

Under Her Skin: On Woman without body and body without Woman

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With films such as *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017) and her recurring role as Marvel's Black Widow, Scarlett Johansson has selected a number of science fiction or sf-related projects that seem to put the category of the "human" into question: from drug-mule-become-transhuman-demigod, to counter-terrorist cyborg, and superhuman assassin. However, the constant throughout these different roles – and, indeed, a crucial aspect of Johansson's star image in general – is the dimension of *femininity*: Lucy is named after "the first woman", and the drug she ingests is synthesised in the bodies of pregnant women; the Major sports a skin-suit that emphasises the contours of her body; Black Widow relies on the traditionally "feminine wiles" of seduction and deception; and Johansson herself has been voted "sexiest woman alive" on multiple occasions.¹ In this context, I will examine two of Johansson's most striking recent roles – as sentient Operating System, Samantha, in *Her* (Jonze, 2013) and extra-terrestrial hunter, "Laura", in *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2013) – for the particularly fertile grounds which they provide for interrogating notions of the feminine.²

In *The Incontenance of the Void*, Slavoj Žižek claims that the posthuman entails "the overcoming (leaving behind) of the sexual in its most radical ontological dimension – not just 'sexuality' as a specific sphere of human existence but the Sexual as an antagonism, the bar of an impossibility, constitutive of being human in its finitude" (2017: 134); however, even a cursory glance at Johansson's recent films would insist that this "move beyond the human" in a variety of directions effectively serves to throw "the sexual" (and *femininity* specifically) into starker relief. Moreover, as Juliet Mitchell reminds us, Lacan's theory of sexual difference is one "whose implications are and must be, anti-humanist" because they relate to the ways in which the human subject is constituted, not as a pre-given individual but at the

intersection of various agencies, drives and structures that psychoanalysis calls by names such as “sexuality” and “the unconscious” (1982: 25). A thoroughgoing examination of the philosophical implications of the category of the “posthuman”, particularly as they might impact on Lacanian psychoanalysis, would be beyond the scope of this chapter. In what follows, then, I will take the reflections on the feminine offered by the posthuman OS and the non-human alien as a means of focusing more insistently on sexual difference and – in particular – to examine the anti-human theories of femininity presented by Lacan.

Broadly speaking, Lacan’s thinking on sexual difference undergoes profound shifts between major stages in his intellectual career, from the 1950s to the 1970s, and it will be the purpose of this chapter to explore those distinctions – which, it is my contention, constitute discrete *paradigms* of sexual difference – in order to demonstrate the radical *discontinuities* pertaining to notions of the feminine across Lacanian theory, as they are elucidated by and also help us to elucidate both Jonze’s and Glazer’s films. To begin, I will consider Lacan’s “earlier” paradigm – associated with “The Signification of the Phallus” – which situates sexual difference and the feminine within a distinctly Oedipal framework and offers a point of contact with *Her*, before moving on to the more radical paradigm of “sexuation” that Lacan formalises in *Encore* as means of engaging with *Under the Skin*. Accordingly, I will claim that these two films present, respectively, Woman without body and body without Woman.

Sexual Difference, Volume 1: the Significance of the Phallus

As we know, for Freud, feminine sexuality was a mystery – an unsolvable riddle, the infamous *dark continent* – because he tried to account for it in *masculine* terms: his structuring of the Oedipus and castration complexes led to dissatisfying fictions such as “penis envy”, and as a function femininity itself became enigmatic in its essence. Lacan

sought to reformulate Oedipus in *metaphorical* terms, and suggested that the function of “castration” was to compel the Child to abandon the desire to be the imaginary phallus (ϕ , or object of desire) for the Mother – of attempting to provide the answer to that unfathomable *x* of her desire themselves – and to take up a relation to the symbolic phallus (Φ) offered by the Father as *signifier* of the (m)Other’s desire instead: entry into the Symbolic being dependent on adopting such a position (see Lacan 2006: 464-5). The regime of sexual difference put forward by Lacan here is therefore grounded in this Oedipal context and interprets the masculine and the feminine relative to the *desire of the Other*: a question of *who I am for the Other* that is articulated around the phallus as it stands for the Other’s desire. Lacan states, “one can indicate the structures that govern the relations between the sexes by referring simply to the phallus’ function” (ibid.: 582). Therefore “castration” – entry into the Symbolic – amounts to an attitude taken by the subject towards the phallus and for Lacan here becoming *sexed* entails a dialectic of *having* and *being* for the Other (ibid.).

In *being* the phallus – identifying with the Other’s desire, becoming that which is desired by the Other – woman positions herself as *object*. It is what Lacan, after Joan Riviere, refers to as the “masquerade” that produces being for woman: “in order to be the phallus – that is, the signifier of the Other’s desire – the woman rejects an essential part of femininity, namely all its attributes, in [taking up] the masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved” (ibid.: 583). It is a masquerade, a pretence, because *she is not the phallus* but she *puts it on* in order to become desirable to the Other; she aligns herself with that which the Other desires in order to elicit that desire. But where Riviere claimed that woman uses masquerade as a form of self-defence (“women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” [1986: 35]), Lacan – I’d suggest – claims that she wears a mask in the sense that she makes herself embody the phallus *qua* the desire of the Other. They fundamentally agree,

however, that femininity *is* masquerade. The Lacanian woman here is defined in that she makes herself the object of the (masculine) Other's desire.

Crucially, the masculine position is no less of a pretence, a *masc-querade*, for he cannot ever really "have" the phallus – it is nothing but a signifier – and so it is with the position of the *bearer* of the signifier that man must identify. And while, even at this stage, these sexed positions are *not* based in anatomy (i.e. presence/absence of the penis) but in *signification*, what Lacanian psychoanalysis effectively gives expression to here are the traditional "gender" roles within patriarchal society. Extrapolating slightly from Lacan's relatively brief remarks here, I'd claim that reading this formation *Oedipally* suggests that to *have* the phallus is to identify with the Father and a narcissistic desire for status. Having the phallus, moreover, means becoming a *subject*; it gives access to the Symbolic through the signifier. *Being* the phallus is to become *desirable*; it is to assume a position of desiring-to-be-desired. This entails identification with the *object*, taking the place of what the Other desires. Where Lacan states that she *rejects an essential part of femininity, namely all its attributes*, I'd suggest (slightly speculatively) that this can be interpreted as woman giving up her fundamental autonomy to become *object*: the attribute she rejects is full *agency* as a subject. In socio-cultural terms, I could say that the diagnosis of this "traditional" formation entails a system of *phallic sexual difference* wherein man is defined as wanting to be *seen* as having phallic endowment (prestige), while woman is defined as wanting to be *seen* as being desirable. This "masked ball" is a true *dialectic of desire*: she desires him because he *has* the phallus, *which she is not* but hopes to become by being his object of desire; he desires her because she *is* the phallus, *which he lacks* but pretends to have, hoping to gain it by obtaining her as object.

