

***Under the Skin* (2013): Images as the Language of the Unconscious**

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25 July 2016

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When aliens come to our planet, one thing which science fiction audiences learn to expect is that, whether for better or for worse, and whether they take up residence here or move on, visitors who traverse galaxies to reach Earth rarely leave things here unchanged. With the exception only of the tiny number of Earthlings who claim intimate knowledge of incomers, the physical being of extra-terrestrials, if any, is entirely unknown to humanity. Therefore (whether found in dreams, legends, myths or fictions), images of and ideas about such visitors are impregnated with fantasy. *Ipsa facto* these beings are vehicles for energy sourced outwith consciousness. The anxiety that surrounds them is one sign of that characteristic.

**UFOs as living myth**

In a time of international crisis at the end of the 1950s, C. G. Jung wrote a short book about Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). Its publication coincided with the intensification of the Cold War to the point where, terrifyingly, global annihilation through nuclear conflict was becoming an all too present danger. Living through the decade when populations of many nations felt imperilled, Jung observed that UFO phenomena, whether physically real or imagined, had been sighted in much increased numbers. He realised they had become a living myth such that 'in a difficult time for humanity a miraculous tale grows up of an attempted intervention by extra-terrestrial "heavenly" powers' (1959: 14).

This flurry of UFO sightings chimed in Jung's imagination with his observation that by that date the old gods were dead or dying. Associating UFOs with symbols arising from both the individual and the transpersonal unconscious, he concluded that these round, shiny objects seen in the sky could be regarded as archetypal images. In every age in the western world, circles, being complete and perfect, had played an important

role as both symbols for the unity and wholeness of the soul, and as images of God (1959: 20-1).

A circle in the sky is the first discernible form in the pre-title sequence of *Under the Skin*. The film actually opens in pitch dark while a rasp-like, creaking music of scouring energy thrusts into consciousness. Only then is a pinprick of light born in the black screen's centre. Gradually it swells into circular form, undecipherable (because beyond human experience) whether it be a spacecraft, a planet moving through a field of aligned moons, a ring formed by the play of immense energy, a deity's probing eye – or just conceivably the archetypal vehicle for them all. As it nears, repeated chuffing breaks through the wracking buzz. Something alien, straining to vocalise like a human baby, prepares to communicate with Earthlings. Could the strange music carry, on a parallel communication channel, signals incomprehensible to us? At all events, before characters' actions introduce a degree of narrative direction, Mica Levi's fearful soundtrack suggests not only terror but also the subjective loss of spatial co-ordinates. It does not encourage the hope, whether this twenty-first century UFO be transportation for creatures or a deity, that they might be more benign than the incoming hostiles who fed rampant paranoia in Hollywood's Cold War science-fiction.

### **Myth and Art**

Why might all this matter to us as we engage with *Under the Skin*? Joseph Campbell explains that 'it is the artist who brings the images of mythology to manifestation, and without images (whether mental or visual) there is no mythology' (1986: xxii). When art produces the visionary images necessary to perceive the world differently, it taps into dominant psychic archetypes that hold the potential healing energy to transform the individual *and* transpersonal psyches. One of the attractions of this extraordinary film is that, although its aesthetics and structure do at times invite a naturalistic reading (for example, scenes filmed in Glasgow resemble a *vérité* representation of the city), their utilization quickly shatters the plausibility of that outer space and refers sound and images to inner space, 'the wonderland of myth' (*Ibid.*). In effect reading this film cannot, even at entry level, be satisfactory unless one looks for something beyond a clinically reductive interpretation. 'Amplification is the *conditio sine qua non* which *cannot* be left out in mythological interpretation' (Von Franz, 1990: 146).

Myth is the language of the psyche. Thus our aims are to engage at depth with *Under the Skin* to discover whether it reveals changes in dominant archetypes and, if it does, to bring their potential meanings toward the consciousness of individuals and, should the gods favour our labours, a wider culture.

Watching this film feels like a genesis moment — of sci-fi fable, of filmmaking, of performance — with all the ambiguity and excitement that implies. It's as if director and star have gone into some alien space to discover what embodies a person, exposing the interior dynamic of psyche and soul and its relationship to the exterior. (Sharkey, 2014)

### **Creation Mythology**

Erich Neumann notes that, for all peoples in all religions, creation first appears as the coming of light. ‘The coming of consciousness, manifesting itself as light in contrast to the darkness of the unconscious, is the real “object” of creation mythology’ (1954: 6). This primordial state of being is perfect because self-sufficient and independent. It is also ‘the place of origin and the germ cell of creativity’ (1954: 10).

When in *Under the Skin* light pierces the darkness, it takes a constantly changing circular form which evolves into and then beyond an energy-charged doughnut ring. It recalls the uroboros (the Great Round), the circular snake of ancient myths that bites its own tail, thus slaying, wedding and impregnating itself (*Ibid.*). The uroboric period is that initial phase of psychic identity in which all things are fused together in *participation mystique* (Neumann, 1971: 109). It is the state of mystic identity that precedes the emergence (in an individual or a collective) of reflective consciousness. This is the phase in which the movie begins. It brings to mind both the moment of universal creation and the beginning of an individual’s life before differentiation commences and the betrayal of separation is first encountered. As Aldo Carotenuto notes, it is at this precise moment of birth that each living creature experiences betrayal for the first time (1996: vii). This first phase of separation brings the principle of opposition into being, initiating the earliest stages of self-awareness. Love and hate, light and darkness, conscious and unconscious enter into conflict with one another. Read in this mythologised context, the film’s opening invites us to realise

that we are witnessing a moment of creation, whether of a lone individual, a new world, or both.

