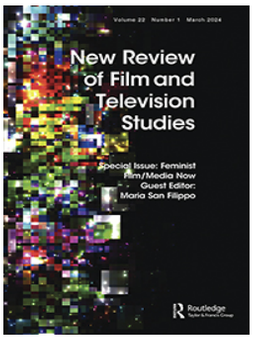

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Othered form and insectile subjectile: *Under the Skin*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film *Under the Skin* as it pertains to the 'insectile' or, in other words, to an entomological imagination. The insectile, I argue, is structured according to apparent opposites, form and formlessness, and refers to particular manifestations of subjects. On the one hand, the insectile is instrumentalised as racialized technology centred on the face, rendering a fixity of form, and, on the other, it is coded as that which undoes precisely this logic of form. In a first instance, I am paying attention to the faciality of the unnamed, alien woman (Scarlett Johansson), constructed as insectile; the second part of the essay lends an ear to the film's sonic environment, the buzz of its extra-diegetic score. The essay, further seeking to respond to Sheryl Vint's claim that the film cannot offer an ethics of difference, suggests a position from which an 'improper' ethics of difference might begin to be thought.

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In Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film *Under the Skin*, four iterations of what I call the insectile, which pertains to an entomological imagination or fascination and regime of signs, appear. The film, adapted from Michel Faber's novel of the same name, published in 2000, follows an unnamed, extra-terrestrial woman (Scarlett Johansson) engaged in a (forced) labour of extraction, whose purpose is never explained in the film: the objects of the harvest are young, white men, whose flesh or skin meets some unknown demand. The woman serves as bait, intent on luring her victims to the scene of being reaped. A vehicle of male heterosexual fantasy and desire, she is, however, also clearly marked as other. She must be animated, her affective responses – a smile irradiating her face – switched on to perform the part (a white woman, object of desire and 'human' subject) assigned to her. In the final stages of the film, in an unbearable act of violence which culminates in her being burned to the ground, her technological otherness is further revealed

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as racial difference. Rather than creature of light and glass,[1] she is obdurately black, opaque, a presence that is pulverised.

I seek to theorize a new aspect of cinema and, more broadly, contemporary culture, namely the constellation among subjectivity, fascination, and entomological phenomena. My argument is motivated by the desire to dismantle the fantasy of the so-called human by being concerned with a fundamental instability at the heart of said subject. This instability is articulated as insectile, which I deploy with reference to two apparently opposing conditions: form and formlessness or what Georges Bataille calls the *informe*. In *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, Bataille notes that the *informe* 'does not, in any sense whatever, possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm' (Bataille 1995, 51–52). Explicitly linked to life that is not assigned any value – worm and spider are conceptually aligned with the insectile as rightless – the *informe* 'declassifies' or destructures; it is the 'negation of definition' (Brotchie 1995, 23). Writing about Bataille's term, Yve-Alain Bois observes that he considers the *informe* to be an operation of slippage rather than a theme, substance or concept (Bois, 1997, 15). At the same time, the insectile, while *informe*, also codes 'armoured life', even if, as Steven Connor notes, 'the insect as armour in fact is a defence against unrepresentability' (Connor 2020), the multiplicity cast out of individualised insect forms. Armoured life is indexed to the fixity of form, so that both form and formlessness are harboured in the insectile, effectively pulling in these two directions at once. The suffix added at the rear end of the body of the word insect is designed to perform the 'pulsations' (Bois, 1997, 31) between form and the *informe*.

What's at stake in this analysis of *Under the Skin* is, on the one hand, an investigation of a racial imaginary or faciality predicated on the insectile. On the other, through the film's insectile sonic events disarticulating the armour and genre of the 'human', the essay concerns the unravelling of precisely this logic, that is, the logic of racialisation and the fixity of form. As a critical operation, the insectile interrogates what subjective forms are imposed, kept safe, or rendered expendable in the ways in which they are linked to insects; it might also follow the movements of insects as they appear in films, certain genres, in the functioning and interruptions of genre. (We might want to think, for example, of Manny Farber's description of Claire Denis' films as 'termite art', because her imagery creeps up on the spectator long after having left the cinema[2]; or the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1980), coded as insectile (Collignon 2021, 1–19); or the fly in *The Terminator* (1984), settling on the *T*-800's face without the cyborg flinching or swatting it away: the fly is the marker of the non or in-human, of a death that is living.)

The insectile functions in a number of ways in *Under the Skin*. There is, for one, the score music, sound events formed of dense crescendo string sounds that establish an extensive and crawling aural field constitutive of the

entire fabric of the film. These extra-diegetic, disembodied sounds – no source of emission can be identified – spread everywhere, lose themselves in other mechanical signals, recede into a background buzz or are abruptly cut off, before insidiously emerging once more to, growing in volume, repeat the cycle. Then there are more oblique, marginal occurrences that consist of the close-up of an ant, lifted up to eye-level on Johansson's hand having just finished undressing the body of a second woman, her predecessor lying dead at her feet; a fly on a windowpane during a mirror stage scene, aurally and visually breaking in on a moment of self-reflection; finally, the flayed skins of the harvested men – as if they'd undergone ecdysis and thereby allowed another's moulting – floating in a curiously thick, black space.