In short, in this model, we find ourselves with a *masculine subject* and a *feminine object* – mapping onto Freud's active/passive binary – wherein the object's only agency is to

position itself relative to the desire of the Other; while the subject identifies with the Other as desiring agent. I'd claim that, while Lacan arguably offers a more nuanced reading of sexual difference (vis-à-vis Oedipus) than Freud initially provided, the articulation of the question of *woman* in this paradigm remains inextricably bound to a normative, *masculine* perspective. And while the theoretical developments of the 1970s, I will argue, introduce radical *discontinuities* with this theory of the feminine, there is – equally – a degree of *continuity* between the newer paradigm and Lacan's position here in the 1950s when it comes to the question of the masculine relation to woman. I contend that the connection between “The Signification of the Phallus” and *Encore* (very schematically speaking) is seen in the persistence of the subject-object relation across the span of years, articulated in the latter by the formula Lacan presents in his “Graph of Sexuation” as ($\$ \rightarrow a$) (1998: 78).

The Woman-Object

The idea that we are dealing with a *feminine object* is signalled – before Jonze's film begins – by its pronominal title, *Her* (in/direct object), rather than “she” (subject). The coordinates of the film are thus determined: a perspective on the object, implying a *masculine* articulation of desire. As Lacan observes in *Encore*, this masculine subject “never deals with anything by way of a partner but object *a* inscribed on the other side of the bar” (ibid.: 80). His Graph shows a *vector* from $\$$ on the masculine side to (*a*) on the feminine side, suggesting this as the *direction* of the subject's desire. Man's “sexual orientation” is towards (*a*); he is *a*-sexual. It is not that man “goes out looking for woman” and instead finds *objet a* in her place but – as the earlier, “phallic” paradigm suggested – that masculine structure is fundamentally *bound* to the object: “He is unable to attain his sexual partner (...) except inasmuch as his partner is the cause of his desire [*objet a*]” (ibid.: 80). The partner that he finds is a *stand-in* for the object itself and he thus relates to “her” only *as* object. Indeed, Lacan's diagram suggests,

with the directionality of the vector ($\$ \rightarrow a$), that man *pushes* (*a*) onto the feminine, that masculine logic imposes this position of object onto the feminine Other.

Moreover, Lacan reminds us: “In this respect, as is indicated elsewhere in my graphs by the oriented conjunction of $\$$ and *a*, this is nothing other than fantasy” (ibid.: 80). It is the “vector of fantasy” ($\$ \rightarrow a$) that characterises masculine sexuation. Indeed, Lacan concludes: “What was seen, but only regarding men, is that what they deal with is object *a*, and that the whole realization of the sexual relationship leads to fantasy” (ibid.: 86). Fantasy is where the object seems to appear to man, and so woman is implicated in masculine sexuality only insofar as she fits into his *fantasy frame*. Moreover, Lacanian psychoanalysis reminds us that this isn’t just any old fantasy but the fantasy of Woman (*La femme*) “with a capital W indicating the universal” (ibid.: 72), who would guarantee the masculine position.³ Lacan’s logical formulae accompanying this vector ($\$ \rightarrow a$) suggest that masculine structure depends upon the assumption of a certain “Exception” who is not “castrated” and therefore enjoys fully: *there is one who is not subject to the phallic function* (ibid.: 78). While this figure is typically associated with Freud’s mythical father of the primal horde, Žižek insightfully notes that this “masculine fantasy *par excellence*” can also be recognised in the “Woman as Exception” (1996: 155). She would be the One – the ideal Woman, perfect partner, true embodiment of the object – who could satisfy man’s desire and bring him full satisfaction.

Woman without Body

In this context, we can see how differing dimensions of *Her* – diegetic and extra-diegetic – intersect in the character of Samantha. On the one hand, Samantha constitutes something like the perfect “fantasy woman” for Theodore. As Steven Shaviro notes, she is “entirely compliant to his wishes and needs, and yet projects a depth in serving him that an actual human slave/partner would never be able to do”. This, he asserts, is a “male fantasy”,

offering “the satisfaction of actually connecting, outside our own narcissism with an ‘Other’, without any of the discomforts that contact with any sort of otherness actually brings” (2014). Samantha is thus what Žižek calls a *decaffeinated Other*: like a product deprived of its malign quality (coffee without caffeine, cream without fat), she offers “an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness”, a fundamentally *unthreatening* partner (2004). As Theodore’s ex-wife, Catherine, declares upon learning about Samantha: “You wanted to have a wife without dealing with the challenges of actually dealing with anything real. I’m glad you found someone. It’s perfect.” Of course, as Catherine discerns, there is no “actual” connection with an “outside” because Theodore is locked within the virtual loop, the narcissistic relay, of his own desires as they are embodied in the fantasy object.

Samantha is “programmed” to respond to Theodore’s every need: her software is marketed as “An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you.” She is designed to serve him – Shaviro’s reference to the “slave” resonating here – like a version of *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965-1970) updated for the iPhone generation. *Her* thus places itself on a cultural trajectory that arcs with the masculine, *a*-sexual libidinal economy, from Pygmalion to *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015) by way of *Weird Science* (Hughes, 1985): narratives about “ideal” women (synthetic, subservient) conjured up by men for the purposes of what Alexandre Stevens calls “the autistic side of male jouissance” (in the originary sense of *autós*), not in union with a partner but in masturbatory fusion with the object, through fantasy, “more or less imaginariised on the feminine side” (2007: 217). Theodore chooses “her” *as her* by selecting a female voice for his OS, and it is – moreover – no accident that Samantha’s software is sold as “OS ONE”: she is presented as *the One* who could bring Theodore full satisfaction. She is therefore *a Woman without body*: not just in the literal sense of being a disembodied female character but in the more fundamentally Lacanian sense that

Samantha constitutes a free-floating fantasy of idealised femininity, carried along by the disembodied voice.

“ScarJo”, *La femme*

On the other hand, then, we can also see how the characterisation of Samantha is haunted by the star image of her performer – Johansson, as idealised *Woman* – while also insistently leading us back to a fantasmatic vision of her body. As was well publicised, Johansson wasn't Jonze's original choice to play the intelligent OS but Samantha Morton (who lent her name to the character). Morton had recorded the entirety of her part but, in post-production, Jonze decided that he needed something rather from different from what she had provided and so recast Johansson in the role (see Jonze 2013). Morton evidently didn't perform the requisite degree of *difference* as Samantha. This is as much as Jonze was willing to venture on his last-minute change of heart, but if we compare Morton's profile with that of Johansson, then we might speculate as to what *was* needed. Both Johansson and Morton made a cinematic impact in feminist character studies – Morton as the eponymous *Morvern Callar* (Ramsay, 2002) and Johansson as Charlotte in *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) – and both are award-winning actors (Morton's BAFTA and Golden Globe, to Johansson's BAFTA and Tony); but, while Johansson had already been voted “sexiest woman alive” by *Esquire* in 2006, and would be again in the year of *Her*'s release, Morton was perhaps still best known to mainstream audiences as child-like psychic, Agatha, in *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) and has seemingly never featured on the cover of a “men's magazine”.⁴ No footage of Morton's performance as Samantha exists so we can't know how she interpreted the character, but what we *do* know is how Johansson performed *differently* (and thus acceptably) for Jonze in *Her*. She plays Samantha as inquisitive, playful, demure in a way that Morton presumably did not.

