Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (2000)

Some Questions for Class/Further Study

These questions are *not* definitive. We won't be able to cover them all in one class. They are selectively based on my reading of the novel – and some selected criticism. The interpretive nature of literary study ensures there are other angles/perspectives. Use the questions as a platform, from where to leap into your own Vodsel world.

(NB: Page numbers refer to my copy, Canongate 2004)

1. Having read the novel, what can you discern from the opening two paragraphs? Have a 5-min discussion in 2s and 3s. Then turn to the opening paragraphs of Ch.10 (p.197). What is happening here?

2. What function does the occasional narrative switch to the hitcher's point of view have? Seee, for example, pps. 11; 28; 34; 80; 121. 134-35.177-178; 200-01;

3. Why does the plot reveal the 'truth' gradually?

4. Read from "Then the middle finger of her left hand flipped a little toggle on the steering wheel -> end of first chapter (pps. 20-23). What themes/issues/styles can you discern from this scene?

5 What does the novel's title suggest? pps: 26; 33; 152; 164.

6. The Story of the Whelks – is this allegorical? pps: 30-33 (See also 89, 192, 206)

7. Isserley – 'human' or 'alien'? See, pps: 39; 61; 92; 141; 232 (in what sense is her bodily pain a metaphor?) What do you make of her ecstatic reaction to the 'culling' of the 'cattle'? 218-220? Can we call her a 'feminist'? 141 ('*Men*, she thought....'); 213-215 (wants to watch the 'butchering')

8. In what sense is Television (or other pop culture/media, such as music) an interesting element in the novel? See pps: 51; 145-46; 153-4

9. Isserley's burning of the German hitcher's gear. What to make of this episode? 59-60

10. The alien/human confusion: 75; 108; 110-111 (description of Amlis Vess as a beautiful 'man');

11. What is the role of Amlis Vess in the novel? (see, for example, pps: 72-73; 112-114 ('I don't believe in killing animals"); 171-174: the 'MERCY' episode. What issues and themes does this throw up? See also 244-245; The Sheep episode, (240-41it's comedy and darkness in the light of 'human' 'cattle' (eg 168-169.

12. Eco-theme – 117-119 ('the subterranean hell of the estates') See also 260 (Earth contrast)

13. Does it make sense to see the novel as exposure of corporate globalization? 81; 108-109 (the cargo ship); 272, 235, 228-29

14 The clear reference to a referendum on 'Scotland's future' 246-247. Does this matter in any way in the novel?

15. This is a novel about 'petroculture'.... why? (see myriad refs to fuel and the car (esp. 156-158

16. What do you make of the end of the novel? From the death of the husband-to-be to the car crash, the final expected conflagration/sacrifice?

"Today, our monsters are robots, cyborgs, genetically altered creatures, and aliens who attempt to take up residence within a *necessarily altered* human domestic sphere, or within human sites of production, including human bodies. Instead of enforcing cultural and political norms, these constructed beings function as interpolators: their presence within causes breakdowns, interrupting, disrupting and redistributing power. Unlike the god-made monsters faced by Odysseus, contemporary monsters are products of human technology, or are alien constructs produced by their authors for the express purpose of creating opportunities to successfully confuse, destroy or recombine oppositional dualisms such as human/nonhuman." (Anne Weinstone, "Resisting Monsters: Notes on *Solaris*")

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devil_Girl_from_Mars

The Devil Girl from Mars – seems prototype for *Under the Skin*

http://www.theguardian.com/film/gallery/2014/nov/23/the-20-best-british-science-fiction-films-in-pictures

SYMNICH + SEIÃO COSTA

achieves "an imitation of the writing of Basil Valentine, Jacob Böhme, Father Athanasius Kircher, Jean-Paul Richter, Hegel, Marx, and Enno Littmann" (79). That the ape is able to imitate a group of Western writers and thinkers can be read as a highly ironic comment on the lack of original writing (and thinking) in the second half of the twentieth century. The modern writer apparently can only 'ape' what others have done before, without hoping to achieve anything new or original. Butor's text thus seems to use the motif of human-animal metamorphosis to express the postmodern topos of the 'exhaustion' of literature.