Glazer introduces his alien eyes wide open to a revelation beyond words, the utter wonder and terror of being. Campbell calls such revelation another essential service of mythology (1986: xx). From the moment of the alien's entry to the Earth's sphere, a creature not identifiable as either male nor female, what we see and hear is mainly formed by her developing perceptions. Access to language initiates the process of differentiation entailed in both making and discerning meaningful variants between sounds: it thereby introduces reflective consciousness. Consciousness may select what a speaker intuitively to be the most appropriate words for a given scenario; but those words also reveal the input of the personal and cultural unconscious. Conversely, language deployed consciously begins to change the unconscious. So when the alien incarnates, she must use human language to carry out her mission which impacts on her unconscious, something neither she nor her cohort seem to have anticipated. Losing the plot and losing our minds before we investigate them both can prove a necessary abandonment in starting to pursue an alien!

### **Liminal Being: Johansson the Alien**

As most reviewers of *Under the Skin* revealed, the audience do not know for some time what to make of the new arrival, except that she both is and is not Scarlett Johansson. As film star she is, by virtue of the juxtaposition between the narrative and her socio-cultural position in the audience's imaginal world, both a virgin goddess and a seductive anima figure. As such, she is 'a mediatrix to the unknown, the unconscious. She mediates through images, not words or dialogue' (Douglas, 2000: 183). That said, 'Mica Levi's dissonant score creates a pervasive sense of dread, teetering on the brink of madness' (Gray, 2014). What the alien / Johansson embodies remains for us to discover or perhaps co-create.

The Earth-based plot commences at night. The camera surveys a ribbon of wet road that winds through the Scottish Highlands. Reprising the film's opening, a second pinprick of light emerges out of the dark. A powerful bike hurtles down the long glen and an unrelenting electronic chord carried through from the pre-title sequence envelopes the barely visible biker in mystery and speed. He descends toward human

habitation, a ruthless messenger who could conceivably have been given power by god-like creatures newly landed in the mountains. As his machine tears through a town, the pumping grind resumes that we heard in space, and the rider (Jeremy McWilliams) heads into the outskirts, stops at a bungalow and disappears beyond the streetlights' reach into the garden. After a moment he comes out, the corpse of a young woman (Lynsey Taylor Mackay) slung over his shoulder. It has been speculated that she is a cadaver found at the side of the road, but the biker is an efficient killer who knows where he is going and why, witness the van ready for him and his cargo.

When the biker dumps the body in the van we cut hard from a deep night-for-night shot into a brilliant light box with the victim's face in close up. As so often in Glazer's films, the aesthetics surprise no less than the form. Where is this blinding, unearthly place? The alien, now embodied in Johansson's naked human form, strips the dead woman of her clothes and dons them. Director of Photography Daniel Landin holds both the living and the dead in blue-black monochrome, sometimes in images recalling Lotte Reiniger's paper cut silhouettes. This woman (the only female whom the aliens kill) has been targeted because her clothes will fit one particular alien's body, and that body must be sexily female. Cladding herself in the feminine, 'she' mimics the hero of classical myth preparing for war. Her performance of dressing also embodies an attitude she intends to adopt in her new earthly surroundings as she aims to seduce the human males whom she will target. Carotenuto emphasizes the central role of seduction in human experience, designating it as a particular circular space where the Me is placed in relation to the Other (2002: 2). Implicated in this alien Psyche's disarming attire is the possibility that she may become a new collective dominant in a specific new feminine form, offering a more complete realization of ego and Self, where the ego experiences the Self and becomes one again with it.

Landin's camera takes up the alien's point of view in shots where, gathering information, she turns an equally cool gaze on the cadaver and an ant marooned on the body. She picks up the insect, peers at it, and notices a tear leaking from the corpse's eye. This bizarre juxtaposition will acquire meaning retrospectively for the audience and for the alien herself who gathers information randomly as it impinges on

her. Ants have long represented communities that function in an orderly, efficient yet instinctive manner, in contrast to the great difficulty that societies of human beings (endowed with consciousness) experience in trying to behave comparably. This lone ant brings to mind an autonomous complex emerging from the collective unconscious: perhaps a new cultural consciousness.

Meanwhile, the corpse's tear returns us to Carotenuto's thoughts on betrayal. People come into the world exposed to 'the betrayal of life by death, betrayal through hate, betrayal of the primary unity through birth itself' (1996: 85). Individual psychological birth is impossible without the experience of betrayal (*Ibid.*); but the young woman's sacrifice may allude to something beyond her individual murder, namely the rupture of an old way of feminine relating. One kind of betrayal is to reveal inadvertently a person's identity or character that should be secret. In this sense, the victim's corpse reveals the shadow side of the female as lacking in psychic energy. Being impoverished, it must come to life again. Thus her death signals metaphorically the victim's un-lived part of the feminine element and simultaneously implies potential qualities yet to become part of the alien's character and actions. We shall discover through the female alien's mysterious power, that only a conscious and responsible attitude transforms the shadow into a friend (see Von Franz, 1996: 139).