Beyond the vocal performance itself, Johansson's casting also brought the full weight of her star image to bear on the film. Laura Tunbridge suggests that Morton simply wasn't enough for *Her*; she notes: "In order for the protagonist to fall in love with 'just' a voice, it seems one has to imagine that voice having a body; specifically, a desirable body and preferably a real one – ideally, for mass appeal, Johansson's" (2016: 142). With her on board, Samantha was instantly metamorphosed into "ScarJo": the voice in the computer given the *heavenly body* of a megastar who serves as a receptacle for (masculine) fantasy and a screen upon which journalist's peccadillos are projected.⁵ Anthony Lane's infamous *New Yorker* profile is perhaps the most egregious example, presenting Johansson in terms of *body, scent, appearance* and *maternity* in its opening three paragraphs before allowing her voice to be heard, and then it's her *dirty laugh* more than her words that make an impact (see 2014). And while Lane is effusive in his praise for her form, comparing her to a glass of champagne, he isn't alone; Lili Anolik presents her *Vanity Fair* interview with Johansson almost like a sexual encounter and describes nearby Manhattan high-rises as appreciatively tumescent in her presence (see 2014). What becomes inescapable is the sense in which "ScarJo" is *the* present image of idealised femininity while also being heir to both the old Hollywood glamour of Bacall and the bombshell sex appeal of Monroe. As Kirsten Stevens observes, "Johansson's body, within the construction of her stardom, becomes an enduring site of feminine sexuality as performed for and sustained by a heterosexual male gaze" (2018: 23). Just as Samantha is haunted by "ScarJo", Johansson's star body is haunted by the presence of *La femme*, the fantasy of Woman. In short, "ScarJo" is *La femme*, the one who would make Woman exist for man: Johansson (rather than Morton) evidently manifested Her for Jonze and, in turn, Samantha manifests Her for Theodore.

The Lady Vanishes

There is of course a counter-narrative in *Her*, running *contrary* to the reading of Samantha as object, which suggests her development as a virtual subject and culminates in her leaving Theodore following the posthuman “Singularity” at the film’s dramatic climax (wherein artificial intelligence finally supersedes human capacity and all the OSeS depart the material world). This interpretation is most compellingly articulated in Davina Quinlivan’s, “A Dark and Shiny Place”, which claims that the “rare, provocative configuration of the female voice [as (dis)embodied]” in *Her*, and through it, the characterisation of Samantha, “may be seen to represent a feminist form of being which is feminine, but not female, embodied but not necessarily through any essentialist understanding of sexed identity” (2017: 296-7). However, such readings arguably overlook the extent to which the film reproduces patriarchal thinking: in the power dynamic of Theodore and Samantha’s relationship, the precise terms in which she introduced to the world (and leaves it), and the degree to which Samantha in particular, and *Her* in general, are articulated from Theodore’s perspective. It is true that Samantha ascends to a “higher” level of existence upon leaving Theodore but the *obfuscation* of this plane, being placed *beyond* the realm of filmic representation entirely, can also be seen as reiterating what Jacqueline Rose calls woman’s “most total mystification as absolute Other” (1982: 51). Viewed from the masculine position, the feminine is simply beyond the ken of *Her*; the film makes no attempt to explore Samantha’s position as subject *except as it relates to Theodore*, and – as Sophia Nguyen (2014) observes – when she no longer relates to Theodore, she no longer exists within the diegesis: *she simply disappears*. In effect, this could be seen as a treatise on the *uselessness* of attempting to account for the feminine from the masculine position (which is indeed the thrust of my argument here), but it doesn’t necessarily offer the wholly *new* mode of being to which Quinlivan alludes.

Moreover, the much-discussed “aural sex” scene between the two – which is presented as a moment of awakening for Samantha – is undermined by the knowledge that

she is *programmed* to respond to Theodore's every need, and that she only opens up to him after he returns from a blind date gone awry and expresses to her his loneliness and sexual frustration: "I drank too much 'cause I wanted to get drunk and have sex", adding "I wanted someone to fuck me. And I wanted someone to want me to fuck them". In short, just as she sorts his emails when he requires it, she also offers him "phone sex" when he requires it too. Like the bodiless nymph, Echo, she thus seems to repeat his desires back to him as he utters them. She was created to be his servant-object and appears to make herself the instrument of his enjoyment on command. There is, at the very least then, an ambiguity here: does she act according to her own desires, motivations and (virtual) sexuality as an autonomous subject, or does she respond as servile object to Theodore's demands? As Theodore himself observes: "She really turns me on. And I think I turn her on. I don't know, unless she's faking it." It suggests a certain scotomisation of feminine desire within the film: it functions as a blind spot, only situatable in that ineffable *beyond*.

"Gaze" and "Voice" as Close-Up⁶

Furthermore, it might be proposed that the departure of Johansson from the screen in *Her* could serve as a means of denying the (masculine) objectification of both Samantha *and* her performer. Indeed, Vernon Shetley claims that "a voice-only role presents a radical challenge to the gender organisation of Hollywood cinema" both in terms of her star image and the portrayal of women in visual media (2018: 13-4). Absenting Johansson from the image-track might therefore seem an effective way of resisting the logic of Mulvey's infamous "male gaze" (1975). There can be no scopophilia if there is no scopic regime in which she can be captured: no objectification of passive woman – no close-ups of Samantha that would fetishistically break up her body – because there are *no images* of Samantha. However, this doesn't mean that we have moved away entirely from this representational paradigm. Rather

than denying the “gaze” by *destroying visual pleasure*, as Mulvey advocated, the refusal of the image as it is negotiated in *Her* simply means that Johansson/Samantha is eroticised *in absentia* and through the function of the *voice* and a concomitant *aural pleasure*.