Seeing oneself as the other: metamorphosis in Michel Faber's *Under the Skin*

That the motif of metamorphosis can fulfill a wide range of functions is also apparent in Michel Faber's crime/science-fiction novel *Under the Skin*.[22] This novel presents an unusual example of metamorphosis, but it can be seen as variation on other transformation narratives, giving rise to yet different interpretations and functionalizations of the motif. So far, we have looked at instances where the metamorphosis was caused either by supernatural powers or by factors not further specified. Metamorphoses thus apparently tend to be represented as processes beyond the individual's control. In *Under the Skin*, however, the protagonist Isserley, who belongs to an alien species, voluntarily undergoes an extremely painful operation to alter her physical appearance completely. The purpose of the surgery is to make Isserley look human. The metamorphosis is therefore the result of a conscious decision rather than an instance of human helplessness in the face of supernatural powers or unspecified environmental forces.

It is by departing in several respects from the usual pattern of human-animal transformation that Faber's novel raises interesting questions about the dividing line between human and animal. Isserley belongs to an alien species that, to human eyes, looks like animals, as is repeatedly indicated in the text, but whose knowledge and technology are far superior to that of humans. Thus, the idea that being turned into an animal implies a degradation and loss of rationality, which is a common feature of literary representations of human-animal metamorphoses, is questioned ironically. At first the readers are led to believe that the protagonist is an ordinary woman. For a considerable portion of the story, there are no clues that would give away that Isserley is an alien, and thus the recipients simply fall back on the default value for characters in fiction and assume that she is a human character. A cognitive-narratological analysis can explore how this primacy effect is gradually undermined in the

reading process. This draws the readers' attention to their anthropocentric assumptions about literary characters, and it produces an ironic twist on the readers' expectations as far as metamorphoses are concerned. Since the readers are first of all fooled into believing that they are reading about the actions, but also the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of a human woman, the assumption that there is a clear dividing line between human and non-human species is called into question. The depiction of alien perception, thus, does *not* generate an imaginative counterdiscourse, but appears to be quite ordinary, at least at first.

When the readers finally learn about Isserley's true identity and that she has undergone a painful operation in order to look human, the alien aspects of Isserley's perspective also begin to occupy more space in the tale. The readers' assumptions about the desirability of being human are challenged by the information that the operation had a very prosaic purpose: Isserley dislikes looking human, but needs this disguise in order to kidnap male hitchhikers because human meat is regarded as a culinary speciality by her species. Considering the pain she suffers due to the 'unnatural' human anatomy, she is in fact 'de-humanized' by her operation and viewed as a machine or weapon. The impact of losing one's humanity, which often haunts the individuals experiencing a metamorphosis in literary texts, is thus ridiculed. Isserley has lost part of her dignity by becoming a 'vodsel' (the name attributed to humans by her alien species) in this 'reverse' metamorphosis. In Isserley's view of the world, human beings have the status of cattle, and the way the men caught by Isserley are treated by the aliens can be read as a cultural-critical metadiscourse of the way human beings treat animals in the meat industry. The novel's ecocritical stance, thus, is mainly expressed by interpolating an alien perspective, by inviting the readers to see human beings, themselves, from an alien point of view. In a scene where Isserley inspects the humans that are being kept for fattening, the captives are naked, and their tongues have been cut out; yet the remnants of their being human are expressed when one of them writes the word 'mercy' with a "handful of long straws [...] in the dirt" (171). This scene emphasizes the utter degradation that the captives have been submitted to and might make the readers wonder whether their treatment of animals is not also 'inhumane.' Even though Isserley can understand and read human language, she is not willing to let this cry for mercy enter her consciousness. The scene in which writing is used in an attempt to establish communication not only recalls the story of Io, but also aspects of intensive livestock farming, that humans may be caught between the wish to communicate with their companion species and the wish to ignore this possibility in order

herself as "no uglier" than the workers in the processing plant, referred to as "a herd," and finds some vodsel features, like a v-shaped hairline, attractive.