A hard cut takes us from the ant in extreme close up to the foot of a residential tower where demolition is under way. The awkward juxtaposition of the crumbling tower and the wrecked homes that it contains can be taken as another emblem of decaying human culture and consciousness in both their masculine and feminine aspects. Overhead, lights flare briefly: the UFO lifts away from the skyscraper's top while the alien / Johansson exits via a dilapidated stairwell and takes possession of the van. Her disguise, chosen by the male biker (his victim's denim miniskirt and torn fishnets), does not suit her purpose and she needs to hit Aphrodite's temple, a brightly lit mall redolent with the aura of desire, to fine-tune her appearance for seduction or warfare. Filmed *cinéma vérité* style as she walks among shoppers in her 'slatternly mop of dark hair' (Anderson, 2014), the working girl ignored by the crowds is also Johansson the unseen dark goddess and now Laura, the alien / human. (The dark side of goddesses is the one most intimately associated with transformation [Downing, 2007: 110]). In one context, Laura's Earthling name associates her with triumphant Roman

generals through their laurel garlands. Yet we notice on her calves the rip in the murder victim's fishnet tights. It suggests a feminine wound arising from the unstable nature of an overly adapted self, a female mask that has been defined by Western civilisation. This adaptive part of the personality must always avoid something, and therefore uses the primitive defence of splitting as a coping mechanism. As a result, the person behaves in ways not in relationship to their whole psyche. Only when the personality maintains a certain plasticity can the ego be sufficiently influenced by the Self and healthfully adapt to the whole psychological system.

### **Exploiting Liminality**

In the mall alien / Laura observes women being shown how cosmetics alter their personae. She buys stand-out lipstick on the saccharine side of scarlet and complements it with a faux-fur jacket and acid wash jeans. Her attraction to make-up and clothing both covers up and reveals her instinctual desires. Thus re-equipped in 'low-rent French Connection chic' (Anderson, 2014), she appears both more obvious and bordering on the false: a working-class Brit but posh too, as her middle-class English accent suggests (see Romney, 2014). Her tacky fur, neon lips and van could be the cover of a middle-class woman away from home, prowling Glasgow to pull men. Equally, the weird combination might reveal a common theme of science fiction, the extra-terrestrial's necessary adaptation to her destination. Anthony Morris catches the character's strange, doubled quality.

Usually in film, women — especially a movie star like Scarlett Johansson — are presented as sexy and attractive, whether the story requires it or not. That's part of what makes you a movie star: people like to look at you. Here that's reversed: Johansson is shown as sexy in the story we're watching — the men she picks up look at her with barely concealed lust — but both the film and Johansson herself work hard to present her (or her body at least) to the audience as something unsettling and remote. She seems human to the leering men around her, but she's an alien to herself, and Johansson gives a brilliant performance as a creature always slightly horrified to be who she is. (2014)

The shimmering of her roles against each other penetrates, in an almost hallucinatory manner, into the celebrated quasi *vérité* sequences filmed when the alien /Johansson drives around Glasgow picking up young working-class men and flirting with them.

In fact the aesthetics differ from the purely observational style that orthodox *vérité* aspires to. Take, for example, two effects which can be interpreted, because of their unfamiliarity, as revealing what the alien hears and sees. Where *vérité* would favour direct sound, we hear a sophisticated, mixed sound spectrum: a pump, one stroke heavier than the other, labours under a subaltern buzz that is pierced occasionally by screeching violins. Except for its mechanical rhythm, the beat might recall a limping human heart. The visual perspective disquiets too: though the van prowls slowly, it sometimes swerves across the traffic lane and Landin's camera pans a bit too far, as if controlled by a poorly programmed machine.

Romney notes that the men lifted from the streets do not realise what they are being sized up for:

... the actual men in front of the camera, non-professionals picked up on the spur of the moment, don't realize that they're in a movie—and that they're being chatted up by none other than Scarlett Johansson ... Thus the film becomes on one level a documentary about how these men react to Johansson, and on another, about how unsuspecting earthlings might behave just before being killed ... (2014)

### **Alien as Anima**

The associations of 'Laura's' pseudonym with the garland of a victorious general befit the alien's ambivalent nature. In selecting her victims, she discriminates in two ways: she never kills women; and she does not take men who have a family. Her acts resemble the methodical harvesting of a natural resource. When killing her first victims she seems no more emotionally engaged than a farmer offloading sheep ready for market at the abattoir. Yet, by the laws of our planet, her business is meditated serial murder. James Hillman notes that the unconscious anima is a creature without relationships, an autoerotic being whose aim is to take total possession of the individual (1985: 116). The untouchable element of the alien / Laura's personality has just this characteristic. Such women, Esther Harding says, 'conquer men not for love of the man, but for a craving to gain power over him. They cannot love, they can only desire. They are cold-blooded, without human feeling or compassion. Instinct in its daemonic form, entirely non-human, lives through them' (1990: 118). In Carotenuto's terms, she incarnates perfectly 'the type of woman-Anima Jung first described – a



woman able to impersonate the projections of the man she seduces so perfectly that... [she] assumes the countenance of our fantasies, becoming the shadow onto which we project the internal image of *our* sexual counterpart' (Carotenuto, 2002: 11). Yet Laura's robotic quality implies that she herself does not yet possess the psychological characteristic of projection because she is imbedded in an archaic identity (not the only such personality in the screenplay). In writing of these large areas of unconscious identity, Jung says that only if a necessity has arisen to dissolve the identity can one begin to speak of projection, but not before (1923: §783).