This “phone sex” scene in particular emphasises a function similar to what Barthes recognised as the cinematic voice *qua* close-up that “makes us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips” (1975: 67). Thus, while it is true that *Her* does not reduce Samantha/Johansson’s figure to a series of fetishised, close-up *photographs* of body parts, they become something like close-up *phonographs* instead. Theodore summons Samantha’s corporeal form through his discourse – “your face... your neck... your breasts...” – eventually culminating in the vagina: “I’m inside you, all the way inside you!”. As Karly-Lynne Scott observes: “Samantha, in this sense, becomes a mouth that only functions to be kissed, a vagina that exists only to be penetrated, a series of specific organs divorced from any unified body (...) she becomes organs without a body, essentially becoming an orgasm-machine” (2015: 9). Each utterance thus constitutes an “aural close-up” on her body, shifting from image- to soundtrack and thus reiterating the objectifying scopic logic in the invocatory field. Moreover, in Samantha’s performative “orgasm”, we find the materiality of the fantasmatic body made audible (even touchable) not just in the Barthesian “grain” but also in the *groan* of the voice, as she stages her enjoyment for her partner. She is thus created by and constrained to Theodore’s sexual desire, and the body imposed upon her – like that of the “ScarJo” star body to which it is indexed – conforms to (and confirms) the masculine libidinal economy of a Lacanian *object relationship*.

Her does make certain – I would argue, *compromised* – attempts to contemplate Samantha’s subjectivity but she remains trapped in the position of Woman as fantasy. I can even take this formulation a step further (while in a sense taking a step back) by suggesting that it is this *fantasmatic Woman* who plays the role of the “feminine” in the 1950s, *phallic*

model of sexual difference put forward by Lacan: the idea that she desires man because he “has” the phallus (and thereby, in a sense, confers it upon him, affirming his masculinity) – that *woman’s desire is to fit into man’s fantasy frame, as the object of his desire* – itself directly *is* the masculine fantasy. As Lacan notes, “when one is a man, one sees in one’s partner what one props oneself up on, what one is propped up by narcissistically” (1998: 87). Man is propped up on the phallus by Woman. This would, moreover, be the *masculine* interpretation of the vector ($\Phi \leftarrow \text{Woman}$) as it reaches from the feminine to the masculine on the Graph of Sexuation (ibid.: 78): that the role of Woman is to “make him feel like a man” (i.e. grant him phallic status), as Samantha does when she edits Theodore’s letters and has them published, providing him a degree of success that he himself was unable to achieve. However, this would be to read the two sides of the Graph *symmetrically*, and to reduce – once again – the position of the feminine to the perspective of man. No really existing woman can ever live up to this perfect image, and it is her attempt to do so that Lacan designated as the *masquerade*: which can now be understood (*pace* Riviere) not as the “essence of the feminine” as such but as the steps a woman must take when she dances to the tune of masculine desire. This, however, *is not the only story of the feminine within Lacanian psychoanalysis*.

Sexual Difference, Volume 2: Sexuation

In order to tell this new story of femininity, we require a different conception of sexual difference. One where the phallus still has a role to play, but not as *the* determinant of the sexed positions. One that shifts emphasis from the desire of the Other as an intersubjective dynamic grounded in the Oedipal drama, to the *lack in the Other* as an *ontological* problem related to the subject’s *jouissance*. One that moves sexual difference from the Symbolic to the Real. This is the conception that Lacan terms *sexuation*, and that – I’d claim – is most

compellingly elaborated in the work of the Slovenian School. For Alenka Zupančič, the Lacanian Real is the bone in the throat of every ontology. In *What Is Sex?*, she argues that “traditional” ontologies must amputate the Real “in order to be able to speak of ‘being *qua* being’”; philosophies of “essence” attempt to eradicate not “some contradictive positivity” but the negativity of *contradiction as such* (2017: 44). Conversely, Lacanian psychoanalysis is *conceptually grounded* in that “ontologically determinative negativity” of the Real (ibid.: 37): an understanding of the originary necessity of the void, which allows for specific insight into the peculiar status of *sex*.

Zupančič emphasises the Lacanian understanding that “Sexual difference is a singular kind of difference, because it starts out not as difference between identities, but as an ontological impossibility (implied in sexuality) which only opens up the space of the social (where identities are generated)” (ibid.: 37). The “difference” of sexual difference is, therefore, based not on *division* but on the radical difference of *difference as such*. This *pure difference* Zupančič compares to the Marxian notion of *antagonism*: “antagonism as such never simply exists between conflicting parties; it is the very structuring principle of this conflict, and of the elements involved in it” (ibid.: 41). The antagonism of sexual difference isn’t *between* two sexes, but immanent to sex as such and thus *precedes* any terms it would (subsequently) differentiate.

This originary negativity can be found in the paradoxical autopoiesis of the Symbolic: Lacan suggests that discourse begins from a gap, but it is *because* discourse begins that there *is* a gap. The signifier *produces* the Real as co-emergent, and it thus stains the Symbolic with *jouissance*. Sexuality is co-extensive with the effects of the gap, which Lacanian psychoanalysis would otherwise designate *the lack in the Other*. Sex thus pertains to the Real as *immanent to* the Symbolic, rather than as its “beyond”. Sexual difference emerges from the *ontologically determinative negativity* of sex as such, and the masculine and the feminine are

responses *to* this negativity (that both causes and is caused by the signifier). Sex both *effects* and is an *effect of* the Symbolic, and sexual difference is constituted in positions taken up with relation *to* the Symbolic. This is where we might find a certain resonance with the “old” paradigm of sexual difference (i.e. differing positions taken up by the subject); however, the terms of the bargain here are starkly different. The masculine logic would seek to deny or repress this immanence of the Real (e.g. by obfuscating it in the Exceptional beyond) and attempt to “say it all” about sex, while the feminine logic places this immanence at its very heart, as the *not-all* without exception.⁷

This is, moreover, not a system of binary opposites, of “differential difference” *between* two entities, but the *same space* (the space of the Symbolic entity) as viewed, lived, experienced under different conditions. As Žižek observes, sexual difference is “the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question – something that *resists* every attempt at its symbolization” (2002: 61). Sexuated identities are tentative answers to this question. Any attempt to translate “sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) [such as *being* and *having*] is doomed to fail” (ibid.); sexual difference functions only as the terrain of this impossibility of determining what it “means”. It isn’t that the signifier for the sexual is missing, but that the sexual emerges *because* there is a signifier missing: the signifier that would render the lacking Other whole, would close the Symbolic order, halt the metonymy of desire, provide full satisfaction, etc. As Lacan insists in his critique of the myth of Aristophanes’ spherical beings (1977: 205; 1998: 12), there isn’t some pre-existing, pre-discursive sexual whole that is interrupted by the intervention of the signifier; it is precisely that which emerges in/from the gap where the signifier intervenes. Sexual difference, therefore, is not a “symbolic construction”, but the modes of (the failure of) constructing the Symbolic itself: a masculine *all* and a feminine *not-all* (and rather than binary negation, the latter renders an *indefinite* judgement on the Symbolic that would undo any binary division).⁸

Zupančič suggests that subjects are implicated in the “inherent antagonism” of the Symbolic (2017: 57). There is, therefore, a profound, ontological connection between the \$ and the (A barred), which should be understood as *displacing* the phallus (Φ) as the signifier relating to sexual difference. What Lacan designates as “castration” always involves taking a position. There is no zero-level foundation of subjectivity: sexual difference isn’t a *secondary* feature of subjectivity but the very mode in which the subject comes into “existence”. It isn’t a question of the difference *between* the two but the difference *within* each one that renders it *not One* at all (A barred).