While a creature enduring such torment could be expected to elicit sympathy from the reader, and perhaps does so at first, this is gradually replaced with horror, which again towards the end of the novel is transformed into almost empathy. For this tortured body houses a twisted mind, hardened by the impersonal and immoral society Isserley lives in. For most of Faber's novel, she acts as a cold-blooded hunter incapable of empathizing with her victims and their pain. While watching the processor cut out and cauterize a temporarily paralyzed vodsel's tongue and then castrate him, she reflects that the victim is "suffering from nothing more serious than icpathuasi" (a drugged state; 225). She may justify this indifference by echoing Vess Enterprise's lie that vodsel are no more than "vegetables with legs," but Isserley is willfully deluding herself for she is fully aware that the vodsel have a complex language which she herself needed years to learn and which contains colorful expressions that she likes to use such as "water under the bridge" (261). Isserley, in fact, attempts to conceal the vodsels' ability to use language from Amliss Vess on two occasions when he asks the meaning of the words "mercy" and "sheep." When they visit the vodsels' pens together, she secretly hopes that the captives tongues "had been thoroughly seen to." In her cold-blooded acceptance of killing, Faber aligns Isserley with the likes of Orwell's Napoleon and his cronies, but her inhumanity is more disquieting in that it rests on self-deceit and leads the reader to question how many practices in our society may be accepted on the basis of a lie.

Gradually Isserley becomes aware of the suffering imposed on the men she catches and this awareness is matched by her initial compassion for these men in spite of several rather unpleasant examples of the male human, including one who has attempted to rape her and another who prided himself on his "control" of the dogs he used to own. When she realizes that she herself, like many a modern factory worker, may soon be replaced thanks to new technological developments, the reader, also in an interesting inversion, feels her desperation and despair. Moreover, she has come to love the world her people are abusing, and her evocation of its wild beauty seems to be the author reminding us that we do not see what we are destroying. No longer fully human (in the alien sense), Isserley is obviously unable to return to her own world, a world in which only the elite can afford to buy the necessary amounts of oxygen and water to live comfortably, and a world in which even that elite are forced to live underground. On the other hand, the earth she has grown to love can offer her no sanctuary either. It is at this point that the novel breaks down somewhat and the ending is rather facile.

To return to the main focus of this article, several themes present in *Animal Farm* recur in *Under The Skin*. Both works hark back to an earlier and simpler time, a nostalgia which, as Colin Manlove points out, typifies much

modern fantasy (10). The earlier novel depicts the crumbling of a community based on utopian ideals and camaraderie, and its return to a totalitarian system, a return made inevitable by the all-too-human self interest of the strongest individual and the group to which he belongs. This pessimism prefigures the stark despair of Faber's novel that starts where Orwell leaves off, showing us a society where ruthless elitism systematically pervades every aspect of life. In the harsh environment of a planet ruined by overexploitation, the wealthy live a life of ease surrounded by comfort and drugs, while using the population as slave labor, assigning them to a squalid existence performing degrading tasks in a constant struggle for survival. The basic difference lies then in the degree to which society has been reduced to a money-making machine for a privileged few. Vess Enterprises condemns its workforce to a brutal existence in order to produce a luxury line of foods for the elite using vodsel flesh for which they have created a demand. There is no morality, only the law of the strongest: "my father would chop the planet into pieces if he thought there was a profit in it," explains Amliss Vess (247). And the workforce is reduced to a collection of scared individuals, working to survive, with none of the sense of community that affords comfort even at the most difficult times in Orwell's farm. They are, as Isserley comments, "a disposable means to an end ... overused pieces of equipment" (269). Little wonder that no compassion mitigates the suffering of the vodsel being processed at the farm, for the language spoken by Faber's aliens has no word for "mercy."

In a world marked by physical difference, language constitutes a powerful source of both unity and conflict. Both Orwell and Faber show language perverting the truth and remaking reality. In *Animal Farm*, Orwell at first equates communication with liberation: Major's analysis of Farmer Jones' exploitation and his rhetoric sensitize the animals to their plight; the song "Beasts of England" resembles a working-class or rugby song of the type appreciated by Orwell; it expresses and contributes to the solidarity which develops between them, a solidarity later consecrated in the seven commandments according to which Animal Farm will be governed. Learning to read becomes a deciding factor in the way life evolves on the farm; the pigs, being the better readers, are able to manage and thereby control the farm. The different degrees of literacy attained by the animals corresponds directly to their intelligence; the sheep, being stupid, can be taught to chant slogans which they do not even understand. In the next phase, language, however, becomes a means of manipulation with the seven commandments written on the wall being surreptitiously modified to convey the opposite meaning. Finally, reflecting the transition to a new autocracy, "Beasts of England" is replaced by the anthem "Comrade Napoleon" which is closer in spirit to "God Save the Queen" than to a rugby song. But even when misused, language has the power to unite.

