

# *Under the Skin: Science Fiction as Posthuman Cultural Ecology*

---

Rita Monticelli

## **Abstract**

Considering science fiction under the perspective of cultural ecology and as a 'special case' of re-mediation, *Under the Skin*, a novel by Michel Faber (2000) and the homonymous movie directed by Jonathan Glazer (2013) can be considered as 'imaginative counter discourses' exploring the posthuman subject. Science fiction, by offering multiple interpretative (im)possibilities of the real transcending the necessity of mimetic transparency, is an exploration of the possible laterals of experience. Both the novel and the movie, in interdependent ways, face in imaginative forms complex interspecies relations, gender violence, the separation between nature and technology, the exploitation of living beings in the consumerist world. 'Under the skin' indicates the communal humanity offended and claims the recognition of the interdependence between the self and the other, within the ecosystem and the media that 'mediate' and communicate them.

## **Keywords**

Science Fiction, Ecocriticism, Re-mediation, Under the Skin, Posthuman, Gender

# *Under the Skin*: Science Fiction as Posthuman Cultural Ecology

Rita Monticelli

By offering multiple interpretative (im)possibilities of the real transcending the necessity of mimetic transparency, science fiction is an exploration of the possible laterals of experience. Consumers and producers of science fiction are aware of the discrepancy between the virtual scene and the real world, and such awareness is an important part of the experience, because it unveils the real as a construct, and reveals its ideological, political, social and cultural assumptions, searching for a cultural ecology of the present, aiming for concrete, future actions.

Culture is seen today as a network of re-shapes, re-creations, quotations, repetitions, and transcoding of artefacts where the usual and disused separation between different media opens up reflections that imply interdependency rather than comparison. Science fiction, in itself a structural challenge to 'realism', has shaped itself as the representation of multimedia devices already within literary texts. In this sense we can talk of science fiction as a narrative technique already including complex forms of 'multimedia adaptations'. Science fiction indeed has configured the interaction between different media as a significant production that, from its very beginning, interacts with policies and counter policies, with social and cultural contexts, producing different stories that, in turn, induce different emotive and cultural responses.

In order to propose an analysis of the interdependence between Michel Faber's science fiction novel *Under the Skin* (2000) and Jonathan Glazer's film (2013), I would like to choose as my starting point a few

premises concerning science fiction as a special case of 're-mediation'<sup>1</sup> and as eco-criticism.

In their transformation of the original text, adaptation and remediation also transform the 'original' into its future receptions. Remediation in science fiction could also be the attempt of repairing what is irreparable in reality in order to inspire concrete action in the present. In science fiction, the accent placed on the body as a space for re-mediation and experimentation shows, yet again, to what extent cultural processes are always joined to the media informing them: that is how technological media, to quote Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), acquire their cultural meaning in their very interaction, in their paying homage to or challenging previous media such as painting, photography, film, television. Literature, in this process involving new media, is still today a crucial space for re-signification, elaboration and (re)mediation. In this direction, adaptation, in this case from novel to film, becomes, to quote Linda Hutcheon, re-mediation, translation and inter-semiotic transposition between different systems (Hutcheon 2006).

Although Bolter and Grusin's work refers to remediation as the main feature of the new digital media, their analysis is applicable to the film *Under the Skin*, because here it is exactly a case of repurposing: «to take a "property" from one medium and reuse it in another» (Bolter – Grusin 2000: 45). It is not a coincidence that the two authors use as constant model Kathryn Bigelow's 1995 dystopian science fiction film, *Strange Days*. The fact that they use it for the play of virtual media deployed, moves to the background what I am interested in, namely that science fiction is in itself a reusing, repurposing, borrowing and refashioning of media (Bolter – Grusin 2000: 45-50). Science fiction thematises the inseparability of mediality and reality, thus re-signifying reality through those very media. In science fiction,

---

<sup>1</sup> Remediation here refers to Jay David Bolter's and Richard Grusin's theorizations (2000) and to science fiction as a device implying interactions among and transformation of different kinds of technologies.

remediation is textual and political re-form of the real: «all mediation remediates the real» (Bolter – Grusin 2000: 59).