Only when Laura starts picking up men is minimalist dialogue first heard. If she spots a potential victim she engages with him easily, but mostly she asks questions, as Chris Knight notes. 'When she makes statements they are repetitions of earlier answers, intending to elicit more data. She speaks like a chatbot, a computer program designed to fool human operators into thinking it has sentience' (2014). (Johansson voiced a comparable role as an intelligent computer operating system in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013).) More than one reviewer found the men's Glaswegian accents indecipherable, but accepted that could be how our world sounds to an incomer (Martin, 2014). And the characters played by non-actors reveal their sensual awakening through body language.

If naturalism is the more obvious shaping influence in the street scenes, fantasy once again dominates when the alien leads all-too-willing men into what they take to be her home. Once through the door, walking backwards steadily over a reflecting black surface while discarding one garment after another, Johansson / the alien leads each new captive into immeasurable space.

Reflecting objects have [had]... from time immemorial, a numinous significance for human beings. The oldest experience of a reflecting object may well have been that of the surface of water... Ninck shows that in the world of antiquity water was always thought of as chthonic, as having sprung from the earth, and that it was always associated with what he calls the "night conditions" or "night states" of the soul: intoxication, dream, trance, unconsciousness, and death. (Von Franz, 1995: 183)

Throwing off their clothes, the priapic fellows advance toward her, snared by lust for the splendid body that recedes before them, completely unaware that the mysterious surface sustaining her is deluding them. John Berger compared representations of the naked body and a nude via spectators' use of their images. The former is the image of someone wearing no clothes; the latter of a naked person clad in spectators' desire (1972). In the alien's slaughterhouse, her aroused victims see her as nude, dressing her in cocksure anticipation that she reciprocates their lust; but the audience sees a naked woman walking backwards purposefully over a reflecting black surface. The men are *pueri aeterni* (eternal youths) whose erotic longings reflect that they have been captured by their own shadow projections. The shadow, the repressed or neglected part of consciousness that has split off into the unconscious, contains the overwhelming power of irresistible impulses and actions. As we have seen, it conceals the personal anima, embodying the feminine psychological propensities in a man's psyche and his relation to the unconscious. In a sense, the anima is the male's experience of the feminine unconscious. Its most frequent manifestation takes the form of erotic fantasy with the present scene exposing its most dangerous negative aspects. These are the destructive illusions which distort men's decision making and thereby drag them into the anima's lair. The victims plod ever deeper into something that, weirdly, neither ripples nor instantly drowns them. Neither the characters nor the audience can make out what it is – and that's the point.

### **Instinct**

One night, when she is driving the city, a lacy veil of shadow falls and lifts again and again across alien / Laura's face as she motors under the streetlights, a fascinating image that pulses like oscillating consciousness. Through it mixes the sound of heavy seas, deep water leading into a scene of naked horror. It is daylight when Laura parks the van above a gravel beach where an Atlantic gale whips spume from powerful waves, a veil occluding the bay. She watches a vigorous swimmer exit the turbulent waves, engages him with her chat-up routine, establishing that he is a lone Czech visitor (another alien in Scotland), and a good target for seduction. But suddenly his attention snaps away from her to the far end of the bay where a family man trying to save his wife from drowning has put himself at risk. Unmoved, Laura the alien looks on while the Czech, facing extreme peril, drags the husband to safety. But the rescued

man cannot abandon his wife although high seas have pulled her far beyond reach. He staggers back into the waves, where both drown.

The family disaster commenced when the wife leapt into the ocean to save their dog. As von Franz reminds us, animals are the bearers of human projections: ‘As long as there is still an archaic identity, and as long as you have not taken the projection back, the animal and what you project onto it are identical; they are one and the same thing’ (1996: 36). By rushing to her death in the oceanic waters of the unconscious, the woman vividly portrays the failure of her maternal instinct and its connection to the deeper feminine. In complete identification with the animal, she has projected her disavowed instinctual nature onto the dog, impulsively following it to her death. Plainly she lacked conscious connection to the Eros principle, ‘an opener and a uniter, the wisdom of Eros encompassing bitterness together with its life-giving power acquired by feeling-experiences’ (Von Franz, 1996:130). That lack made her unable to judge soundly and sacrifice the dog. Driven by overwhelming emotions – love, terror and anguish – both parents acted impulsively, as humans do in a crisis, unconsciously forgetting their baby. Jung reminds us that ‘The autonomy of the unconscious ... begins where emotions are generated ... In a state of affect a trait of character sometimes appears which is strange even to the person concerned, or hidden contents may irrupt involuntarily. The more violent an affect the closer it comes to the pathological, to a condition in which the ego-consciousness is thrust aside by autonomous contents that were unconscious before’ (1939: §497). The emotional reactions of this married couple reveal disturbing relationships both between their individual conscious and unconscious and in the interpersonal aspect of the unconscious relationship between their animus and anima. How, then, could the feminine principle of Eros and relatedness conceivably be redeemed by this robotic, murderous incomer?