in literary texts is first and foremost a punishment, which implies that crossing the boundary between humans and animals is conceptualized as an utter degradation for the human being. Deprived of various privileges because of his or her loss of 'humanity,' the one who is transformed is made aware of the rigid character of the demarcation line between animals and humans. In literary texts the experience of being turned into an animal is typically associated with a state of helplessness or with an outbreak of uncontrollable ferocity. In both cases the motif of human-animal metamorphosis is closely linked with human fears in the face of the 'other' and in particular with the threat of losing control over both one's emotions and one's body. In other words human-animal transformation may express the fear of encountering the 'other' lurking inside the human being behind a façade erected by civilization.[7] Even in cases where the metamorphosis creates (mainly or partially) a comic effect, it can usually still be interpreted as an expression of fear, since laughing at what one is afraid of is a common strategy for keeping one's fears at bay.

In addition to undermining culturally prevalent assumptions about the human-animal relationship, the motif of human-animal metamorphosis can also fulfill a host of other functions, as the texts on which we focus in this article exemplify. The depiction of a metamorphosis may, for example, provide the context for a critique of gender roles, as Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* demonstrates. Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, in contrast, shows that metamorphoses may also question contested self-definitions in what Russell West-Pavlov refers to as "the disputed terrain of Australian identities."[8] The motif of human-animal metamorphosis thus turns out to be very flexible as far as its functions are concerned. In the following, we use the ecocritical and the cultural-ecological framework to examine the diverse functions that can be ascribed to four novels from the second half of the twentieth century that use the motif of human-animal metamorphosis.

Ecocritical approaches to the study of literary texts direct attention to themes and questions that have often been neglected by literary critics: concepts of nature, the representation of nature, and the interdependence between man and environment. Thus, ecocritical thinking, for example the assumption that "[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation," provides a useful starting point for the discussion of the motif of human-animal transformation.[9] To explore the potential functions of literary texts employing the motif of human-animal metamorphosis, it is also useful to rely upon the concept of literature as 'cultural ecology' developed by Hubert Zapf.[10] In contrast to ecocriticism, Zapf's concept of literature as cultural ecology shifts the focus from a purely thematic to a structural-functional

approach. According to Zapf, literature can influence culture in a manner that can be compared to the workings of an ecosystem. The term 'ecology' in this context does not refer to the thematic focus of a literary text but merely to *analogies* between ecological processes and the function of literature as a sensor for what has been marginalized, neglected, and suppressed in society. By imaginatively balancing inequalities and distortions in the cultural system, literary texts may foster a creative renewal of perception and imagination. The literary motif of human-animal metamorphosis, for example, may challenge the rigid demarcations between human beings and animals which are prevalent in society; it may invite readers to reconsider and possibly even to redraw the human-animal boundary, but it may also critically examine other aspects of the cultural system.

Within the framework of his cultural-ecological approach to literature, Zapf discerns three central functions regulating the relationship between literature and cultural context. According to Zapf, literature may function as (1) *cultural-critical metadiscourse*, (2) *imaginative counterdiscourse* and (3) *reintegrative interdiscourse*. The function of literature as *cultural-critical metadiscourse* results from

> [t]he representation and critical balancing of typical deficits, contradictions and deformations in prevailing political, economic, ideological and utilitarian systems of civilisatory power. These systems are depicted as often traumatising forms of human self-alienation, which, in their one-sided hierarchical opposition between culture and nature, mind and body, power and love, lead to death-in-life situations of paralysed vitality and psychological imprisonment. (Zapf 93)

A human being undergoing a process of metamorphosis may become the very site of conflict where culture and nature collide, since, as the story of Io illustrates, the transformation often forces the individual to cope with a painful tension between mind and body, culture and nature. If aspects of the prevailing cultural system are not just criticized in a literary work but the text actually "articulate[s] what otherwise remains unarticulated," Zapf assumes that the text has the function of an *imaginative counterdiscourse* (Zapf 93). This function can, for example, be fulfilled by texts in which a human-animal transformation is told from the perspective of the individual undergoing the metamorphosis. In such a case the human perspective may give way more or less radically to an 'animalized' point of view, and thus a perspective that is usually excluded from human perception is granted room in the work of fiction. Finally, literature may function as *reintegrative interdiscourse* by "reintegrating [...] the repressed into the whole system of cultural discourses," in this way potentially inducing a process of cultural renewal (Zapf 93). The