## **Eco-Criticism and Cultural Ecology**

Hubert Zapf, starting from Gregory Bateson's *Ecology of Mind* redefines eco-criticism and cultural ecology not merely as interaction and interdependency between ecological processes, natural energy cycles, and cultural processes, but also as a holistic process, as a «dehierarchized concept of mutual dependency between the (human) organism and its (natural) environment, subject and object, culture and nature» (Zapf 2010: 137). A process, I would add, that involves the media that re-mediate and 'produce' these relations. The ecology of the mind is, today, a pluralistic, holistic process of analysis of media-multimedia, psychic, vital (bios) and cultural ecosystems, in a systemic methodology. Such processes can be adapted and transferred to the cultural ecosystems of art and literature as forces for «selection and self-renewal» (Zapf 2010: 137-138). From this perspective of cultural ecology, the inner landscapes produced by modern culture and by both individual and collective awareness are as important as the external 'environments'. Literature and other forms of cultural imagination and creativity are necessary to produce the richness, diversity and complexity of the inner landscape of the mind and of society, including emotions and interpersonal communication, communications that are «threatened by impoverishment by an increasingly overeconomized, standardized, and depersonalized contemporary world» (Zapf 2010: 138). Zapf shows how literature per se may be described as a symbolic, and particularly powerful means of 'cultural ecology'. Literary texts have explored not just the complex scenarios of social and cultural relations with 'natural' ecosystems, but also the natural and cultural relations between human and non-human through creative acts of regression and future projections of eco-social and systemic relations.

Within this perspective, eco-criticism<sup>2</sup> in literature concerns the analysis of discriminations linked to the differences of species, gender, ethnicity, and dis-abilities. This type of literature

[...] draws its cognitive and creative potential from a threefold dynamic in its relationship to the larger cultural system – as a cultural-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counterdiscourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse. It is a textual form which breaks up ossified social structures and ideology, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated. (Zapf 2010: 138)

Such literature is a counter discourse to economic, political and normative forms of exploitation and ideological interpretation/classification of human life, and shatters one-dimensional visions of the world and the self, opening them up towards what has been repressed or towards the excluded other, in its most diverse forms (Zapf 2010: 138). Although the accent, in eco-criticism, is placed on the relationship between nature and culture (nurture), nature and technology and on the human/non-human systems, the analysis of cultural ecology opens itself up to a reflection on literature and in particular on science fiction as a cognitive ecosystem and as a critical, reintegrating interdiscourse employing science, technology in its relation with nature. Science fiction displays a dialectics between reality and (im)possible experiences of the world: the separation between fiction, science, and social reality is illusory.

Science fiction, amongst the various narrative genres, may actually be considered as a particularly powerful eco-critical discourse. In the case of *Under the Skin*, science fiction as eco-criticism will thus not be understood as a mere criticism of the environment and the relationship between humans and non-humans (relationship which will be overturned inducing a deconstruction and an overtaking of this

---

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Slovic - Rangarajan - Sarveswaran 2014; Glotfelty - Fromm 1996; Iovino - Oppermann 2014.

dichotomy itself), but also as a counter-narrative on the relationship between identity and difference, nature and culture, flesh and technology. In this perspective, such science fiction is an 'imaginative counter discourse', that is a disposition and a (textual) stand taken on the matter of the spaces of exclusion and marginalization (through the exposition of the cultural construction of the very same discourses), and their counter-exposition in critical signifiers capable of producing transformative, creative energy.

Using technology as 'techné', as internal system, science fiction can be a remediation of the real; it can become a means of continuous cultural renewal between spaces of suppression and resistance and, compared to other narrative forms, it is an exploration that includes natural, psychic, and cultural systems investigating their own interactions in imaginative forms<sup>3</sup>.

### **The case *Under the Skin***

From this perspective, *Under the Skin* can be analysed as a remediation of the book: an experimental film uniting and untying different visual media (cinema, video clip, electronic music, digital devices) translating the book into other forms. As its director Glazer himself states, «I did not aim at making a film from the book, but I wanted to transfer the book in another medium». That is to say, to achieve a sort of *mediamorphosis* (Fidler 1997). In this critical direction, *Under the Skin* (the book and the film together) can be considered as interdependent imaginative counter-discourses: a unitary system,

---

<sup>3</sup> As highlighted by Louis Armand, the issue of technology is to be studied on a background of social, political, cultural and philosophical aspects, without forgetting literature and art. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the fact that each of these discourses possesses a technological dimension and that the notion of discourse itself is fundamentally linked to the idea of technology – be it not just technique, or 'techné', in the sense of art, artifice, but also 'craft', artefact, or 'system' or 'method in doing' (Armand 2006: 1-4).

albeit a heterogeneous one, and developed through different forms and media.