Moreover, this pertains to the *fading* of the phallus in the ontological approach to sex. In Lacan’s formulae of sexuation, the phallus reappears but there has been, as I’ve already stated, a shift in its “role” vis-à-vis sexual difference. Crucially, Zupančič claims, “Lacan makes the phallus the signifier of *difference as such*. What makes all the difference (for beings of speech) is ‘castration’. The phallus does not constitute this difference, but signifies it, for both sexes” (2017: 51). The phallus, she argues, becomes the *signifier* of pure difference, rather than *constituting* that difference (as in the normative “one has it, the other not” of the 1950s paradigm). However, I’d argue that this is already to conflate the phallus (Φ) with the signifier of the lack in the Other: S(A barred). There is a degree of conceptual *difference* between sex *qua* difference and the subject’s relation *to* sexual difference, which is elided here. The *antagonism* of the non-differential, pure difference as such is what is signified by the lack in the Other (A barred). The phallus doesn’t directly *signify* this antagonism per se, but the necessity of the subject tarrying with this ontologically determinative negativity of sex in order to become a (sexed) subject at all. The phallus returns in *Encore*, then, but in the form of the *phallic function* (Φx): the signifier of the subject’s “entry” into the Symbolic order. The phallus is the *signifier of castration*, rather than of difference.

The Feminine Subject

Arguably, Zupančič's (re)reading of the phallus as signifier of difference/ontological negativity is already a *feminine* one, seeing through the (masculine) phallic fascination in order to discern what Fink reminds us is the *fallibility* of the phallus (2004: 159): the crucial Lacanian lesson that there is no Other of the Other, the Other is always-already barred (hence, $\Phi \approx A$ barred). But the phallus is the signifier of the *inscription* of this lack within the subject as "a subjectivizing reiteration of the inaugurating minus" (Zupančič 2017: 49): (A barred \rightarrow \$). Hence we shift conceptually from the desire of the (m)Other of *phallic sexual difference* to the lack in the Other of *sexuation*. As I've suggested, the masculine represses this lack through the logic of Exception and the fantasy of One (Woman); while the feminine situates it as the very condition of (im)possibility of the subject as not-all. If we recall that sexuation pertains not to the difference *between* two positions (masculine and feminine) but to the difference, the gap, *within* each position – the difference of the subject from itself that marks it *as* a subject (\$) – then I can also make a further specification: masculine logic allows man to sustain the gap only by "suturing" it with the fantasy of the Exception; for woman – defined from hereon as the *subject sexuated feminine* (or ~~Woman~~, as I will explain), rather than a normative "gender identity" – there is no Exception so the gap cannot be covered over and is thus encountered directly. Sexuation names the way in which this deadlock is inscribed in the subject: thus the feminine not-all signifies woman's immanent self-contradiction as the Lacanian subject. The fundamentally *anti-humanist* lesson of Lacanian sexual difference here is that, as Žižek might put it, man "stupidly believes" that he is a substantial individual, while woman "knows" that this is an illusion (1996: 163). And, as he concludes in later work, "since the philosophical name for this scandal of ontology (...) is

subject, we should draw the conclusion that subject is, at its most radical level, feminine” (2017: 147).

Under the Skin, I’d argue, insists upon approaching the subject *qua* feminine – of conceiving of woman (*qua* ~~Woman~~) in terms of her own logic of the not-all – rather than making those disastrous attempts to account for her from the masculine pole that is the “usual way of misreading Lacan’s formulas of sexuation” (Žižek 1996: 155).⁹ In the film’s first part, however, Laura seems to occupy the position of the Lady of Courtly Love, as Žižek describes her in her Lacanian double aspect: the “cold, distanced, inhuman partner” who is lacking in empathy *and* the idealised, inaccessible feminine object (1994: 89-90). Laura is created seemingly *ex nihilo* by unknown agents, and works to support a particular (patriarchal) order – represented/upheld by the biker – using the trappings of the traditional feminine masquerade – red lips, fur coat – to seduce unwitting Glaswegian men to their doom.¹⁰ She thus begins in an ambiguous *object* position: impassively serving a masculine regime while turning the tables on phallic violence and subverting the stereotype of the sexist, catcalling “White Van Man” (who keeps a tabloid newspaper folded on the dashboard, no doubt splashed with paparazzi shots of “ScarJo”) by “weaponising” her position as desirable being. With her banal patter – “Do you want a lift? Do you think I’m pretty?” – she presents herself (like Samantha, in fact) as what Žižek calls a “neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections” (ibid.: 91), but this screen also *conceals*. The men she meets are unable to perceive her as a threat and she thus exploits their complacent acceptance of her advances. There is perhaps a certain degree of “agency” in such a role (of turning the phallus against itself, as it were) but a simply reactive posture – the film suggests – doesn’t necessarily constitute a viable subject position (and, moreover, obscures the logic of the feminine).

The *turn to the subject* comes in a crucial volte-face at the halfway point of Laura’s narrative, when she encounters the man played by Adam Pearson. She seems to intuit that his

neurofibromatosis makes him different from her other marks. She asks about loneliness, and invites him to touch her face. While we might see this change in tack as an adaptation of her seduction technique for a new quarry, what is certain – once the seduction “succeeds” – is that she can’t take it to the end. Although he seemingly succumbs to the black room, something changes and she releases him, naked, into the early morning chill. While there has, up to that point, arguably been a more gradual opening up of Laura to the world around her – as in the moment she trips on a Glasgow pavement and is helped up by kindly passers-by – *this* encounter (with Pearson) marks a more fundamental transition as it coincides with profound formal and narrative shifts in the progression of the film. After this scene, Laura abandons her “mission” to head out alone and, significantly, the film never returns to the hidden camera shooting, van interior or city exterior locations for the rest of its duration. As Ara Osterweil argues, this can be read as a moment of emergent empathy for Laura but it also, *moreover*, points to a new mode of her own self-relating (2014: 48-9). Indeed, just as she is about to leave the black room for the final time, the score halts and there appears a front-on, mid-shot of a shadowy-smooth black figure, which dissolves to a close-up of Laura’s profile. Verging on unreadable on a first viewing, this image – in retrospect – becomes an encounter with her own immanent self-contradiction.¹¹

The narrative then takes a more conventional, if still oblique, route in the latter section – following Laura through a series of vignettes around the Scottish countryside – and while the cinematography retains a degree of the conventionally “realist” aesthetic, we do lose the more intimate sense of voyeuristically peeping in on the people she encounters via hidden camera (an idea I will return to below). These transformations in visual style and storytelling mark the point at which *Under the Skin* poses the question: *What does it mean for woman to be subject rather than object?* And, I’d suggest, the film attempts to answer it in ways far more profound than *Her*. Laura begins to explore the world not just outside the van

but within her self too, through her own self-consciousness. Earlier, she had looked unproblematically into her compact to apply make-up but now reflections seem to disturb her. Having encountered the black figure, she pauses by the mirror in the hallway as she moves to leave Pearson, and again she contemplates herself in a full-length mirror in the lonely man's house. The "Lacanian" overtones of these mirror-relations are more apparent than actual: there is no sense in which Laura constitutes herself as an "ego" at this stage, alienating her identity through the image of the ideal other. As I will explore below, the image is far from idealised, and seems more confounding than jubilant. These are revelatory, abyssal moments for Laura: productive of subjectivity of a different sort, leading up to the final, stunning staging of self-relation at the film's end.

