balances Levi's music with the female

voice, which is now emitting increasing quantities of phonemes in the form of hard consonants, 'd', 'z', 't', as well as the first discernable word: 'help'. The violin tremolos coupled with the word are suggestive of vulnerability, however, the repetition of the phonemes also indicates that the word may arise through random conjunctions of sound.

The next shot is a frontal presentation of the sphere, the cylindrical rod now creating a dark central circle, a point of light revealing its smooth, convex surface. The edges of the lighter sphere appear to contract as though the structure were turning and receding from view. The overall patterning of the shot remains symmetrical, a dark circle within a lighter circle. The female voice utters a plethora of words beginning with 'f': 'feel, film, films, foil, fail', before repeating the second and third. The sound acts reflexively, drawing attention to the film as a film and indicating the presence of its star, Johansson. However, her voice is rendered unfamiliar by the newly acquired English accent, noticeable in the repeated 'i' sounds of the word 'film'. This play on the familiar and the unfamiliar is a precursor to Johansson's appearance in the film, the brown wig replacing the star's bloneness in an endeavour to convey the unknown qualities of the alien protagonist. This strategy is only partially successful. While interviews with Glazer in the DVD extras attest to his desire to construct the alien protagonist as gender neutral by using the term 'it', the housing of alien sensibilities within the form of a star who is culturally constructed as a hugely desirable female body is problematic. Once embodied, the measure of what constitutes the alien is set by how far the protagonist fails to conform to gendered social expectations. This is particularly noticeable in scenes that draw attention to the discrepancy between the protagonist's lack of reaction and the viewer's reaction, such as the drowning at sea and the attack on the van by a group of youths.

There is a cut from the black and white image of the perfectly geometrical doubled circular structure to another black and white image featuring a jagged-edged inner circle, the abrupt transition giving the impression that the first has suddenly collapsed under pressure. This is followed by a colour shot of an extreme close-up of a human eye.



The close-up of the eye forms graphic matches with the two preceding shots. The dark edge of the collapsed inner circle matches the imperfect circularity of the edge of the iris. The shining point of light that previously illuminated the dark, convex surface of the inner circle is doubly reflected in the eye's surfaces, drawing attention to the convexity of the cornea and the bulging, transparent, moist layer of the conjunctiva. The graphic matches emphasise the imperfect symmetry of the human eye, drawing attention to its texture. The transition from black and white to colour brings out the variant shades of the iris, comprising autumnal browns from russet to conker and tinges of green. The colour palette is used again at the end of the film, forming a link between the physical, human form taken by the alien and the natural setting of the pine forest where she is murdered.

The contrast between the perfect symmetry of the conjunction of the sphere and cylinder that produces the doubled circle form, and the palpable, imperfect materiality of the human eye that pressurises and finally covers over this structure suggests a major disjunction between the emerging consciousness of the 'I' and the material 'eye'. The graphic matches coupled with the representation of the forming of new life set up a series of familiar oppositions, pitting the perfect, geometric, intangible (light and sound) and scientific against the geometrically imperfect, palpable, and viscerally material. The oppositions between the alien and the human are extended along familiar lines as the film progresses: logical versus illogical, reason versus emotion. This is illustrated in the scene on the beach in which the alien protagonist's reaction to the family drama is contrasted with that of a human stranger, a Czech tourist. She watches intrigued but unmoved, while he is impelled to attempt to rescue the parents from death by drowning.

The soundtrack accompanying the eye balances the music with new words: 'form, forms, cell / sell'. It is impossible to distinguish which of the final two is spoken, the soft 'ce / se' sound is repeated as though on the verge of saying 'self' but this moment of completed formation does not come and there is a cut to a white background featuring the film's title: Under the Skin in black lettering. The title draws attention to the disjunction between the inner formation of the alien and

its human exterior. The close-up of the eye acts has a significant precedent in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) whose opening sequence charting the cityscape of a futuristic Los Angeles also cuts to a close-up of a human eye reflecting the flares from an industrial chimney. In Scott's film, close monitoring of the contractions and dilations of the pupil of the eye during the Voight-Kampff test provides the means of distinguishing the replicants' responses from the humans they so closely resemble. Under the Skin draws on this presentation of the eye as the privileged physical site of both empathetic response and emerging consciousness, unsettling the former and exploring the latter.

In *Blade Runner*, the replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) endeavours to prolong his life beyond its 4-year term by confronting his makers, from the technician who designed his eyes to the owner of the Tyrell Corporation, before killing them. He comments to the former: 'If you could only see what I've seen with your eyes.' *Under the Skin* may be said to explore this possibility, seeing what the alien protagonist sees through our human eyes. At the same time, physical human embodiment, which is presented as pressurising the alien's perfect geometrical structures from the first sequence, profoundly shapes the non-human life form. The deadly sexuate encounters with male victims link back to the film's first presentation of cosmology. The men are gradually submerged in an unbounded liquid darkness – a volume without contours. Becoming a human, female body involves the imposition of bodily boundaries, specifically as a receptacle of a male body in penetrative sex. As the boundaries are imposed, so the predatory alien learns emotion – becoming fearful, becoming prey. The reversal from predator to prey is reflected by her loss of language – a marked loss given the formative role of sound in the alien's generation. Becoming a human female body is thus presented as a process of becoming receptive, silent, and, finally subjugated to deadly physical violence. Whether the film is offering a critique of the human when seen through our own eyes remains a key question.

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Catherine Constable is a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Warwick. Her research specialisms include film-philosophy, feminist philosophy, film theory and Hollywood cinema.

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¹ I have used the term 'sexuate' to indicate couplings of two differential elements that diverge from the binary sex roles of normative heterosexuality.