What follows could not express more graphically the difference between murder and self-sacrifice motivated by tenderness for life. When the baby’s anguished wails pierce the racket of storm on stone, alien Laura notices it stranded on the rocks. Contrary to the affect-driven nature of humans (and to the deep shock of the film’s audiences) she completely ignores the infant as its cries rise to helpless screams of terror – further evidence that the alien does not possess that human quality of

projection which reveals the subjectivity of a personal psyche and interior life. Instead, witnessing the exhausted Czech collapse unconscious on the gravel, she strides purposefully along the roaring water's edge and cracks his skull with a large stone before delivering him to the biker and death. This, her first physically aggressive act, may be a reaction to a kind of betrayal, her first failed attempt to seduce. It's an early sign that her experiences on Earth may be changing alien / Laura, a development that her tribe did not anticipate.

### **Abandonment and the Patriarchy**

From a depth-psychological and cultural perspective, Laura / the alien's indifference frames the baby's abandonment in the context of a crisis of our time. On the personal level, the baby's fate is clearly due to the neurotic components of the parents' personalities and lack of connection to their instinctual natures. 'If however, one leaves it embedded within its archetypal context, then it takes on a deeper meaning, namely that the new God of our time is always to be found in the ignored and deeply unconscious corner of the psyche' (Von Franz, 1996: viii). Understanding the archetype of the feminine is essential to comprehending the anima as the archetype of life and its connection to what Jung calls the Self, that is, the psychic totality of an individual and the regulating centre of the collective unconscious. Thus the baby's cry gives direct voice to the abandonment content of our dangerously narrow, one-sided culture whose instinctual life has been oppressed and repressed. Having no parents, everything for the orphaned baby lies ahead in an unknown future. So who is this 'child'? Clearly it personifies some realm of the psyche, and is not altogether about the infant *per se*. For Jung, 'The "child" is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning and the triumphal end' (1951: §300).

Neumann reminds us that the development of consciousness in the West is a history of masculine, actively oriented consciousness whose achievements led to a patriarchal culture. ... The different nature of the female and feminine psyche must be discovered anew not only if women are to understand themselves, but also if the patriarchally masculine world that has fallen ill thanks to its extreme one-sidedness is again to return to health (Neumann, 1994: xi).

As long as our female alien continues acting ruthlessly, her masculine side dominates, noticeably so while her deeds resemble the biker's. *Under the Skin* in this phase is a piercing tale about a heroine's problem with the shadow and her destructive animus. The animus is an internal image of the masculine in the unconscious, entwined with the shadow and associated with Logos. It has both bad and good qualities. Until now we have seen only its negative aspects, the one-sided, collectively masculine-driven universe that alien / Laura comes from. In this negative form the animus leaves a woman where Eros is lacking, separated from life. In its positive aspect it builds a bridge to the Self and, ultimately, enables transformation to spiritual wisdom. Where anima reaches backwards by its reflective nature, animus is concerned with the present and the future.

The biker conscientiously removes the drowned family's tent to destroy signs of their presence but leaves behind the hysterical infant tottering in near complete darkness along the water line. Its wailing does not distress these dangerous visitors because, as an innocent (still held in the archetypal realm of the mother), it has no relevance for their mission. Only when alien / Laura notices a black baby drowning contentedly in a car does the sight get under her skin. Although the audience don't know it, she too is black beneath her adopted hide. With this sighting, the mirroring image of the black baby may have initiated a connection with her own unconscious. The language of images is that of the unconscious therefore, we can never reach beyond the symbolic images which the unconscious produces. Psychologically interpreted, the contact appears to have sparked her *potential* to develop the psyche's creative activity because as soon as there is a tendency for self-reflection and doubt, projection appears. Nevertheless, whatever latent metamorphoses may be stirring within, they do not immediately unsettle her mimetic human persona. As long as she remains the efficient killing machine, there is complete cold objectivity in the way the alien lives, manifesting no feeling life. But, as Ean Begg notes, repressed parts of the archetype both in individuals and history tend to 'take their captors captive' (1986: 37).

It becomes possible, as the narrative unfolds, to compare Laura / alien with the males who populate the world she moves in. When she first sets about entrapping Glaswegians, they resemble each other under the skin despite obvious (delusory) differences between her adopted human gender and theirs. She chooses from the city

streets only men all of whom are dead in spirit and come to life only at the prospect of a primitive sexual encounter. Their zombie-like personas are filled with unconscious contents which have been rejected and killed off, neither grieved over nor buried. Asking them if they have family, she chooses only those who are not connected to anyone. Lacking relationship to their internal feminine, they are vulnerable to seduction. Their isolation contrasts with the way a group of women partygoers cheerfully sweep Laura into their vivacious collective. But she is not one of them. As yet in her alien being undifferentiated from the biker, she selects victims who, with their dumb, biddable energy, would augment a totalitarian power structure – possibly the destination to which she despatches them.