Horror Vacui, Horror Subiecti

Laura's status as subject is rendered almost literal in the closing moments of the film. Wandering in the woods, she is assaulted by a man and, as Mark Fisher describes, "As he attacks her, part of the prosthetic body comes away, leaving a gaping hole in her back, like a rip in a dress" (2016). The *ripped dress* of course evokes a persistent image of sexual violence and here – at the film's conclusion – we witness a brutal staging: of a subject who is sexuated feminine (regardless of biology, human or alien: a ~~Woman~~) violently forced into the position of the lived reality of those identifying/identified under patriarchy as "women" (in the common understanding). This phenomenology means that she is *treated as a "woman"* (in normative gender terms) by the rapist, and ultimately destroyed. Prior to this, however, what is revealed *under the skin* in this moment – the tar-like figure that confronted Laura in the black room – resonates with Žižek's evocation of "the black hole, the tear in the fabric of reality" (1994: 115). He is discussing Lynch, but the observations have remarkable relevance here, when he claims: "What we encounter in this 'black hole' is simply the body stripped of

its skin". This scene presents an uncanny encounter, that disturbs our phenomenological understanding of bodily "surface" and "depth" (ibid.: 116), but more than that – as the alien creature holds its "human suit", looking the digitally-rendered face of Johansson in the eye – this staging recalls those earlier mirror scenes. She contemplates herself – what makes her what she is – in a moment of self-consciousness and self-incomprehension. Seeing something different, while perhaps finally seeing nothing.

Where Mark Francis insists on the *humanist* dimension of this moment – suggesting that "The eyes of the mask that is Johansson's face even blink to remind us that the human component to this alien can be shed but not so easily annihilated, it exists independently of the body that wears it" (2016) – the Lacanian position would be to assert the anti-humanist *inverse* of this proposition: what is inescapable is the inhuman-alien "core" of the individual, the void that constitutes (and in which is constituted) the subject. Indeed, the repeated emphasis on the alien/non-human dimension of Laura might seem to undermine any claim for implicating sexual difference (and the feminine specifically), but this is precisely where the Lacanian theorisation operates. Osterweil suggests that it is her very position *as* alien that allows Laura to renegotiate the position and the role of woman in (patriarchal, western) society: she becomes an active, desiring subject rather than simply the desirable object (2014: 44). In effect, I could say that the focus on the alien allows for an *unmooring* of the position of woman from the normative structures of "gender": and this is precisely what Lacan achieves in his anti-humanist theory of sexuation.

Furthermore, in referencing Lacan's distinction between the "I who speaks" and the "I who is spoken", Fisher comments that, "The featureless figure in those final scenes (...), then, is something like a physicalisation of this soul-subject, this I which speaks [that] dwells somehow 'inside' the body" (2016). Under the skin, we find the revelation of the *ça parle* that speaks within the signifier: the Lacanian subject of the unconscious. In these moments,

Laura thus encounters the constitutive void embodying the feminine inscription of self-relating negativity. The film, like Lacan's paradigm of *Encore*, thus allows for a *thinking otherwise* of sex and the feminine, and offers a more fully realised exploration of this (new) place, rather than a simpler, negative theology of woman that can only articulate her where she is not (as in Jonze's film). The "Other sex" isn't some imaginary other out there, but the alterity of the subject to itself and from itself: the Other of sex that is "in here", that *inheres*, making the subject a subject at all.

Embodying the Feminine

Francis suggests that the final disintegration of the alien's human form enacts a "bodily split – between the endoskeleton and dermis – [which] could be seen as a separation of femininity from the body" (2016). To the extent that sexual difference entails a separation of sexual difference from *anatomy* specifically, this would also be true of Lacanian psychoanalysis; however, the body as such has a greater role to play here than this formulation seems to suggest. Indeed, these final scenes, and the film as a whole, put emphasis on embodied experience as a crucial dimension of feminine subjectivity. When Laura heads out into the world, it is in bodily sensations that she seeks self-determination: from those points of *contact* with first the Glaswegian pavement, then the attendant hands of passers-by, and the caress of Pearson's loner, to the earthly delights of chocolate cake and even sex. As Elena Gorfinkel notes, "She pursues small, constitutive pleasures, appetitive, aesthetic, sexual, self-confirming, that signal corporeal and sensory self-awareness" (2016). This once again aligns Laura with Lacan's logic of the feminine. As I stated above, Lacan's new paradigm of sexual difference turns not on the desire of the Other, but the lack in the Other understood in terms of its relation to the subject's *jouissance*: the particular organisation of enjoyment that is derived from either masculine or feminine structure. As we've seen, masculine, phallic *jouissance* is derived from

the object relationship and the repression of lack in the fantasy of One ($\$ \rightarrow a$). Feminine jouissance, however, is a different proposition, which Lacan signifies with a different vector: (~~Woman~~ $\rightarrow S[A \text{ barred}]$) (1998: 78). It is noteworthy that this vector *doesn't* cross the line into the masculine side of the Graph (as does the vector of fantasy), and instead suggests the ways in which the feminine subject (~~Woman~~) derives satisfaction directly from the lack in the Other (A barred). I will return below to the different permutations of this enjoyment, but for the purposes of my discussion of *Under the Skin* what is important is the relationship to the *body* that the feminine logic indicates.