Faber's text is, amongst many interpretations, an animalist eco-criticism of consumerist capitalism, funded on the relationship between human and non-human beings. The book has been defined in different ways according to the diverse main lines of interpretation: «[i]t is a novel about how life turns out for us all, regardless of our physical make-up and where we call home» (Soyka 2000); «[i]t is a novel about what is superficial and what is not, what is simple and what is profound» (Ratzan 2013), as a novel of subversion, a novel that shows that «[t]he monster without is the monster within» (Soyka 2000); it could be considered as a dystopian novel, a critical dystopia, a horror novel, a Bildungsroman, a story of trans-formation, a postmodern novel, a novel on the road, travel literature, thus showing science fiction as a hybrid genre.

Published in 2000, *Under the Skin* centres on the story of an alien sent to earth, Isserley, who has been transformed into a woman to abduct men, particularly muscular, as they have to serve as meat for the alien elites. It is significant that the hitchhikers she picks up on the roads of Northern Scotland, in her red Corolla, are a special kind of human beings, they are very fit physically, but they do not fit into the Scottish environment; they are ex-centric and, as the narrative shows, already condemned by the dominant society<sup>4</sup> to be 'commodities' in the capitalist system, to be deprived of their language and sexuality to be processed, packed and transformed into meat and distributed to the very high classes of the alien world. These 'vodsel' (this is how humans are called by the aliens), are fugitives, outsiders, and losers, with no family and ties, strangers and homeless, unemployed, while Isserley – coming from the working class – sees herself as an elf and a freak, thus anticipating the double bind of being a strange case of human and an exploited subject, sharing a communal 'alienation' with the humans. In

---

<sup>4</sup> «In a way, the vodsel community itself seemed to be selecting those of its members it was content to have culled» (Faber 2011: 182).

order to become human she has undergone several surgical operations, but she will finally be transformed into a 'real' woman only through the devastating experience of rape. Along this route, she identifies with nature that is the soil that nurtures her life and soothes her physical and spiritual pain. Always a hybrid, an in-between subject, she does not fit into anything; both sympathetic (towards the end of the novel) and indifferent, even aggressive, she stays in this ambivalent space till her final decision that should connect her with the natural world and the universe. Significant it is also the meeting with Amlis Vess<sup>5</sup>, the vegetarian son of the owner of the company Isserley works for, who paradoxically seems to be one of the fewest to show a sort of sympathy toward the men/vodsels<sup>6</sup>.

The novel's textual 'techné' centres on the reversed relationship between humans and aliens and on the becoming woman of the alien protagonist. Nature is the substratum accompanying all of the narration, nature as Isserley's mirror, and as mediation between human and non-human. Humans are transformed into meat by the aliens through the labour carried out by Isserley who approaches and seduces men according to the stereotypes and canon of human femininity and brings them to the underground vaults where they will be deprived of their bodies and identity. Isserley has become a woman according to human canons and her body has become a hybrid, a cyborg where nature and technology have blended without possibility of separation between nature and culture, flesh and technology, as mediation between identity and difference. In this psychic, cultural,

---

<sup>5</sup> The encounter reveals Isserley's self-recognition as 'other' from her original self and as an in-between human/non-human being: «Being a freak was so wearing. Amlis Vess, never having seen her before, would recoil. He'd be expecting to see a human being and he would see a hideous animal instead. It was that moment of... of the sickening opposite of recognition that she couldn't cope with» (Faber 2011: 77)

<sup>6</sup> Very important is the question of language – that we cannot debate here – that shows how it does not only describe reality, but how it creates and establishes it.



natural and technological system, Isserley will be both the agent of mediation between the two worlds, and the scapegoat of the system. The novel also foregrounds gender and the relationship between identity and otherness as artificial constructions through the relationship between human and non-human.