I want to examine these events to reflect on processes of forming and unforming concerning the subject on and off-screen, a dynamic to which the film from its opening stages – at which noise gradually, more or less, coheres into speech – refers. This dynamic between form and the *informe*, or between figure and ground, plays itself out across multiple systems of representation of the insectile in the film and is, at first, linked to the formation of the face and the absence of expression. I begin, in a section titled 'Face/Form of the Other', by looking at one of the episodes of insect encounters referred to above (woman/ant) to investigate the mechanisms of (racialised) facialisation in *Under the Skin*. This apparatus of signification, because rendering the face of the woman as arrested and inscrutable, establishes a zone of correspondence with the 'no-face' of an ant. The second part of the essay, '*Une mouche entre*', looks at a scene occurring at the usually crucial moment of a mirror stage, on which audience identification with a character often hinges, and gradually moves into the sonic economy of the film on the back, or the buzz, of an interrupting fly. This disturbance occasions a critique of the form of the 'human', relying on Jacques Derrida's work on the law of genre, as well as a shift, during the course of the section, from the on-screen to the off-screen subject, from diegetic to extra-diegetic sound. In this latter part, by lending an ear to the insectile, I seek to respond to Vint's claim that the film cannot offer an ethics of difference – she looks elsewhere to find it – as well as to Lucas Hilderbrand's uncomfortable fascination with the film and its, from his perspective, curious, incoherent politics.

While the first section concentrates on form, the rigid systems of racialised othering converging on the face and conceptualised through the insectile, the second part stages an interpretation of *Under the Skin*'s 'anempathetic' score, composed by Mica Levi. Michel Chion argues that anempathetic sounds are 'intimately related to cinema's essence', that is, its 'mechanical nature' (Chion 1994, 8). These sounds behave as vectors invoking the cinematic unconscious, in this case also functioning to burrow into the filmgoer's repressed 'nature': her mechanical, insectile otherness, inhumanely buried. Chion writes that anempathetic music reveals cinema's

'robotic face', repurposed, here, to suggest its insectile 'reality' (Chion 1994, 9), a specific kind of filmic body/face and soundscape unconscious, inhabiting or in-forming the subject (Lacan 1998, 26). This realignment of the anempathetic effect from the robotic to the insectile interprets insects as *technē* and vice-versa, while further gesturing towards Greg Hainge's work on sonic cinema (Parikka 2010, xiii). In his book about the French filmmaker Philippe Grandrieux, Hainge proposes sonic cinema as a concept that extends beyond sound, suggestive of an immersive environment into which 'you' fold. He thereby suggests sonic cinema as 'an alternative or perhaps corrective to the idea of haptic cinema' to account for dimensions of sensory encounters no longer structured around the scopic, still the predominant mode of engagement even in the haptic approach (Hainge 2017, 13, 77 & 80).

I want to offer the insectile as a supplement to already established phenomenological ways of approaching a film by structuring my reading according to various aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis that undergird my analysis. The insistence on the inhuman within explains this essay's largely latent but committed orientation towards Lacan, bearing in mind his focus on the dehiscent subject, defined by its intimate relationship to the exteriority of the other: the subject internally archives the other. Then there is the process of subject formation which, in Lacanian thought, is structured around mimicry, illuminated by Roger Caillois, whose work on insects and adaptation to space influenced Lacan's development of the mirror stage. Even the word imago, the assemblage of the subject in light of the other, is of entomological origin. Imago is at once fantasy of form, the totality-form of the subject, an armoured self, and indicative of the subject's '*méconnaissance*' as whole and as 'human' (Lacan 2001). Post-mirror stage, the subject's knowledge of itself as incomplete, decentred, and fundamentally alienated, is relegated to the unconscious. The body in pieces (or the flayed body) (Anzieu 1989, 41) emerges in dreams, but it is also called forth by a cinema 'about' the instability of forms.

The theoretical apparatus I assemble here is constituted through several voices – Lacan; Deleuze and Guattari; Derrida; Michel Serres; etc. – each of which contribute to the economy of the essay. In one way or another, these voices are all preoccupied with form or the *informe*; I draw them together to think through the dimensions of the so-called human in its insectile dis/articulation. Part of what this assemblage does is highlight the process of writing itself as swarming, always belonging to the other. In writing this piece (and others), I necessarily have to enact the insectile otherness that inhabits me – writing as inhabitation – even if I, a hallucinated subject in command, am still held responsible for shaping it into some kind of form. The insectile is a project about the morphology of the subject, intertwined with entomological events. The topology of the essay – a rhizome, a teeming multiplicity – folds into insectility, its fabric composed of citations, perhaps experienced as

parasitic intrusions. The insectile interrupts the fantasmatic image of the 'human', whose interiority is always already *extimate*, Lacan's word for the other, exterior, lodged within. *Under the Skin*, I suggest, testifies to the insectile as radical turmoil of the subject, the extimate intimately disturbing the discourse of form.