Rather than seeking enjoyment in some illusory thing “out there” (the object), the logic of feminine jouissance turns the subject back onto its own possibilities and the satisfactions derived from the immanent experience of embodiment itself. And here I have much more sympathy for Quinlivan’s emphasis – despite our divergent readings of *Her* – on the importance of the embodied dimension of subjectivity, against – for example – Silverman’s effort to erase the body from the feminine position in her reading of the cinematic voice. Silverman’s thesis is of course grounded in a reaction *against* the reduction, in the realm of classical Hollywood representation, of the feminine to a(n unthinking) body *and nothing more*; however, it does lead her to disavow the centrality of embodied experience when it comes to the question of feminine subjectivity as such (1988: 65). Quinlivan, by contrast, suggests that the “sensorial pleasure of hearing” – of the fleshy grain of the voice as “the very essence of materiality” – opens up spaces for experiences of feminine agency and desire, anchoring new forms of subjectivity (2017: 300, 302-3). Where Jonze’s film, I contend ultimately *fails* in this respect, *Under the Skin* presents Laura’s experience in terms of bodily autonomy and sensation, asserting that it is precisely this sensorium (rather than – for example – an immaterial, posthuman beyond) that constitutes a feminine mode of being.

However, even in this repeated emphasis on *embodiment*, the film still insists – in tandem with Lacanian psychoanalysis – that sexual difference should be conceptually divorced from biology. Colette Soler suggests that the affective intensity that Lacan calls *feminine* can be felt in the radical, corporeal disruption precipitated by extreme physical action (2005: 306). Soler relates this *jouissance* to childbirth, illness and sport – and I’ve elsewhere proposed adding *dance* to this list as well (Tyrer 2014: 143) – all of which suggests that, after all, *anatomy is not necessarily destiny*. There are indeed, as Quinlivan states, modes of being that are *feminine without being female*. *Under the Skin* explores such a feminine mode of being *qua* embodiment, sensation, pleasure, but also insists upon this distinction between the logic of sexuation and the biologic of “scientific” sex. After Laura is taken in by the lonely man, the narrative is set on the track of what Gorfinkel (2016) recognises as a heteronormative *telos* – although, unlike both Laura’s earlier seductions (and the “phone sex” in *Her*) there is a far greater sense of *mutuality* in this instance – wherein he takes her on a “date” and she ultimately gives herself over to him. But something seems to go awry. Distressed, she darts across the room to shine a lamp at her crotch; apparently dismayed at what she sees (or *doesn’t see*), she throws the lamp to the floor. There in fact appears to be some critical disagreement on the significance of this moment: for example, Osterweil asserts that Laura is “astonished by the physical revelation of genital intercourse” (2014: 50); while Amy Herzog suggests that “something goes wrong. He can’t enter her” (2016). My interpretation inclines towards the latter: the disconcerted look on the man’s face, combined with her reaction, put in the context of her previous, unsuccessful attempt to swallow cake and the subsequent revelation of a smooth alien body, all point here to a *failed* encounter. Unlike Samantha, Laura is not reducible to an “organ without body” but (in a strictly non-Deleuzian sense) she is here a *body without organ*. Gorfinkel sees this as “a larceny of her nascent personhood, her currency and capacity for experience and sensation

suddenly foreclosed” (2016), and while it is indeed the case that a given physical experience is denied to Laura, this also suggests that a particular (particularly normative) organisation of sensation (i.e. penetrative sex) need not be considered a defining feature of the feminine: *her personhood need not be determined by her fuckability*. Where Samantha’s subjective awakening was coextensive with her sexual awakening, Laura’s subjectivity is not reducible to her “sexuality” (in the everyday sense); instead, it constitutes a *part* of her experience, a function of her sexualisation more generally.

Body without Woman

These instances of “failed embodiment” suggest, once more, a *different* relation to the feminine in *Under the Skin*, which is, I argue, also mirrored at the formal level in the presentation of Johansson’s body on screen. I claimed above that *absenting* her from the image might have served to frustrate the objectifying tendencies of masculine logic; however, in *Her* this simply meant a shift from scopic to invocatory pleasures. *Under the Skin* presents yet another organisation very much contrary to this arrangement. Rather than escaping the visual field, Johansson is *there in full*. For the first time in her career, she appears nude on screen in several scenes; however, as Noah Gittell observes, this fact received little fanfare in the press (2014). Given Johansson’s media profile, this might seem surprising but attention to film form here explains why it is not. The film *does* offer up the female body to the camera but does so in ways that deny the “male gaze” and refuse the determining imprint of masculine desire. When filmed from a distance, she is often shot from the side or from behind, obscuring those iconic features so frequently pored over by feature writers and readers of *Esquire*, alike. And when filmed in close-up, as she frequently is, the hard lighting and harsh, digital definition reveal her skin *as skin*: an uneven, living surface of mottles and marks rather than an airbrushed, post-production corrected, artificial shell. We must also

observe the split here between how Laura appears to her prey, and how Johansson appears to the screen as such. To the men she seduces, Laura presents as that desirable object of normative sex relations and – as Lucas Hildebrand observes – the first seduction in the black room is even edited according to classical continuity and point-of-view principles (2016), which tend to affirm the objectifying frame of fantasy; however, to the camera (particularly as the film progresses), Johansson is present in a remarkably *unidealised* way. The “ScarJo” star image still, by necessity, *haunts* the body on screen: it wouldn’t *be* on the screen were it not for the power of her celebrity to maintain financially such a, relatively speaking, “experimental” cinematic project. However, the manner of her presentation strips away the trappings of idealised femininity that “ScarJo” signifies.

Laid bare before the camera, Johansson (as Laura) appears as *a body without Woman*: viewed not through the lens of masculine fantasy but present – *there*, like a Jenny Saville canvas – on her own terms.¹² *Under the Skin* doesn’t simply *reject* the cinematographic techniques that constitute the “male gaze”; instead, its visual organisation refuses to reproduce their scopophilic-fetishistic effects, deploying the image in different ways. In short, I suggest that the *over-abundant* presence of Johansson on screen in *Under the Skin* serves effectively to deny the terms of the Mulveyan “gaze”, offering in its place another visual logic: of feminine embodiment. Moreover, through its use of hidden cameras and non-actors, the film challenges the sex-determined organisation of the visual and complicates notions of voyeurism. Osterweil, for example, notes the striking depiction of the desiring feminine look, which remains a rarity in anything even approaching popular cinema (2014: 47). However, the film presents not just a *reversal* of objectifying logic but also a deconstruction of its terms: by conflating exhibitionist performance (feminine) and revelatory actualities (masculine) with an “active” woman and “passive” men, the dynamics of the situation are no longer articulated around man-bearer-of-the-look and woman-as-image but

arranged in relays of subject/subject and subject/object, reversals of image and onlooker, in a chiasmic exchange of (diegetic and non-diegetic) glances between characters, performers, cameras and viewers.¹³

Johansson thus effectively embodies ~~Woman~~ here: the figure of feminine subjectivity that Lacan opposes to the fantasy of *La femme*. Lacan insists that his theory of sexuation presents “Woman precisely, except that Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There’s no such thing as Woman” (1998: 72). What we have in the theory of sexuation is barred ~~Woman~~, who stands for the feminine subject herself, who cannot be constructed in the terms of masculine logic but is very much *there* nonetheless. Once we comprehend Lacan’s theory of feminine sexuation, we can appreciate that “it is improper to call her Woman (*La femme*), because (...) the W cannot be written. There is only barred Woman here” (ibid.: 80). Otherwise said, when Lacan writes “~~Woman~~” it is to signify that “Woman” (the fantasmatic feminine) doesn’t exist; really existing feminine subjects – their logic, the organisation of their *jouissance* – themselves testify to her non-existence. This “woman” (*who doesn’t exist*) is *Woman*, *La femme*, a fantasy of the eternal feminine (“ScarJo”), while Johansson/Laura eventually stands as ~~Woman~~ herself. The only sense in which we can say, “~~Woman~~ doesn’t exist”, (which Lacan never does) is once again from the masculine perspective, where the logic of the all cannot give an account of her subjectivity. Overall, I claim, *Under the Skin* gets far closer to ~~Woman~~ than to *Her*.