### **Approaching Feminine Consciousness**

We have noted that alien / Johansson arrives on Earth in a psychological state of *participation mystique*. A moment that initiates her development occurs when, after she has sunk some men in her pool, she examines what is not her own but Laura's face in a mirror, acquiring perhaps via her adopted persona some glimmer of feeling for the human Self that it masks. As Jung said many times, it is through a mirror that the unconscious becomes aware of its own face (1954: §43).

The biker is unsettled by his colleague's moment of introspection. Sensing danger, he addresses her intently, though on a channel to which we cannot tune. Hitherto (despite their differently gendered human forms), they have lived in a collective world of sameness. But step-by-step she is now breaking out from *participation mystique*, commencing the individuation process, coming to consciousness, and in consequence equally bewildered by human kindness and cruelty. The biker does not and will not change, his body-integral backpack declaring his robotic otherness.

Meanwhile sunk in the surreal bath to which alien / Laura has led them, two of the Glaswegian men touch, causing a bang like an electrical short circuit. The shock hurls them back from each other, tinfoil manikins wrinkling into nothingness. Interpreted psychologically, the moment when they reach out and touch in the indescribable bath of the unconscious exposes them to the devastation of coming to consciousness too late. 'Whenever the psyche is set violently oscillating by a numinous experience,

there is a danger that the thread by which one hangs may be torn' (Jung cited by Stein, 2006: 45). For example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Earth's inhabitants cry out for Zeus to intervene in their crises, he responds with apocalyptic lightning strikes. Like those ancients exposed to the divine presence for which they lusted, these flaccid and unprepared victims are destroyed, sucked along a blood-red beam down which white light sears. Their obliteration is confirmed by Levi's rasping music that develops material first heard in the pre-title sequence: all change can only take place in the unconscious.

Laura the alien takes another step differentiating her from her minder when the lonely vulnerability of a facially disfigured young man (Adam Pearson) attracts her. Like this sufferer from neurofibromatosis, she too is alone and misshapen, concealed in a woman's form to carry out the aliens' collective mission. She gazes at the unfortunate man and seems, like a lover, to take him into her inner world. She is in contact with the feminine aspect of a human, albeit in a deformed male body which elicits the nascent feminine in her. That shows in her compassion and sense of his beauty when she identifies with him as a positive mirror of her own shadow. The encounter will draw out her instinctive impulse to awaken the feeling connection with the depths of the unconscious and with nature, since in life it is the task of the feminine to renew feeling values.

This does not happen instantly, for when she takes him to her slaughterhouse, she begins as usual to strip and (while surfaces dissolve and stressed violins wail) draws the unfortunate fellow into the deeps over which she presides. But as he descends, she discerns (barely perceptible in the dim light) a submerged human form, not his body wracked by neurofibromatosis, but an image of perfected humanity, momentarily superimposed on her gazing profile. Everything changes. The ugly man has stirred vivid affect beneath consciousness and it has generated a dark idealisation of human potentiality in her mind – a transformational archetypal image. The shock breaks her seduction ritual and draws her once more to the mirror where her watching face scrutinises its reflection, her slight, questioning movements out of synch with those in the mirrored image. Her reflection gradually clarifies as the gloom that first obscured it lifts. It is an expressionistic rendering of the metamorphosis she is undergoing: the shadow redeemed by being made conscious. Hillman says that anima consciousness

brings the possibility of reflection in terms of awareness of one's unconscious and that is why anima is the archetype of the psychological calling (1985: 137).

A frantic housefly scrabbles to escape from a frosted window. In chilly dawn light alien-Laura unbolts her door and shepherds the naked man out of the tomb prepared for him. Fleeing his seducer for dear life, he flounders barefoot over a marshy field as panicky as the fly. Meanwhile she drives away in the van, knowing full well that her demonic minder is already hammering along open roads in pursuit. The biker first slays the poor fellow and dumps his corpse unceremoniously. Then he hunts Laura who now imperils the aliens' mission. For the first time her movements signal fear, a further lurch toward consciousness in a creature which, before cladding herself in woman's form, never knew feelings.

### **Trying out Humanity**

Finding herself in the Scottish Highlands, alien Laura drives past a mountain loch where the wind curls spume above the water, a stunning image that recalls the sea bay where the family drowned, but this time without horror. Given the changed context, these shots lay bare to her eyes the wonder of nature and, thanks to the wind, bring to mind the potentially inspiring spiritual quality of the unconscious. She enjoys only a glimpse of this strange beauty before a chill fog of unknowing maroons her. She abandons the van and, now unprotected by her fellow aliens, mimics people in order to pass as human. But she cannot emulate these alien creatures perfectly. Taking afternoon tea in a café, she discovers she cannot swallow Earthlings' food: unlike David Bowie's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), she has not come for food to sustain physical life on her planet. Since eating is often implicated in emotional life, it seems she cannot yet digest the human experience. She walks on, lost and alone, tracking the ribbon of tarmac until local resident Andy (Michael Moreland) advises her to catch the rural bus with him. Although she cannot find words to respond to people's concern about her inadequate clothing, she gradually recognises Andy's kindness and accepts the loan of his leather jacket and an invitation to his bachelor home.