Face/Form of the other

There have been a number of investigations of the film, by Sheryl Vint, Lucas Hilderbrand, Laura Tunbridge, Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean (2017), the latter a collaborative piece touching on Scarlett Johansson's underperformance as technological other (Dinnen and McBean 2017, 128). Tunbridge's subject, similarly, is Johansson's 'haptic voice' variously deployed or refused in *Under the Skin*, Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Luc Besson's *Lucy* (2014) (Tunbridge 2016, 145). I want to draw on Dinnen and McBean's work (2017), criticising Ara Osterweil's argument that the film's 'true inquiry is into femininity' (Osterweil 2014), to instead suggest that its interest lies in the face and facial recognition. Johansson, after all, is the 'face' of contemporary SF cinema (Dinnen & McBean, 127), therefore 'quasi-object' – because faces always somehow elide the means to capture them – revealing the face as technology and, specifically, as gendered and racialised technology.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the face is something that is produced by an 'abstract machine of faciality' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 187) bestowing subjecthood by only recognising particular elements as being worthy of this signifier. The faciality machine is, hence, a subject-making machine. The organisation of the face defers, in concrete terms, to the 'White-Man face' – the 'good' form – which can't abide alterity, denying the privilege of subjecthood to gendered and racialised others (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 197). The face, consequently, is not naked but 'overcoded': it is inscription, a function in a grid which 'rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious'.[3] Insects as 'figures' without face are grasped, in discourses reifying racial difference, as total others; 'figure' stands in quotation marks to put it under scrutiny. Speaking about the fly, Connor notes that it 'does not form a figure, nor yet exactly figure a form' because it is 'unfigurable', without face in anthropocentric thought (Connor 2006, 31 & 32). A figure has a face, is or must be expressive, conform to culturally sanctioned and socially recognised modes of behaviour. The 'faceless' insectile is set to work in fascist and racist-capitalist ideology operating at different levels or scales, conceiving of migrants and refugees in terms of the *informe*, that is, swarms, packs, hordes that raze like locusts (or vermin). In this system of meaning, the insectile is 'figured' as technology of racialised othering, which in *Under the Skin* at first sight functions in contradistinction to the racializing trope of 'animatedness' that Sianne Ngai analyses in *Ugly Feelings*. Underlying this

notion of animation is inertness, the activation of a 'lump' dramatizing, or compelled to dramatize, its infusion with life. Not only is the racial stereotype of the silent, inexpressive Asian operative in American culture, but Ngai's reading of John Yau's 'Ghengis Khan' poem cycle (1989–1996) further demonstrates how crucial animation is to the production of the 'overemotional', racially marked subject (Ngai 2007, 94). The non-expressive body/face does not disturb racial epistemology but, far from it, precedes and supports it. Impassivity only functions as a good for those whose subject status is never in question, who are not required to prove or enact their 'humanness'. In any other subject, impassivity is suspicious because mechanised, non-human or not quite human, indicative of the secret glitch of unassimilable otherness which, according to this logic, must be effaced, crushed like a spider or earthworm.

The 'White-Man face' organises structures of recognition, to the point of making all others either invisible or hyper-visible. Johansson's face, a.k.a. the cinematic face, is made and unmade by blackness, established at once as matter of petrochemical technology (oil; plastics) and, at the same time, operating as racialising apparatus intent on securing concrete white faciality. If the face is object rendered technologically, as 'abstract machine' that presents itself as totally transparent, it is imagined as surface to be decoded at first glance. Systems of facial detection produce surfaces or faces as returns: the return of that which is already known and expected, a pattern determined in advance. There are other ways of looking at surfaces, however, as Deleuze demonstrates in *The Logic of Sense*, in which he considers Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. He notes:

> events, radically differing from things, are no longer sought in the depths, but at the surface, in the faint incorporeal mist which escapes from bodies, a film without volume which envelops them, a mirror which reflects them, a chessboard on which they are organised according to plan. (Deleuze 1990, 9–10)

To skirt along the surface, as Catherine Constable (2018) shows in her article about Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), means to be alert to the various constructions and functions (a mist, a mirror, a film) of the surface, continually evolving in Garland's movie. They have the potential, she continues, to 'make us see the limitations of our familiar conceptual categories, such as: humanness, gender, and genre' (Constable 2018a). Lauren Berlant similarly travels the surface of Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004), thinking about the distribution of life lived at the surface. Berlant is interested in underperformed emotion, flat affect, recessive action. These 'structures of unfeeling' are difficult to decipher, might be a defensive action rather than indicative of a 'casualization of emotion', not invariably the result of a crisis. Instead, they might be constitutive of a 'space-making device',

thereby establishing a possibility, in the sense that an encounter remains unfinished (Berlant 2015). There is a politics at work here, in terms of, for example, a woman's 'duty' to smile, to yield herself up to codes of behaviour in public, an animation that Johansson, in *Under the Skin*, performs in her seduction game. Berlant's work prompts us to think about the politics of performing emotion (c.f. Ngai) as much as about the difficulty of assessing affectively flat registers. These studies of surface effects help organise the response to the production of the inscrutable other in *Under the Skin*, which appears to be 'all outside' (Connor 2020), pure surface, an exoskeletal 'figure' with no inside, and without depth.

An 'imploded' face, a dead face, can be the face of late capitalist value,[4] a reading that, despite the conditions under which the woman suffers, would be mistaken in relation to *Under the Skin*. Coded as technological other, the woman's unforthcoming face is explicitly linked to an ant's, a creature she seems to recognise more than the dead woman at her feet (Hilderbrand 2019). The scene in question takes place in a van's interior, incongruous in terms of both light and dimensions. In this luminous white space that renders figures as photographic negatives, the scene unfolds as such:

(1) a close-up of the dead, clothed woman, eliciting no response because there is no reverse shot of the naked woman (Johansson) looking down at her predecessor such that, consequently, she would be experienced as missing. Similarly, no close-up of Johansson precedes the gaze directed at the corpse, so that the shot of the dead woman's face, the first thing we see upon entering the van, occurs, as it were, from nowhere or, more accurately, as if emanating from a sardine can. Lacan, who relates his *point de rencontre* with a sardine can floating on the water and glimpsed on a fishing boat in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, distinguishes the eye from the gaze, which develops out of objects 'looking' back at the I, in turn displaced as a subject in command of perspective. What brings to mind the sardine can is that the woman's gaze, unmoored as it is from her face, issues from an agency without subjectivity, for which the other, on the ground, has slipped out of relation. Slipped, because we assume a relation between the women: one dead, one alive, and looking so much alike.