S. DILLON

vodsel in the pen she retains her command over language and reveals her true identity to her father by tracing letters in the ground:

> Her tears rolled down; if only words would come,
> She'd speak her name, tell all, implore their aid.
> For words her hoof traced letters in the dust—
> I, O—sad tidings of her body's change. (20)[4]

The word the vodsel traces here is not its name, but MERCY, a word that Isserley realizes "by sheer chance … was untranslatable into her own tongue; it was a concept that just didn't exist" (171). Isserley is desperate to conceal from Vess that the vodsels have a language—no doubt, the logic would imply, so as not to add fuel to his moral opposition to eating them. Vess is averse to eating them simply on the grounds that meat is "the body of a creature that lived and breathed just like you and me" (163); if he were to know that they had language—and therefore, according to the traditional equation, subjectivity—his case for their rights would be even stronger. Despite Isserley's refusal to admit that they have a language ("'What do you *mean*, "What does it mean?"' she exclaimed testily. 'It's a scratch mark that means something to vodsels, obviously. I couldn't tell you what it means'" [172; emphasis in original]), Vess is still insistent on the moral implications of the fact that "the meat you were eating a few minutes ago is the same meat that is trying to communicate with us down here" (173).

This scene in the pens demonstrates the functioning of the traditional division between the human and nonhuman animal—the possession and non-possession of language, respectively—and how it serves as a determinant of our ethical obligation to them, not least whether it is acceptable to kill and eat them. The fact that the vodsels' possession of language is such a closely guarded secret by Vess Industries implies that its revelation would cause the bottom to fall out of their business. Yet, in one of the many contradictions associated with her character, Isserley is both determined to keep the vodsels' possession of language a secret *and* insistent that this is not what marks their nonhumanity:

> The thing about vodsels was, people who knew nothing whatsoever about them were apt to misunderstand them terribly. There was always the tendency to anthropomorphize. A vodsel might do something which resembled a human action; it might make a sound analogous with human distress, or make a gesture analogous with human supplication, and that made the ignorant observer jump to conclusions.
>
> In the end, though, vodsels couldn't do any of the things that really defined a human being. They couldn't siuwil, they couldn't mesnishtil, they had no concept of slan. In their brutishness, they'd never evolved to use hunshur; their communities were so rudimentary that hississins did not exist; nor did these creatures seem to see any need for chail, or even chailsinn.
>
> And when you looked into their glazed little eyes, you could understand why. If you were looking clearly, that is. (174)

In her foreword to *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Marie-Louise Mallet observes that the philosophical tradition Derrida is deconstructing defines "the animal, in an essentially negative way, as deprived of whatever is presumed to be 'proper' to the human" (Derrida x). Whereas Derrida names such things as

"speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, crying, respect, etc." (135), he emphasizes that "the list is necessarily without limit" (135). In a similar movement of comparative deprivation, Isserley adds to this infinite list, defining the vodsels as lacking siuwil, mesnishtil, slan, hunshur, hississins, chail and chailsinn, all valuable elements of her race's "human" nature and culture. The dark irony here, of course, is that the reader does not know what any of these terms actually means.[5] The emptiness of these specific signifiers serves as a metaphor for the emptiness of *any* signifier that "human" animals have used to distinguish themselves from nonhuman ones, and hence ethically justify their violence towards them. In light of this, Isserley's hollow and illogical conclusion to this passage—"so that's why it was better that Amlis Vess didn't know that the vodsels had a language" (174)—resounds as an ethically weak justification for the industrial meat production industry in general, and her deadly role in it in particular.

While Isserley's encounter with Vess shows the ethical functioning of the "no language, no subjectivity" model, the renaming of what the reader understands to be human beings as "vodsels," like the transfer of the species name "human beings" to Isserley's alien race, takes the text's engagement with the question of language and the human and nonhuman animal beyond this simplistic formula. This act of species renaming is a crucial textual method of destabilizing the reassuring divisions that we, the readers, as a species draw between ourselves and the animals we eat, experiment upon, or otherwise do "justified" violence to. In the first instance, as Marion Gymnich and Segâo Costa observe, the text's intentionally deceptive opening—it is not at first evident that Isserley is not what we would consider to be human—exposes the reader's "anthropocentric assumptions about literary characters" (85). The reader assumes that Isserley is a human being, like us, and that the narrative is being told from what we understand to be a human perspective.[6] When it becomes clear that Isserley is indeed human, but only in the new sense of that term within the text, the reader realizes that from the outset she has been subject to an alien perspective on the vodsel species, a perspective that is the source of much of the social satire of contemporary culture evident in the novel.[7]