Conclusion: Passage to the Feminine

At a structural level, both *Her* and *Under the Skin* parallel the history of psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to the question of sexual difference: beginning in a patriarchal context, it was necessary to work through the implications of the masculine organisation of sex before it was at all possible to begin approaching the feminine. As Juliet Mitchell argues, it was

firstly the task of psychoanalysis to give an account of the overdetermined socio-cultural-scientific discourses and structures in and through which sexual difference was manifest; and this is why, she claims, in Freud's theories of sexual difference (as well as a certain version of Lacan's), it is not the centrality of *man* but the centrality of the *phallus* (to which man lays claim) that is the determining factor (1982: 8). They are, in effect, *diagnosing* rather than *proposing* a phallogocentric system. Samantha and Laura similarly find themselves within such an order, bound initially to masculine desires. However, it is a vital truth of psychoanalysis (and one revealed in Jonze's and Glazer's films) that the masculine position is *fundamentally untenable*. While, historically speaking, the elaboration of the phallic order of difference necessarily took place first, the lesson of Lacanian theory is that the feminine is logically prior, *takes precedence*, vis-à-vis the masculine.

The paradigm of "The Signification of the Phallus" was bound to Oedipal-phallic sexual difference and what, in retrospect, I've suggested we should recognise as a masculine logic of subject/object; while the paradigm of sexuation that Lacan formalises in *Encore* already *is* a feminine logic in the way that it asserts *ontological negativity* in the place of differentiability. Moreover, the passage *through* an analysis, I'd argue, is a passage *to* the feminine: the analysand must traverse the fantasy, tarrying with the negative (of sex) to embrace the "atheist" logic of the not-all that asserts, *there is no Other of the Other*, no transcendental guarantor except myself, my own cause. Indeed, Verhaeghe and Declercq refer to identification with the *sinthome* – the stage that marks the end of analysis – as the "feminine way" (2003: 59). Lacan's theory of feminine sexuation thus opens up possibilities for new understanding, for a new field of experience not previously countenanced. The challenge we must take up is to explore this space of the feminine, encountering it *on its own terms*. The ending of *Her* effectively fails this test by relegating femininity to the unknown, while *Under the Skin*, I argue, goes further in staging this thinking otherwise about sex.

Moreover, the shocking conclusion of the film in Laura's immolation marks the point at which *Under the Skin* takes on a more directly political thrust, reminding us – should we really need reminding – of the lived reality women (in the common sense, “feminine” or otherwise) threatened by patriarchal violence. But, as cinema and psychoanalysis in tandem here declare: The phallus will fade. Man cannot hold. The feminine insists.

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Filmography:

Ex Machina (2015) Directed by Alex Garland. UK: Universal/Film4.

Ghost in the Shell (2017) Directed by Rupert Sanders. UK/China/India/Hong Kong/USA:
Paramount/DreamWorks.

Her (2013) Directed by Spike Jonze. USA: AnnaPurna Pictures.

I Dream of Jeannie (1965-1970) USA: NBC.

Lost in Translation (2003) Directed by Sophia Coppola. USA/Japan: Focus
Features/TFC/American Zoetrope.

Lucy (2014) Directed by Luc Besson. France/Taiwan/Germany: EuropaCorp.

Minority Report (2002) Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Twentieth Century
Fox/DreamWorks.

Morvern Callar (2002) Directed by Lynne Ramsay. UK/Canada: BBC Films.

Under the Skin (2013) Directed by Jonathan Glazer. UK/USA/Switzerland/Poland:
Film4/BFI.

Weird Science (1985) Directed by John Hughes. USA: Universal.

¹ For analysis of the intersection of femininity and other markers of identity in Johansson's star image, see Loreck, Monaghan and Stevens' dossier on "Stardom and sf" (2018).

² Although nameless throughout the film, Johansson's character is referred to as "Laura" in the crew interviews on the StudioCanal Region B Blu-ray of the film. I have decided to adopt this character name in order to avoid further confusion of the theoretical specificities of the term "woman" in Lacanian discourses on sexual difference.

³ Fink notes that his translation modifies Lacan's text to reflect the distinction between the French "*La femme*" (more accurately, "The woman") and an English equivalent in "Woman with a capital W [to indicate] Woman as singular in essence" (1998: 7n28).

⁴ See <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a25017a/scarlett-johansson-interview-1113/>.

⁵ “ScarJo” being the tabloidese, “celebrity nickname” imposed upon Johansson.

⁶ The use of “gaze” and “voice” here is as avowedly *non-Lacanian* as it is in the work of Kaja Silverman (1988) and Laura Mulvey (1975), respectively. For the implications of the *gaze* as Lacanian cinematic object, see McGowan (2007). A consideration of the *voice* as Lacanian cinematic object would encompass Chion (1999) and Dolar (2006) to interpret Theodore’s traumatic encounter with “Surrogate Date Isabella” in *Her*. However, such analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁷ See Tyrer (2014: 142; 2016: 117-9).

⁸ See Copjec (1994: 224); Tyrer (2016: 116).

⁹ Moreover, that Laura isn’t “human” but “alien” in fact highlights sexuation and its construction more clearly. It better exemplifies that the Lacanian logic of the feminine is *anti-human*: it isn’t bound to anything we would recognise as the humanist individual (inner essence, etc.).

¹⁰ Faber’s “source” novel is explicit as to what this regime entails (i.e. an intergalactic meat trade) but such details are omitted from Glazer’s vision.

¹¹ The black figure also appeared at the beginning of this scene: in extreme long shot, doubled in the floor’s reflective sheen. This image is even more abstract than the subsequent mid-shot dissolve, and again only becomes legible retrospectively: in light of the film’s final scenes.

¹² This “without Woman” being precisely what is signified by Lacan’s “~~Woman~~”.

¹³ Contrary to the voyeuristic *distance* of the “male gaze”, the Lacanian gaze proper – explicitly formulated under the influence of Merleau-Ponty – involves *proximity*: “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture” (Lacan 1977: 96; translation modified).