(2) The task of undressing done, her face kept in partial darkness and obscured through a heavy fringe, the woman, now dressed in the corpse's clothes, once more fixes her gaze on the face of the figure below. A single tear, excess moisture stored in the ducts, escapes from the dead woman's eyes as if mourning her own death in the absence of the other woman's lack of 'proper' apprehension. There is no recognising gaze between the one and the other. The living woman,

looming over the corpse, in effect passes over her double, whom she replaces. She stays uninvolved, her gaze impersonal.

(3) In a long shot, the woman crouches next to the corpse, picks up what turns out to be an ant, though initially it is not identified as such. The woman's movement, after raising herself back up, is to hold her hand up to her face, appearing to inspect the object (or the hand) in the light, rotating it this way and that. It is only then, after two subsequent close-up shots, the second one further magnifying the first, that the face of an ant, framed by moving antennae and legs, becomes radically visible. Despite its singularity, the ant nonetheless gives the impression of swarming in this scene, otherwise so deathly still (occasionally, a low-pitched, hollow hum can be heard). The ant, as Derrida has argued, is a 'microscopic figure of innumerable multiplicity', a synecdochal form signalling the nest. The ant is also in itself divisible, its genus name, *insect*, deriving from cut (Derrida 1997). It is as if an ant could never be spoken of on its own, but only in its prodigious 'crops' of being. Here, it is enlarged to fill the screen, its teeming, excessive mobility, to 'us', prompting not a turn towards, but a recoiling from.

Considering that Hilderbrand locates the woman's 'predatory strangeness' in her fascination with the ant, his interpretive act in fact performs such an act of flinching. The mandibles, prominent as they are in the shot, suggest that particular perspective, a 'format' in which ants appear as specifically determined epistemological objects. In *Zootechnologien*, Sebastian Vehlken follows the discursive dynamic in which ephemeral collectives figure, or are rather made to figure, hence usage of the term 'format'. They are formatted according to particular historical, political, and technological conditions (Vehlken 2012). In this vein, Hilderbrand's comment on the predatory nature of the woman's behaviour – by that point an intimation; she only scavenges – is at the very least inflected by a discourse already privileging predation, attentive to mandibles that don't release their hold even when detached from the head, instead of, say, an ant's olfactory sense distribution or its muscular memory. In other words, Hilderbrand's reading, though without doubt a response to what is to come in the film, nonetheless participates in a particular rendition of the life of an ant. Yet there are other aspects to draw into the interpretive circumference, which belong to different frameworks or discursive networks. These allow us to approach the insectile through formats other than 'predatory strangeness', evidently sustaining processes of racialisation that secure the 'White-Man face'. To recall: the correlations between representations of insectility and racialisation instrumentalise the insect as absolute other, resonating with the ways in which the matter of blackness

is deployed, as Hilderbrand in fact shows, in *Under the Skin*. This correspondence remains an organising principle which very much lies at the core – dissimulated or blatant – of discussions about the impassive face, itself produced as radical otherness: incoherent, unbearable, unintelligible.

The 'predatory strangeness' that Hilderbrand detects in the woman's face as a result of her interaction with an ant, as such, depends on a tracing that has organised the ant as an aggressive species, an axis of significance that draws on those 'monstrous' mandibles, pincers or shears that can pierce an enemy's skull.[5] Yet tracings, which Deleuze and Guattari understand as something predetermined, 'should always be put back on the map' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 14), itself a thing without form, which can constantly be reworked, unmade. A realignment of perspective – which does not evoke the ant as always already predatory – takes into account the possibility of an affinity, between woman and ant, that cannot be crystallised just yet, or not ever. If we place this encounter into the context of the 'supertext' (Berlant 2015, 192) of film and novel – Berlant uses the term to discuss a source text and its other iterations – we might be tempted to find a model of 'kinship' there, but one that invokes a strict order and laws of belonging. In Faber's novel, Isserley, the main character and prototype of the film's unnamed woman, beholds sheep and, in their facial features, a correspondence between them based on a shared morphology, which she supposes to be a reason to establish an ethical community. Such a logic is evidently a logic of sameness, which, as Vint has argued, the novel is less interested in criticising, considering that it ends on a note of atomised, dispersed indeterminacy: Isserley exploding to become sky, air, particles.[6]

Predominantly focussing on the film, Vint suggests that it refuses to 'humanise' its protagonist, and instead keeps insisting on the woman's blackness, captured, by the logic of racialisation, as non-human. She likens Johansson's character and the camera's eye to 'an intellect as "vast and cool and unsympathetic" as that of Wells's famed Martians' (Vint 2015), a comparison occasioned by the impassivity that the film facialises as metaphorically insectile: a face as expressionless as that of an ant. In the supertext proceeding from the novel, the suggestion exists that the gaze, as it passes from woman to ant, supposes a figuration beyond the universe of the film, part of a larger 'whole'. This 'whole' is not a unity but behaves 'like a thread' of communication with other sets or iterations, each of which it prevents from closing (Deleuze 1989, 16–17). Such a moment of recognition, woman→ant, occurring in the frame of the film, might conceivably lead to further unseen frames, in which the woman = ant. And yet the thread, passing from the novel to and beyond the film, merely returns the ghost of the morphological sameness witnessed in the novel: the logic of the Same is never spelled out in the film. Instead, it exists only as circumstantial outside the frame of

the movie, keeping the correlation between woman and ant indeterminate, or impure.