In the second instance, the linguistic inversion which names an alien animal species "human beings" and renames humankind "vodsels" sharpens the novel's criticism of our meat industry. The description of the treatment of the vodsels who are "shaved, castrated, fattened, intestinally modified, chemically purified" (97) for a month while being kept in unlit underground pens littered with their own feces before being slaughtered is horrific enough; it is clear to the reader that we are being made to confront the procedures involved in putting cheap supplies of meat on supermarket shelves. But the fact that these procedures are being applied to us by a species that treats us no differently from how we treat nonhuman animals, and on no different grounds, causes us to confront in its full horror the possible inhumanity of such processes. As Faber comments in an interview with David Soyka, "the weird things we do in order to produce an endless supply of supermarket steak no longer bears much relation to farming as we like to imagine

The attack has demonstrated that the vodsels can affect Isserley just as much as she can affect them, that there is in fact a two-way exchange here, an ethical relationship. This prompts two new and conflicting responses in Isserley with regard to the vodsels: one, hostility and a sexualized desire for revenge; the other, empathy. Both of these emotional responses to the vodsels are of the kind that Isserley has previously repressed. The former is manifest when Isserley returns to the farm with her first hitcher since the attack. Isserley breaks her usual pattern of simply delivering the vodsel to the door of the steading and then returning to her cottage. She bewilders the men by deciding to come with them to the processing hall: "I just want to see what happens" (209). What Isserley wants, however, is to watch the vodsel suffer as recompense for her own suffering at the hands of the would-be rapist. Such a desire, while obviously a negative one, shows a new recognition in Isserley that the vodsels are capable of both inflicting and suffering pain. This recognition transgresses the precarious dissociation between herself and vodsels that has enabled her to perform her job until now. Recalling the imagery of the opening of the novel, this desire is also portrayed as sexual: Isserley has trouble controlling her breathing while watching the new vodsel being prepared for the pens and she is frustrated with the surgical precision and speed of the operation—"How could it be over so soon! And with so little violence, so little … drama?... She had a need for release raging inside her, swollen to explosion point" (215). When watching the operations on the new vodsel does not provide this release, she persuades Unser, the butcher, to process one last monthling. As his throat is cut and "a jet of blood gushed out, steaming hot and startlingly red against the silvery trough" (219), Isserley achieves the orgasmic release of revenge she has been seeking: "'Yes!' screamed Isserley involuntarily. 'Yes!'" (219).

Isserley's emotional response violates the detachment required to treat the vodsels as animals, shocking and appalling her fellow workers: expelling her from the processing hall, Unshur admonishes her for her ethical breach—"'We are doing a job here,' the Chief Processor reminded her sternly. 'Feelings don't enter into it'" (219). But Isserley's encounter with the rapist *has* brought feelings into it, and although they are manifest here as a desire for violent revenge, it soon becomes clear that the real threat of these emerging feelings is that they also reveal a far more destabilizing empathy. When she captures her first vodsel after the attack, "two tears fell out of her eyes, onto the hitcher's jeans. She frowned, unable to account for it" (207). In keeping with her disconnection from her own feelings, she drives "directly back to Ablach Farm, trying to fathom, all the way there, what could possibly be wrong" (207). Isserley tentatively identifies the source of the trouble as the assault, but the becoming-animal it has effected is revealed most clearly in language, continuing the predominant technique of this text:

> Of course the events of yesterday … or was it the day before?... She wasn't exactly sure how long she had spent on the jetty afterwards … but anyway, those events … well, they *had* upset her, there was no denying that. But it was all in the past now. Water under the bridge, as the vodsels … as she'd heard said. (207; emphasis in original)

Isserley's linguistic slip and self-correction evidences a becoming-animal through language, through an implicit admission that the vodsels possess it, and through a repetition of its idioms in her own thoughts. This is the second linguistic slip of this kind to occur after the assault, the first containing an even more significant indicator of her becoming-animal. In the first linguistic slip, Isserley observes the beach with the "bony rocks pimpled with those little molluscs that people—that vodsels—collected. Whelks. That was the word. Whelks" (192). This is the first and only time that the vodsels attain the status of "people" in the language of the text, demonstrating, as Deleuze and Guattari state, that becoming-animal affects the animal no less than the human.