The film was released in 2013, many years after the publication of the novel and was received in controversial ways. If, for instance, Peter Hulm welcomes it as a «reverse thriller», he nevertheless criticises it as potentially sexist (Hulm 2015); Peter Bradshaw, reviewing the movie for *The Guardian*, considers it «very erotic, very scary», and recognises and praises the strong visual impact of the movie: «The quicksilver shapes of futurist bodyhorror fantasy are scuffed with social-realist grit, but modified, too, with Jonathan Glazer's brilliant flair for visual impact» (Bradshaw 2014)<sup>7</sup>. This famous/infamous movie also has addressed issues concerning sexism and forms of racism and discrimination, and, as well as the novel, it can also be reread in terms of femicide and violence against women. The film proposes a story reinterpreted through avant-garde cinematic experimentations, and transforming the film in a series of video clips (Glazer started his artistic career as video clip director for Radiohead, Massive Attack, Jamoroquai and many others) remaining, however, faithful to some of the text's deepest meanings, illuminating them. He also employs experimental music and many silences and whispered, not always discernible, languages, functional to the artistic rendering of Isserley as existentially and culturally alien to the world of humans. The film centres on gender difference and the use/abuse of the female both in the psychic sphere and in the cultural/economic one, through the representation of the double alienation of identity and otherness, of human and non-human, within the cultural ecosystem of marginalisation and alienation where nature is the mirroring space of

---

<sup>7</sup> The reviews of the movie are many and go in very different directions; especially interesting are the ones that analyse its intertextuality and its citations in comparison with other movies. See for instance: Hulm 2015; Piras 2015.

this marginality. The alien becomes a woman, as in the book, through the experimentation of mirroring oneself into the marginal (human) female other, her anthropomorphic appropriation, and eventually by experiencing human violence on her own skin: an experience that will draw her nearer to humans, overcoming the dichotomy between human and non-human, but through the rape of her own (woman's) body. Under the skin, (alien) nature is the same for men turned into meat and for women used as sexual objects by the humans.

The film begins with the process of Isserley's construction from alien to human following the same path as the new-born child until her transformation into an adult. First of all we see a technological object that could be both the eye of the camera, the mechanical eye of the alien and the space ship from which Isserley might have arrived on earth. Unlike the novel, where Isserley is gradually unveiled as an alien, in the film it is immediately clear that the protagonist is a special kind of (human) being in formation. Isserley learns the language and pronounces it through morphemes that recall the baby talk of new-borns (See Figure 1), learns to see gradually, first in black and white, then in colour.

The sounds surrounding the newly born woman are first muffled, indistinct, become recognizable little by little, and then reveal their meaning. Glazer and the producer James Wilson in an interview appeared on *The Guardian* reveal their experience in making the movie, that seems to mirror Isserley's construction: "Elaborate special effects sequences were tossed. 'It was like a big, extravagant rock band turning into PJ Harvey', Wilson says. While Glazer was obsessed

over how the world might really look to new eyes. "I liked having it in my head. Finding the logic, the images. It's like learning an alphabet, then a language, then writing in it, then trying to write poetry in it." (Leigh 2014)

The separation between the natural world and the world of machines and technology is depicted, as Manuel Piras reminds us (2015), as a fog that separates two worlds, one urbanistic and machinic



Figure 1

and the other naturalistic and incorrupt. In the book the world of aliens is foggy and dark, there is no sea and no clear sky, its representation is that of a polluted world; in the movie the separation between technology and nature through the fog and mist also marks Isserley's identification with the natural world as a source of freedom and identity<sup>8</sup>.

While in the novel Isserley's haunt for hitchhikers starts in the car where they are anesthetised and ends in the underground of the mansions where they are transformed into meat, in the movie the captured men, naked, are swallowed and drown into a black pool, while Isserley moves smoothly over it (See Figure 2).

The filmic remediation of the transformation into alien 'meal' unites the seductiveness of femininity through the black reflecting surface that swallows the naked, vulnerable and unaware other, who sinks in what seems not only to mimic the Lacanian mirror as 'other than the self', but also the dangerousness of femininity functional to the alien system through the mimesis of the human<sup>9</sup>. The black mirror is both the Lacanian evolutionary mirror phase and desire as life and death drive: this scene is therefore also a reflection of the dreams and nightmares that seem to accompany human sexuality. However, as in the novel, but especially here, what is represented is the nightmare of the woman as a devouring being, the one who transforms the sexual act into death.

---

<sup>8</sup> In the novel, the idea of this blurred space is signaled by the word murky (grey, gloomy, dark) that 'translates' for the alien world the human 'mercy' as the request of help from the captivated men. Murky is the word she pronounces while being raped, misspelling the word mercy, word that does not exist in her alien world (and actually as a practice in the earthly reality): «Desperately, she searched for the right word, the word that might make him stop. It was a word she knew, but had only ever seen written – in fact, only this morning, a vodsel had spelled it out. She'd never heard it spoken. "Murky", she pleaded» (Faber 2011: 193).