While the woman in *Under the Skin*, as Hilderbrand has noticed, is clearly fascinated by the ant – he conversely acknowledges being fascinated by '[the film's] play with and refusal of conventions of cinematic narrative and representations' (Hilderbrand 2019) – the phenomenon of fascination, so essential to subject formation (Miller 1988), only tells half the story. In a scene about an hour into the film, set inside the lair of a ruined house, the woman, in a persistent shot, catches her reflection in a mirror, so often the *Angelpunkt* of an action, rooting her to the spot. The scene cites what functions as a type of Voight–Kampff test[7] the woman was subjected to earlier by her handler/motorcycle man: she now seems to check herself for signs of empathy after the release of a severely disfigured man. Her expression registers no visible change, her face remaining inscrutable. The shot, accompanied by the sound of dripping water, lingers head-on, before the perspective suddenly comes from further away, to the side and slightly to the back. Held there, the woman turns, back towards us, and then we lose sight of her: a fly has entered the frame.

I want to invoke Derrida's 'The Law of Genre' at this point, which informs the remaining section of this essay. Derrida argues that within the law of genre lies a law of impurity, which means that belonging always relates to non-belonging (Derrida 1980), that a genus is the 'place' where morphology can't ever really be articulated. The de-structuring of genre applies as much to the literary, poetic and artistic as to gender and racialisation, determining the so-called human; his article allows us to think impurity as much as the various norms and limits governing a genre. Considering that *Under the Skin* provokes questions relating to the genre of the 'human' – what qualifies a body to be included, or otherwise barred from, appearing in a certain genre – I will show that the fly interrupting the mirror-stage scene performs, and is inscribed as, the fundamental generic disturbance of the so-called human.

Une mouche entre: the sonic event of a fly

If the insectile on its face and in its faciality is (over)determined as *tout autre*, it is nonetheless both form and formless, read also polymorphous, suggestive of the 'adventure of reading and interpretation' because '[crawling] with thousands of meanings (Derrida 1997, 119)'. The insectile can 'figure' differently, does not necessarily command a form of attention restricted to 'tracings', something 'ready-made', having crystallised into a definite form (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 13). Consequently, the insectile does not necessarily have to operate according to a politics seeking to reify difference – the ready-made format

triggering repulsion or aversion – but allows an orientation towards affective 'forms' that somehow bind, are curiously attuned between bodies.

In this second part of the essay, the insectile – supplement or suffixed element – latches onto Hainge's concept of sonic cinema, responding, as it does, to dimensions that exceed Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality and Vivian Sobchack's cinesthetic, embodied subject. Hainge notes his 'discomfort' with the haptic, especially as it develops out of Sobchack's thought, remarking that 'the only possible relation to the cinematic text continues to be figured in terms of visuality, even if the sensory organ in play has changed' (Hainge 2017, 80). Hainge argues that the haptic fixes in place, fingers knowing what they are looking at, and that it can as a result 'only be felt to vibrate in harmony with each other and with us or [. . .] instigate a jarring, dissonant relation' (Hainge 2017, 80 & 81). The sonic, by contrast, resonant and constantly re-forming, plays with figure or form and ground, and cannot be known. Davina Quinlivan, in *The Place of Breath in Cinema*, mentions a 'kind of disparity' (Quinlivan 2012, 21) taking place between image and sound occupied by the process of breathing, escaping the discourses put forward by Marks and Sobchack. Hainge and Quinlivan identify remainders that are not necessarily or not exclusively material – materiality is troubled in sonic cinema or the 'extra-materiality' of breath and noise (Quinlivan 2012, 26) – and are unable to be 'grasped' visually.

As we have seen in the first section of the essay, the enfolding of the subject with the insectile occurs in terms of the correlation set up between unnamed woman and insect: the insectile operates diegetically, and as form. In this subsequent part, the entanglement subject-insect is constituted extra-diegetically and takes place between cinemagoer and the ground or 'skin' of film. Generative of an enveloping fold,[8] the insectile describes a particular way in which bodies are brought into contact because, adapting Connor's work, the insectile – 'too big for space, too packed and too polluting' (Connor 2020 n.p.) – is space itself. 'You' fold into this space, the body of the film, encountered as sound, and the film's body in turn folds into 'You' (Hainge 2017, 77). Because the film's title, *Under the Skin*, already announces it as a central organ of experience, skin is produced as site of attention: it is an organ formed and unformed through the sonic. Sound evidently belongs to the paradigm of cinema as sensory embodiment or entanglement and possesses haptic and tactile qualities. After all, it is wave phenomenon – sound results from a vibrating object; these vibrations travel in waves – proceeding from an object that must be touched, and can be conceptualised as, or at least be related to, skin (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 131 & 137). It is something felt on, and below, the skin, to the point that sound, skin, and space seem coterminous, thereby at once body or form-giving and, as phenomenon of dispersion and propagation, form-destroying.