Evidence of Isserley's becoming-animal permeates the remainder of the text. The imagery shifts to begin to identify Isserley with the vodsels: the reader finds a description of "the waving seaweed of her hair" (248) which recalls the earlier description of the butchered vodsel's eyelashes as seaweed. She begins to try to view herself from the perspective of another species, if only in terms of her physical appearance: "she tried to see herself as a vodsel might" (250). And she begins to insist on an identity that is not determined by belonging to one species or another: "She wasn't anybody's kind—the sooner he understood that, the better it would be for both of them" (258). The most significant encounter in this second half is that with another Anomalous figure, the vodsel murderer, as weary with his life of killing as she is. Isserley feels a strange affinity with this vodsel; she cannot read him as she normally reads the hitchers, just as she cannot read herself: "She'd never had anyone quite like him before. She wondered, alarmingly, if she liked him" (267). The language of the text brings them together: "They sat in silence for a while, as the fresh air blew in. Isserley breathed deeply, and so did the vodsel. He seemed to be struggling with something, just as she was" (270). In the end, he decides to have mercy on her and let her go; she also decides to have mercy on him, in a way, by ending his painful life: "'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I'm sorry'" (271).

Isserley's becoming-animal even extends beyond the vodsels to other species. After capturing the vodsel she calls Pennington Studios, Isserley dreams of his pet dog locked in his van and subsequently goes to rescue it. In the dream that prompts her to do so, Isserley undergoes a physical metamorphosis into the dog:

> at the beginning it was unmistakably Isserley, being led down into the bowels of the earth. But by the end she seemed to have changed shape, size and species. And in those lost anxious seconds before waking, the dream hadn't been about a human being anymore, but a dog, trapped inside a vehicle in the middle of nowhere. Her master wasn't coming back, and she was going to die. (275)

This is not a becoming-animal—since Deleuze and Guattari insist that that is real and does not take place in dreams—but a dream metamorphosis that echoes, shadows, or parallels the real becoming-animal. Although Isserley attempts to reason herself out of her concern for the dog, it seems that—now her consciousness has been opened up to becoming-animal, to existing in relationality with the animal-other—this extends to the entire animal world, not just the vodsels. She is fearful, for instance, of polluting the loch in which she bathes with

Skin Deep

Alienation in *Under the Skin*[1]

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This paper reads Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* as a meditation on how sf represents and responds to difference, particularly issues of ethnic difference. It argues that the film avoids the easy platitude that we are "all the same under the skin" and confronts us instead with the much more challenging prospect of creating empathy across irreconcilable difference. The film explores this prospect largely through its alienating soundscape and innovative use of camera angles, which enable the viewer to experience the world filmed from the alien's point of view, but it does not anthropomorphize the alien to convey this effect. Although *Under the Skin* ends on a pessimistic note with the violent and fearful destruction of difference, more hopeful visions are offered in John Akomfrah's films *Last Angel of History* and *The Nine Muses*.

Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film adaptation of Michel Faber's novel *Under the Skin* is striking and provocative, and is a distinctly different text than the novel. Both in their own ways pose questions about hierarchies and boundaries, about binary oppositions organized around difference, and about relations of affinity that inevitably deconstruct such binaries. The title "Under the Skin" plays with these questions of difference and sameness, asking us to think about whether we are all the same "under the skin," but at the same time connotes the idea of something that stays with and troubles you: when things are under our skin, they irritate and obsess us—the expression suggests exasperation *and* infatuation. "I've got you under my skin," sings Frank Sinatra in one of the most famous recordings of Cole Porter's eponymous song; "So deep in my heart, you're really a part of me." I want to start thinking through questions of skin and subjectivity with this image of inter-subjective fusion. In "A Cyborg Manifesto" Donna Haraway asks, "why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (178). This question, I argue, opens up what is so fascinating about Glazer's film and its implications for thinking about the cultural politics of science fiction.