<sup>9</sup> Piras compares *Under the Skin* to *Only God Forgives* by Nicolas Winding Refn (2013), with which it would form a Lacanian diptych: on female and male sexuality respectively (Piras 2015).



Figure 2



Figure 3

Being functional, Isserley is doubly alien: as a woman and as a stranger in the new world, and in her own social system. Rereading the book in the light of this scene, which could be the subject of in depth examination from other socio-cultural and psychoanalytical directions, the conditioning, not just cultural but also symbolical and psychic, of the mutual fears and dangers of difference appears to be even more powerful, especially when this difference is functional to the system of capitalistic marketing (turning into meat) which makes both seducer and seduced exploited and used in the chain of transformation of the human into the non-human. What the film integrates and remediates is exactly the symbolic system (made of culture and psychic energies) as constructed on the exploitation and functionality of the marginal as anti-human decoy. If the film does not present itself as animalistic criticism, as Faber does, it however illuminates, by transforming the technical mediums from narrative to visual, the symbolic mirror of the law of the father in a mortal trap for the relationship between genders and that between identity and difference.

The power of the final scene where the alien reveals herself to us, under the conventional woman's skin she has stolen and mimicked from other images and female flesh to perform as woman, reveals Isserley as made from the same substance of the black mirror: signifier and signified of being alien as a mirror of the human dehumanisation of the (female) 'other' (See Figure 3).

The last scene unveils the book<sup>10</sup> and the film as a meta-narrative on the body and the self as material and symbolic terrains, both

---

<sup>10</sup> In the last section of the novel, Isserley makes the decision to 'go home' and the way in which she decides to return to the 'alien' world can be interpreted in different ways: «I want to go home, she thought, but her decision had been made: she had no home anymore» (Faber 2011: 286); «The aviir would blow her car, herself, and a generous scoop of earth into the smallest conceivable particles. The explosion would leave a crater in the ground as big and deep as if a meteorite had fallen there. And she? Where would she go? The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air. Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would be-

hypermediated and hypermediatic. Reading both mediums leads to a further consideration: the body as remediation of several technologies of representation. In *Under the Skin* the body is a medium, a material terrain 'decorating' the humanity/inhumanity of human/non-human relationships. In defining the female body as a multimediated construction, Anne Balsamo takes into consideration bodybuilding and cosmetic surgery:

In cosmetic surgery too, the body, often a woman's body, is technologically reconstructed, although not in this case by the woman herself but often by a male surgeon. Balsamo shows how surgeons visualize the female body as an object for cosmetic reconstruction. [...]

As Balsamo points out, the remediations of the cosmetic surge often serve to reproduce signs of the cultural ideal of "natural beauty. (in Bolter - Grusin 2000: 237-238)

In the book *Under the Skin* the latter is structural surgery and in the film it is transformative integument. In both cases it is an 'over-the-skin' transformation, giving meaning to the psychic and political economy of the two texts. Here, the body is flesh-technology and cultural energy at the same time: its representation is tissue and the technological means informing/creating it. In the process, the body is shattered, fragmented, a body in pieces<sup>11</sup>; the 'natural' body incarnates

---

come part of the sky. [...] Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun» (Faber 2011: 299). The transposition and adaptation of this scene into the movie, makes more explicit the violence that has led Isserley to this decision; while the movie ends with Issrley's 'particles' ascending to the sky like snow while some of them linger and stop onto the camera.

<sup>11</sup> «The more he looked at this girl, the weirder she appeared. [...] Strangest of all, though, was her skin. Every part of her flesh that he could see, except for her pale smooth breasts, had the same peculiar texture to it: a downy look, like the hide of a cat recently spayed, just beginning to grow



the features of technological images, uniting the alien to the representations of femaleness – mimetic, but not transparent. The body of the alien, once become a woman, surgically assembled, is re-mediated through the re-revisions of the cultural versions of the female body and its uses and abuses (the rape). It is also a transfer of one medium into the other (under the skin). The body thus shows itself as a modifiable structure. Accordingly, the self is incarnated and re-mediated from the body. Feminist theories are particularly aware of the body as medium and interplay of media, of the interaction of technology and the flesh, of the relationship between nature and culture.