The link between the insectile and the environment of the skin exists in the broader cultural imaginary. In genre fiction, insects are frequently deployed to render unspeakable trauma, drug abuse or severe psychoses – hallucinations, delusions of invasion – as well as vivid dreams at whose kernel squirm termites, or where giant insect eggs are waiting to hatch. Both iterations of *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992 and Nia DaCosta, 2021), William Friedkin's *Bug* (2006) and David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (1991) come to mind, but the imagination of the multiple, of excessive 'life', the latter unthinking, relentless (like a drive), similarly arises in Donna Tartt's novel *The Little Friend* (2002). Here, a drug addict's vision, and by extension entire existence, is textured by bugs:

> Points of light, glittery dust flecks like creatures in a microscope—meth bugs, that would be your scientific explanation, because every itch, every goose bump, every microscopic speck and piece of grit that floated across your tired old eyeballs was like a living insect. Knowing the science of it didn't make it any less real. At the end, bugs crawled on every imaginable surface, long, flowing trails that writhed along the grain of the floorboards. Bugs on your skin that you couldn't scrub off, though you scrubbed until your skin was raw. Bugs in your food. Bugs in your lungs, your eyeballs, your very squirming heart. (Tartt 2002, 440–441)

It is not surprising, as such, that an analysis intent on the audio-visual insectile is affected by and situated within this larger realm. A whole machinery of references has mobilised in the direction of skin and the unconscious 'infested' with insects, across periods, genres, forms, contexts. Insects are space but also the space and skin of the subject. The insectile is that which entangles interiority with the outside, always already existing within, making up the subject in its dehiscence. The pivot on which the section below turns and turns back, then, moves from sound to skin, interior to exterior, form to the *informe*, the inside of the narrative to the cinemagoer losing subjective, humanized stability. What the extra-diegetic score does is assign alterity back to 'us': the film's insectile body folds into the cinemagoer through sound. From this 'position' or figuration – which Rosi Braidotti identifies as a 'vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity' (Braidotti 2002, 2) – an 'improper' ethics of difference can begin to be thought.

It is unclear whether the woman subjecting herself to an empathy test in the ruined house during the mirror-stage scene to try and determine her 'humanness' is interrupted, riven from her in(tro)spection by the fly, or whether the disturbance is ours, or is destined for us alone. Flies are engines of disruption, while, as Connor shows us, they are also indicators of 'a sudden convulsion of scales'. They make 'perspectives collide' between immensities on either side of the windowpane on which the fly alights in the film: grey light outside, dark space inside (Connor 2009, 3x). The drama in this particular scene concerns the prolonged interval between a reflexive

interiority, all the more striking for a character without apparent psychological depth, and an interrupting outside.

The fly, however, agitates not only spatiality, but also temporality. Right at the start of one of his books on sound in film, Michel Chion references Victor Hugo's book of poems *L'art d'être grand-père* (1877), whose last line reads: 'Une mouche entre. Souffle immense de la mer' (Chion 2016, 3–5). A fly arrives, interrupting a soundscape (the sea) that is constant or eternal, an event Chion uses to discuss the comings and goings of sound, the building up of environments instantly destroyed, receding, being moved into the background by random, mean forces (Chion 2016, 6). In *Under the Skin*'s mirror-stage scene, with its close-up of an impenetrable face swathed in shadows, time is felt yet simultaneously seems suspended. The woman's footsteps, indicative of 'traversing time', heard just moments before, are arrested, leaving the 'ultramusical' rhythm of dripping water faintly audible (Chion 2016, 40). These sounds at once mark 'hourglass time', a drop-by-drop flow of time evoking time spent (Chion 2016, 41), and a temporality experienced as never-ending: the soundscape of the trope of the haunted house, an arrested space where time has ceased to matter. The close-up of the face reinforces the impression of time suspended, immobile as it is, gradually emerging into a dim source of light from a mottled glass window: every other movement has come to a standstill (Deleuze 1989, 87). It is this curious space-time that the fly interrupts: an interiority usually off-limits, if not deemed impossible; a 'mute' faciality that itself appears eternal, because fixed, and is probed in a setting promising, but never really delivering, a structure of understanding.

Considering the function of mirrors and the close-ups of faces as affection-images, which remove the face from its spatio-temporal coordinates to, in this case, render it as 'petrified' (Deleuze 1989, 90), the fly breaks our hold on the situation, tenuous as it is. We have already been denied access through the lack of lighting and the camera's movement away from the woman's face. The fly 'swivels' space (inside/outside) (Chion 2016, 7); it is also a liminal creature, not only because it routinely crosses from death into life and vice versa, but because its buzz switches between foreground and background, figure and formlessness (Connor 2009, 7). It is, in fact, 'aggregate', adopting Leibniz's terms to refer to multiplicities, not a 'well-formed object' but 'irrational', something nebulous. Undefined, as such, by the concept of the border, it is *Ungestalt*, its buzz akin to the 'basic element', according to Michel Serres, of our logos (Serres 1999, 2 & 7). The fly points, then, to this 'ground' of being, with which it merges, into which it disappears, and which sounds inside 'us':

> [Noise/Buzz] settles in subjects as well as in objects, in hearing as well as in space, in the observers as well as in the observed, it moves through the means

> and the tools of observation, whether material or logical, hardware or software. [. . .]. (Serres 1999, 13)

Following Serres, the fly's buzz is itself everywhere and ceaseless, only occasionally perceptive as phenomenon, when it is in effect event, ongoing, eternal. In *Under the Skin*, the fly, even though operating as phenomenon in this scene, serves to draw our attention to the event of restless disruption that un/forms the subject, particularly as it (mis)recognises itself as 'human'.