In Michel Faber's *Under the Skin*, we open with a woman, Isserley, driving through the remote hills of Scotland and picking up male hitchhikers. Her

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intentions are not entirely clear, but her obsession with their bodies, their skin and what's under it, is evident, as in this passage where she reflects on her task:

> In truth, there was for Isserley an addictive thrill about the challenge. She could have some magnificent brute sitting in her car, right next to her, knowing for sure that he was coming home with her, and she could already be thinking ahead to the next one. Even while she was admiring him, following the curves of his brawny shoulders or the swell of his chest under his T-shirt, savouring the thought of how superb he'd be once he was naked, she would keep one eye on the roadside, just in case an even better prospect was beckoning to her out here. (4)

The point of view is jarring: we are accustomed to narration that objectifies women's bodies in this way, but less accustomed to such blunt meat-market tactics applied to men. How easy it is to think of women as skin-on-display, and how different to think of men in this same way, is reinforced in the film by camera movement. In early scenes we join an unnamed woman (Scarlett Johansson) as she drives around Glasgow, the camera's gaze standing in for hers. As she cruises the streets and looks at passersby, the camera remains static when it frames women, who walk in and out of the shots without prompting a reaction; yet it pans and tracks the men who come into frame, consuming them visually and pushing the viewer to notice that something is off in the gendered relationship to spectacle. Such camera work prompts us to realize how we fail to notice when it is women rather than men captured by the gaze.

Similarly, in Faber's book, a few pages after Isserley anticipates the superb nakedness of her passenger, we read the man's point of view as he notices Isserley's "fantastic tits" squeezed into "a skimpy black top [...] for all to see—for *him* to see" (11). The novel eventually reveals that Isserley is neither a woman picking up strange men for sex nor a female serial killer preying upon lone men—or at least not in the way we expect. Rather, Isserley is an alien whose species are sentient people, while the humans she picks up—vodsels, in her language—are food animals she collects for fattening and slaughter. The novel thus plays with the way sexual pursuit and predation are linked, but its focus moves from gender difference to species difference. The questions the novel raises about how much we are all alike "under the skin" have more to do with the human/animal boundary than with the male/female binary, although it does remind us of how these two hierarchies are entwined in western cultural systems.

Yet Faber's Isserley struggles with her gender identity, having sacrificed the embodiment of her own species to stand upright and display the silicon breasts that lure human males. She longs for her previous physical embodiment at times, struggles against the painful and limited mobility when "you'd had half your backbone amputated and metal pins inserted into what was left" (135). She falls for the attractive son of the operation's owner, Amlis Vess, who advocates for vodsel rights and argues one shouldn't consume meat because "we're all the same under the skin," a vision Isserley dismisses as "his filthy rich idealist's need to deny social reality" (175). Far from seeing herself as the same under the skin, Isserley resents his beauty in the face of her deformity. Yet when Amlis sees some sheep and suggests they might be another source of meat, Isserley finds the suggestion shocking: "they're on all *fours*, Amlis, can't you see that? They've got fur—tails—facial features not that different from ours..." (252). Her response here points to the way that shared morphology becomes a ground for forging shared ethical community, but at the same time it estranges readers from our normative view that animals who most closely resemble humans are the ones most deserving of our ethical consideration by shifting the markers of personhood to fur, tails, and quadruped locomotion.[2]

The novel challenges our thinking about gender, class, and species boundaries. Are we all the same under the skin, as Amlis suggests in his animal advocacy? Isserley has more sympathy for sheep than vodsels due to shared morphology, but she sees herself as vastly different from Amlis due to class and the ways it distinctly marks their skin: he has the effortless beauty that comes with economic privilege, while she bears the marks of submitting her body to the demands of her job. Beauty is thus not merely skin deep in this novel: it penetrates the skin. The way we are treated because of our skin—marked as it is by gender and ethnicity and class difference—shapes our experience of the world. Because we are treated differently based on how our skin is read, we come to have different subjective experiences. Hierarchies of difference can make some, like Isserley, uncomfortable in their own skin. Isserley lives in someone else's skin—that of a vodsel—but the surface appearance of skin is deceiving: she is not the same beneath. Yet neither is she the same as Amlis under their skins.

Glazer's film retains many of the incidents of the novel but frames them to emphasize gender difference. Its unnamed female protagonist is still an alien, but we are not made fully aware of this until the final moments of the film. Before I turn to discussing these thematics in more detail, however, I want to spend a bit of time discussing the film's aesthetics. *Under the Skin* is both about alienation and alienating to watch. Its eerie soundtrack is a