She continues exploring her nascent emotions, beginning to unlock the unconscious albeit, shorn of her pre-set chat-up programme, she remains wordless. She watches



Andy move around his kitchen to the rhythm of a pop song and tries to copy him but cannot hit the beat. Nor can she eat the meal he prepares. But later, alone in his spare bedroom, she strips off and looks cautiously at the reflection of her human body. What she sees intrigues her and she flexes the strange limbs, discovering with a hint of erotic awakening their appealing softness.

By absconding, 'Laura' has slighted the biker's power as enforcer. Deploying his only resource and thereby confirming his one-sidedness, he calls up three more bikers as reinforcements. The four clones, a quasi-military contingent, pound country roads through the night to find and eliminate her, edgy violins again scratching at the machines' roar. These clones belong in the pre-conscious unity, the undifferentiated collective, their mono-vision locked on safeguarding the mission. As part of the totalitarian collective that swallows its victims, they fear separateness and the uncontrollable vitality that self-awareness brings. Ironically they constitute a male quaternity; but where the number four should symbolise wholeness, here it represents only the Logos principle dominating their collective attitude. *Under the Skin* thus continues to emphasise the missing feminine by dwelling on a dominant collective attitude in which the principle of Eros – of relatedness to the unconscious, the irrational and the feminine – has been lost. The anima, on the other hand, serves life and entangles a man in it (Von Franz, 1996: 169-70).

### **The Edge of Liminality**

Laura meanwhile has commenced a heroic journey oriented toward emancipation through rebirth. She soon encounters further challenges. Andy becomes her guide and leads her across the countryside to explore a ruined castle. For her the main feature is not archaeology but paralysing vertigo: the intergalactic traveller is living between two worlds and must depend on this gentle man to lead her down the dark steps of an ancient tower. In so doing, Andy draws her down from the high wall whence she witnessed one of the bikers speeding past. Acting as psychopomp, he mediates between the conscious and unconscious and shows her the way. By assisting her to find shelter in the dark, he demonstrates *puer* consciousness and his positive relationship with his anima to make the unknown safe. In this context he is also the positive animus, unconscious awakening in Laura. That night they share the bed and Laura begins to learn how two humans express affection for each other. But when

their pleasure rises, he finds it impossible to enter her. She jumps up to examine her groin. A virgin in her alien human form, she is perhaps checking whether lovemaking has torn her skin. Be that as it may, the sweet bond that was emerging between the man and his visitor breaks. Evidently the aliens know nothing about human sexuality or desire.

Daylight finds Laura marching across open country into a dark forest plantation. Compared with her fear when navigating the castle stairwell, she moves confidently between dripping trees and, covered by one of Andy's heavy jackets, picks a way over sodden earth and fallen lumber. But when a truck driver approaches through the trees, he tells her needlessly that the forest is safe, with well-marked but slippery paths. And while speaking he takes note of the attractive, defenceless woman. As she scrambles on, one of the bikes tears along a wet road flanking the forest, menacing in its noisy speed. She is still the males' quarry.

### **Dystopia and Hierophanies**

Deep among the trees she comes on an empty bothy and decides that it is a safe place. She stretches out on the floor, her awkward preparations revealing that sleep is another human experience still new to her. Yet she does sleep while the wind rises, which recalls Hillman's observation, 'Breezy wind and shifts of atmospheric pressure all belong to anima.' (1985: 25). The gusts waltz the treetops and an image of her dozing form emerges softly couched and nested tranquilly high among rocking branches. The picture invokes rich associations with the naiad Daphne, a woodland character and virgin nymph in ancient Greek myth whose name meant 'laurel'. Just as Laura in the superimposed shot looks whole unto herself, ensouled, lovely and more human than ever, Daphne's beauty was widely celebrated. On seeing the nymph, the sun god Apollo fell irredeemably in love. However, his unswerving passion for her beauty was not stronger than her determination to live alone. When after long pursuit Apollo was about to catch her, she appealed to a river god, to 'work some transformation, and destroy this beauty which makes me please all too well!' (Ovid, 1955: 43-4). Thereupon she metamorphosed into a laurel tree. The disappointed Apollo, still in love with her, decreed that laurel leaves should (as we noted earlier) garland victorious generals when they led triumphant processions through Rome

(*Ibid.*). Whereas Daphne becomes a nature goddess, the film's closing images manifest a different but no less archetypal transformation awaiting Laura.

The ambivalent associations of forests are rich. Who can fail to be reminded, as Laura wanders, of Dante's evocation of the lost soul's confusion in the dark woods of the unconscious? Nor can we forget the menace of goblins, trolls and malevolent animals concealed within its deep shadows. On the opposite side, the forest represents nature and the place where pure instinct and healing reside. Jung, looking beyond such familiar metaphors in European myths and fairy tales, observed that forests symbolise the layer in the unconscious that lies close to the somatic processes (1948: §241); and von Franz parses this as the psychosomatic area of the unconscious (1997: 63-4). Likewise, writing as it were on the body, skin is the liminal barrier between inner and outer, not just flesh but psyche too.