Isserley is represented as a cyborg creature, very near to the cyborg as envisaged by Donna Haraway, even if its mobile qualities are turned into a dystopian experience in both the novel and the movie. Haraway's cyborg is a creature of social reality and fiction, a cybernetic organism and a hybrid of machine and organism (Haraway 2016: 5), science and nature, crossing the boundaries between human and non-human, species, materiality and thought, flesh and machine, nature and technology. It also transcends gender polarizations. The cyborg is a deconstruction of Western traditions and the postmodern embodiment of difference and identity together. The cyborg re-writes identity as affinity and bonding, it suggests an alliance more than 'natural' data:

The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of "Western" science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.

---

back the fur. She has scars everywhere: along the edges of her hands, along her collarbones, and especially on her face» (Faber 2011: 205).

The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. [...] No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. (Haraway 2016: 7-9)

The body is thus an imaginative counter-discourse and an integrative interdiscourse, through the display of the media that produce it, where it is no longer possible to separate the materiality of the body from media informing it nor its historical and cultural representations. The final scene where the body of the alien (under the skin) and the woman as integument, plastic and aesthetic surgery, reunite in their destruction and in their return to particles and atoms falling from the natural world, signalling both the inhumanity of humans and the 'natural' common belonging, without separation between human and non-human. But they also signal the female body as terrain for violence and abuse. Simultaneously, they show the body as representation and remediation of the self that dissolves itself going beyond the barriers between human and non-human, returning to the communal elementary shared substances. Isserley's frailty is in fact part of a communal experience of the human condition. Judith Butler's recognition of this form of fragility starts from precarity as shared humanities. In her performative theory of assembly, the communal condition of political and individual vulnerability is the connective tissue that the living bodies share under the diverse skins of experience (Butler 2015). Vulnerability and precarity also signify disappearances from the apparatus machinery of the establishment. Borrowing Butler's words, the jointed reappearance of bodies in public spaces and social movements can be seen in the case of *Under the Skin* as a representation onto the scene of a communal posthuman condition of precarity that does not only claim an individual recognition, but the recognition for all human and non-human beings.

Isserley, overcoming the dichotomy between human non-human is a strange case of a posthuman subjectivity, tracing the continuities and discontinuities between a 'natural' self and a technological posthuman condition. Katherine Hayles reconsiders the posthuman in a positive way:

If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (Hayles 1999: 5)

Although Isserley is also a scapegoat as in classical dystopian science fiction, the sacrificial element that allows the critique implicit in and induced by the dystopian world, her posthumanity calls for empathy and solidarity for a reciprocal 'survival'.

Rosi Braidotti's rewriting of the posthuman body in a nomadic perspective envisages identities as fluid and flexible, embodying the inseparability between culture and nature, technologically mediated cultures and the globally connected societies. The nomadic subjects in the posthuman era claim a politics of affirmation that challenges the negative view of the posthuman condition and nihilism. Nomadic subjects are part of a posthuman policy that recognises the interdependence of all humans but also between human and other species, and their habitats together with the technologies that mediate them: «The posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes a profound interconnection between the self and the other, including the non-human or "earth" others» (Braidotti 2013: 59). Braidotti's interpretation of the posthuman does not work on shared vulnerability as alliance, but her politics of affirmation does not dismiss this shared position of disadvantage.

## **“Soyez réalistes: demandez l’impossible”<sup>12</sup>: science fiction as a tool of transformation**

Science fiction is a sensorium of what is wrong in society, and also a potential cognitive tool for self-renewal, where biophilic and multimedial energies may find a symbolic space for expression and reintegration in the ecology of cultural discourses and through the exposition of the media structuring them. And the empathy we feel for the common damaged and abused humanity (in the book and film) once again signals the poetic and political function of science fiction for an urgent reconsideration of the human/non-human relationship in terms of overcoming ethnic and gender difference. The film is a remediation of the critique-analysis of the relationship between genders and between ‘differences’ both in the psychic sphere and in their social symbolic construction.

Science fiction as eco-criticism is, in this example, an ecology of the knowledge of the processes of biopsychic and cultural life, and their transformations through technology and social experiences. This cultural ecology reveals the necessity of being aware of the uncanny (eco-systemic) interdependence of life and death, identity and difference, and of all different species.