The film defamiliarises the 'human'; as Vint writes, it 'probes the limit of how humans see one another' (Vint 2015, 6). Hilderbrand adds that it 'works to structurally frustrate identification with the film's protagonist', and refers to the scene discussed above, 'keeping her a seeming other' (Hilderbrand 2019). What happens here is that the fly disarticulates the 'human', as it fundamentally does in Cronenberg's *The Fly*. Flies are closely associated with the 'human' all the while so totally, intimately, other: they are 'our' eternal companions (Connor 2009, 5). The fly disrupts a mirror stage, apparently motivated by the question of the 'place' of the 'human' (where does 'humanness' reside?), though disruption, as Lacan tells us, is integral to the process of the mirror stage. The investigative gaze into the mirror does not simply belong to the reflected subject in this film but is ours, too. We are trying to read a face and are prevented from doing so. The fly is irritant, as well as vector of a lack of recognition. A reminder of how inscrutable the woman is, the fly's irritation, however, goes further than that. Its buzz, intermingling with the sounds of dripping water, enervates before the source is seen and grates the skin, the matter, 'envelope' or 'milieu' of our own subjectivities.[9]

The inspecting gaze is a policing gaze; the film's citation of the Voight–Kampff test makes that much clear, and it effectively puts us into the position of the bounty hunter Deckard (in more ways than one: 'we' are Replicant). At issue is the genre of the 'human', understood and produced as white – the marker, in an anti-Black world, of what it means to be considered 'human' – but the fly is also that which does not respect borders or norms. As I have tried to show, the interplay between form and the *informe* – a system of racialised alterity on the one hand, initiating the disarticulation of the so-called human on the other – is indexed to the insectile in *Under the Skin*. What, then, if we were to conceive of this fly as the 'principle of contamination' right at the heart of the law of genre (Derrida 1980, 57) that speck or trait which structures and at the same time undoes everything? Derrida's vocabulary certainly suggests as much. In an aggregation of terms, the 'essential disruption' of the law of genre also goes by the following names: 'impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, deformation, even cancerization, generous proliferation, or degenerescence' (Derrida 1980, 57). Flies are associated with most, if not all, of the above, as carriers of disease, purely libidinal creatures, angels or 'anti-angels' (Connor 2006, 15)

of death and decay. They are, to Connor, 'the embodiment of spatial and categorical disturbance' (Connor 2006, 15), to which, proceeding from the reading above, we might add ontological disturbance too.

The fly is a 'figure' which, in the vicinity of the mirror, contributes to frustrate identification (filmgoer→woman) but, even more significantly, is visual and aural 'image' breaking apart the hallucinated unity of the subject as fully 'human'. The reason it does so is because here, and throughout the film, an insectile buzzing occasions an itching skin, as if 'we' were the host to millions of swarming things, penetrating into, and living in, 'our' squirming hearts. This embodiment or memory of insectile dehiscence, I suggest, means that the film is, after all, able to move toward an ethics of difference, which Vint thinks it cannot do. Indeed, if we stop short of handling the film as an engagement with sound and/as the skin of the cinemagoer, she is right to argue so, considering that final moment of xenophobic violence, leaving no means from which to depart in search of such an ethics. Narratively, or purely in terms of the scopic, that is, the film can't provide any alternative encounters with the other/ed, absolutely and disastrously expelled. The scene in question shatters, is shattering, and then the film ends: it gives the impression of having reached a limit (for Vint, the limit of an ethics of sameness). I want to keep insisting on the sonic, however, reverberating, breaching limits: the ethical, like justice, similarly is that which lies outwith the law, beyond the horizon (Derrida 1992, 3–67).

Cinema, according to Jennifer Barker, 'entails a whole range of possibilities of touch against our skin: films can pierce, pummel, push, palpate, and strike us; they also slide, puff, flutter, flay, and cascade along our skin'. (Barker 2009, 36) In this instance, the narrative already insists on the politics of the skin. The skin is that which is extracted from straight white men, expendable because, although unspoken, the issue of class remains latent, is to be found in the geography of the city where the film is set. The woman looks for solitary men and generally goes on the prowl in deprived areas in Glasgow, around Ibrox and Parkhead – her first victim is a Celtic supporter – on Trongate, lower-end to the adjacent Buchanan Street, Glasgow's high street, and declining in its approach to Glasgow Cross and Gallowgate, as well as the vicinity around Glasgow airport, all of which are regions blighted by poverty and crime. During one entrapment scene, the camera follows the victim down, into a 'sunken place', to borrow the term from Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), a space like cast resin. Here, we witness the 'puff' of an amorphous, desiccated man, leaving only the veil of his floating skin. Skin is that which gives the body form. It is, as it were, the 'body's face, the face of its bodiliness', as Connor puts it (Connor 2004, 29), and figures the 'human'. The skin of white men is that which is required to pass, providing the means for a transformation or metamorphosis into a non-racialised, therefore 'human', subject.

At the same time that the film is preoccupied with the form of the skin or the skin as form-giving, however, it undoes the function of skin as that which holds together, its capacity to possess and preserve form and figuration. It does so through that recurring insectile sonic presence, whose provenance cannot effectively be pinned to a source, emanating from an un-bodied or many-bodied predatory gaze, and constituting an aural field that agitates and itches. It stays an enigma throughout, the universe it creates at once external (coded as total outside) and internal, because transposing its logic of the outside onto 'my' skin. This sound makes the skin function or feel like the concealed and extimate environment of the unconscious: I am, in fact, other. The extensive sonic environment in/of the film produces an impression of 'my' skin not as colander from which things leak (Anzieu 1989, 102), but as aggregate, host, invaded surface and evaded interiority, that is, the repressed reality of a dehiscent subject.

The skin, according to Serres, is 'milieu', which, so Connor explains,

> requires a physics of the imagination that lies between the conditions of liquid and solid. The implicative capacity of the skin—its capacity to be enfolded in upon itself—means that it is involved in other, much more mobile and ambivalent substances too, substances and forms which do not have simple superficiality or absolute homogeneity, but in which, so to speak, the surface turns on itself, goes all the way down: smoke; clouds; dust; sand; foam. (Connor 2004, 40)

Connor is interested in those 'moments of umbilical inclension and involution', when skin suddenly and intimately becomes other, when the outside reveals itself as inside, and such distinctions break apart, are abandoned, or fall away (Connor 2004, 39). An 'entire environment' rather than 'surface, membrane, or interface' (Connor 2004, 28), the skin further binds thinking to it: thought, so Didier Anzieu, is matter of the skin (Anzieu 1989, 9), and therefore of touch. As Claudia Benthien notes, there is an 'epistemological equating between skin and touch or the relationship between skin and hand' (Benthien 2002, 185). In this vein, the scene analysed earlier, of the woman's rotating hand – holding it up to the light as if inspecting it – already prepares us to think about hand/skin and the touch of the insect, as well as about the hand as appendage that does not quite belong.

The film's process of estrangement extends to skin, even if its whiteness is used to signify the 'human', because its figuration, its capacity to figure, is undone through cascading extra-diegetic sounds. A viola, distorted through speed, is hurried along in an 'uncomfortable', discordant pitch (Lattanzio, 2014). In interviews, Mica Levi, the score composer, frequently talking about her 'immersion' in the film, elaborates on her work:

> A lot of the sound [in *Under the Skin*] is a mixture of bad recording technique, on my part, and not-fine playing. Violas are so harmonic because they contain

> a lot of air. A viola is not solid, the sound it produces is like a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy of something, because you get an airiness, and creepiness, and there's a struggle in that. The vibrato doesn't ring out. It's dead. (Lattanzio, 2014)

Photocopies of photocopies introduce those 'mobile and ambivalent substances', such as dust, grains, etc., in turn producing little 'microrhythms'(Chion, 1994, 16) in the 'image' of a sound. This aural event generates a swarming movement, a busy temporality that unnerves. Even though Levi attributes it to the woman's stomach or hunger (Lattanzio, 2014), a synch point – the moment of coincidence between sound and source – is, as mentioned earlier, never confirmed. The sound wanders too much, appears to derive from a growing nimbus of light at the start of the film and, a little later, to arrive with the motorcycle man. It keeps arising without origin, a deterritorialised sound designed to affect the cinemagoer.

In *Under the Skin*, the subject's corporeal engagement with the opaque matter of its own alienation is determined by sound, the swarming unseen insect-things that make the skin itch. An itch undoes singularity, the hallucination of coherence. It is, Connor writes, 'the experience of displacement, of the dislocation of the organism from itself' (Connor 2004, 249). It is in this proposition that the itch, if you wish, of an ethics of difference is at work in the film. Cinema, according to Deleuze, because of its 'lack', cannot give us the 'presence of the body', which, he continues,

> is perhaps also because it sets itself a different objective; it spreads an 'experimental night' or a white space over us; it works with 'dancing seeds' and a 'luminous dust'; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an 'unknown body' which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible which is still hidden from view. (Deleuze 1989, 201)

Seeds and dust are the microrhythms of the audiovisual image, whose 'absence' is generative: an unknown, unthought body incubates. Marked by the itch of the other, the cinemagoer apprehends the multiplicity of her skin (Connor 2004, 234), which becomes host: she experiences herself as host. In this sense, *Under the Skin* fundamentally disrupts the iterative structure of the subject as 'human', all the while spreading an experimental night – a caesura – over the 'naturally' occurring assignation of that appellation. The term 'human' is something that must be bestowed, stolen, from elsewhere. The film's *force de rupture* exists in its insectile disarticulation of 'my' skin, dissolving the humanized form of the subject. In 'Eating Well', Derrida proposes to 'rearrange' the subject so that it 'no longer dominates from the centre' and suggests describing it as 'subjectile' to record the *jet* of *différance* that exists at the heart of the subject (Derrida 1995, 268 & 260). In light of the

analysis above, we might begin to notate the subject as insectile subjectile, marking it in its specifically insectile dehiscence and dimensions.

Notes

1. See Constable (2018a, 292). See also Haraway (1991, 153).
2. Manny Farber cited in Bramesco (2018).
3. Deleuze and Guattari (2004), 189 & 197. On the naked, destitute face, see, for example, Levinas (1985), 86.
4. Berlant, 'Strutures of Unfeeling', 198.
5. I'm relying on Maeterlinck (1941), 40.
6. There is another argument to be made here. The novel, insofar as it challenges this logic of sameness, does so by way of class, the notice it takes of the immensely suffering body and standing in such stark contrast to the body of the capitalist (in this case Amlis Vess), which, as Elaine Scarry observes, is a body of non-participation, of being exempt. Under these circumstances, what Scarry further calls the 'magnified body', a body altered and ravaged by labour, it is unsurprising that the imagination at work would be enthralled by an un/becoming, a losing of form, which capital and its production processes impose. While the utter destruction of the body, with which both iterations conclude, is the result of 'our' catastrophic inhospitability to the other in the film, it is, in the novel, the point when world-annihilating pain can finally come to a stop. See Scarry (1985), 265–267.
7. A reference to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), and Philip K. Dick's source novel, in which the Voight-Kampff test is deployed to determine levels of empathy, indicative, apparently, of the so-called human subject.
8. On this note, see also Walton (2016).
9. Envelope is Didier Anzieu's word; milieu Michel Serres'. See Anzieu (1989). Serres' comes from *Les Cinq Sens*, cited in Connor (2004, 26).

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