In this re-reading, empathy and solidarity are also the overcoming of Western centrality in favour of a more global constellation, where the polarity between ego and outer world, between freedom, social and natural solidarity is overcome and reconciled (Dallmayr 2016: 3). Empathy, then, is a foundational tension in eco-critical science fiction. Thematised in *Under the Skin* through Isserley’s ‘metamorphosis’, empathy reveals itself as a new way to reread the relation between human and non-human, between identity and difference, male and female. If for Descartes admiration was one of the primary passions,

---

<sup>12</sup> “Be realistic, demand the impossible” was one of the most famous slogans of the French unrest in May 1968.

empathy and solidarity seem to become vital for a different vision and construction of the world.

## Works Cited

- Armand, Louis, *Literate Technologies: Language, Cognition, Technology*, Prague, Litteraria Pragensia, 2006.
- Bolter, Jay David - Grusin, Richard, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999), Cambridge (Ma) - London, MIT Press, 2000.
- Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, EBook, 2013.
- Butler, Judith, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge (MA) - London, Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Dallmayr, Fred, *Freedom and Solidarity. Toward New Beginnings*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2016.
- Faber, Michel, *Under the Skin* (2000), Edinburgh - London - New York - Melbourne, Canongate, 2011.
- Fidler, Roger, *Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media*, Thousand Oaks - London - New Delhi, Pine Forge Press, 1997.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll - Fromm, Harold (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens (GA) - London, The University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Haraway, Donna J., *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in The Late Twentieth Century* (1984), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London - New York, Routledge, 2006.
- Slovic, Scott - Rangarajan, Swarnalatha - Sarveswaran, Vidya (eds.), *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism*, Lanham - Boulder - New York - Toronto - Plymouth (UK), Lexington Books, 2014.

Zapf, Hubert, "Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology and Literary Studies", *Ecozon@*, 1.1 (2010): 136-147.

## Sitography

Bradshaw, Peter, "Under the Skin Review – 'Very Erotic, Very Scary'", *The Guardian*, 13.03.2014,

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/13/under-the-skin-scarlett-johansson-peter-bradshaw>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

Hulm, Peter, "Polarizing Sci-Fie: The Fantasy Machine. *Under the Skin* (2013)", *pomopress*, 15.04.2015,

<http://www.pomopress.com/films/skin.php>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

Leigh, Danny, "Under the Skin: Why did This Chilling Masterpiece Take a Decade?", *The Guardian*, 06.03. 2014,

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/06/under-the-skin-director-jonathan-glazer-scarlett-johansson>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

Piras, Manuel, "Under the Skin", *Lo specchio oscuro*, 01.04. 2015,

<http://specchioscuro.it/under-the-skin/>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

Ratzan, Richard M., "Under the Skin", *NYU Langone Health*, Last revised 04.12.2013,

<http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/12759>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

Soyka, David, "Under the Skin", *Bookreporter*, 23.07. 2000,

<https://www.bookreporter.com/reviews/under-the-skin>, online (last accessed 15/04/2019).

## Filmography

*Under the Skin*, Dir. Jonathan Glazer, UK, USA, Switzerland, 2013.

## **The Author**

### **Rita Monticelli**

Rita Monticelli teaches English literature, gender studies, theories and history of culture at the University of Bologna. Her research interests include utopia, dystopia and science fiction in literature and visual culture, memory and trauma studies, the global novel, postcolonial theories and criticism, orientalism, and travel literature. Among her publications: *The Politics of The Body in Women's Literature* (2012), *Topografie delle culture* (2011, co-edited with R. Vecchi), and the special issue of *de genere* "Small Island? Transnational Solidarity in Contemporary Literature and Arts" (2017, co-edited with L. Mari). She is member of international European research networks centred on cultures of equality. She coordinates the international M.A GEMMA (Women's and Gender Studies) for the University of Bologna. She directs the Research Centre for Utopian Studies.

Email: [rita.monticelli@unibo.it](mailto:rita.monticelli@unibo.it)

## **The Article**

Date sent: 30/04/2019

Date accepted: 15/05/2019

Date published: 30/05/2019

## **How to cite this article**

Monticelli, Rita, "Under the Skin: Science Fiction as Posthuman Cultural Ecology", *Immaginare l'impossibile: trame della creatività tra letteratura e*

Rita Monticelli, *Science Fiction as posthuman cultural ecology*

*scienza*, Eds. L. Boi - F. D'Intino - G.V. Distefano, *Between*, IX.17 (2019),  
<http://www.Between-journal.it/>