Taken together, these perspectives prepare the ground for Joseph Cambrey's post-Jungian interest in the ecology of psyche. Recognising that the world is diseased, he advocates that Jungians should explore this darkness. He offers as inspiration the observation that scientists have become myth-makers, shifting their focus from objects to the ways in which those very objects are interconnected and thereby change each other. Cambrey instances the complex adaptive system of rhizomes (part of the underground structure of certain plants) that send out roots and shoots to interact with other subterranean life forms ('Rhizome,' Wikipedia). He speaks of a mode of interaction beyond mere survival, an altruism or cosmic generosity of great trees which support smaller plants in the forest that could not otherwise survive in their shadow. Thus, when forests are slashed and burnt to make way for cash crops, not only the woods, but the unseen life-support systems under the surface are wrecked too (Cambrey, 2016).

From a depth-psychological perspective, psyche and soma are actively engaged and interconnected, a reaffirmation that everything co-originate. On the personal level, bodily symptoms act as mouthpieces for the personal unconscious. Hillman notes that the Greek roots of the word 'symptom' refer to anything that has befallen one, a happenstance or chance (2005: 108.) As a symptom, our planet's dis-eased ecology speaks of what has been violently extracted from mother earth and consequently

requires that we descend into the psyche's underworld to deal with it. At its conclusion, *Under the Skin*, with its machining of trees and rape of nature, comes flat out into contact with what Vandana Shiva calls the myth of our time – limitless growth (2016). This poisonous myth feeds the greed-driven id of a one-sided culture that is arrested in the illusionary state of limitlessness, continuing to live in the psychic realm of *participation mystique* with its addictive attractions.

The magical emblem that gives rise to these speculations, the vision of 'Laura' blessed by nature, hints that she too might experience transformation into a tree. But any idea that she might metamorphose completely into a woman is erased violently when back in the bothy she is shocked awake by the truck driver stroking her leg with indecent intent. She rushes into the woods and takes refuge behind a fallen tree's mossy roots which look uncannily like a green giant's massive foot. Von Franz might have seen this as an emblem of Laura's assailant, when describing giants as half-human archaic beings that represent emotional factors of crude force which have not yet emerged into the realm of human consciousness (1996: 123).

The beleaguered woman runs on and finds a forest track where a massive articulated vehicle waits to be loaded with logs; but the driver has taken its keys and blasting the horn to summon help simply reveals her whereabouts. She races back through the trees with her attacker in pursuit until strength fails. Two millennia after its origin, the Daphne myth plays out again, this time running on to the conclusion that the nymph had dreaded, when the truck driver, no effulgent Apollo but the latest brutalising male in *Under the Skin*, catches his quarry.

The same halting music resumes that played when, as alien, she lured her victims into the fatal pool. When she did so, the instinct emerging from her alien tribe's mission possessed her, as part of the group's single mind. Then, *participation mystique* excluded any personal intention. The trucker, in contrast, is dominated by the ego's appetite to exercise personal power. He knocks Laura to the ground and tears at her clothes. When she resists as best she can, thereby spurring his frenzy, he tears the blouse from her back and, appallingly, rips humanoid flesh, her secret pink costume.

While the enraged trucker, stymied in his intended rape, hastens back to his lorry, Laura/ Alien, now the victim, peels off her split skin to reveal under it a black body and aquiline head. She staggers toward open ground beyond the trees, her alien eyes gazing at the Laura mask now cherished and cradled in her hands. The ascetic black face is strange but neither less beautiful nor less feminine than the lush mask in which 'Laura's' eyes blink, not yet defunct, still engaging with her alien mistress. As her persona, the Laura mask has done more than conceal the alien's own face, healing and helping birth the latter's positive animus with all its spiritual wisdom. This, the only image of the two together, personifies the relationship that now exists between the alien's inner and outer worlds. In the instant before transformation, mutual compassion bonds them, a final reversion to mirroring. The trucker returns from his vehicle hefting a can of petrol, splashes fuel over the couple, lights it ... and scurries away.

Too late, the lead biker stands on a snowy ridge posing like a titan commanding the Highland landscape. Pretending irresistible masculine power, he (like the trucker a moment earlier) shows no trace of anima culture. Blind to what is happening beneath him as the conflagration rages and then dies to cinders, he has, since his protégée escaped him, become powerless. His coldness freezes him in the land of the dead. As a character type, however, his significance perseveres, linking masculine dominance to the spiritual totalitarianism that amplifies this century's crisis. Hillman saw the semi-human titan as a mythic emblem of the contemporary western world's grotesque, overblown and greedy nature.

There is a huge and ugly, and evil, empire at work day and night to keep us this way. Manically charged, hyper-loud and strong TV, sensationalist media news; ... the health industry building muscles not sensitivity; the medical industry as drug dispensers; ... and shopping, shopping, shopping. (Hillman, 1988: 154)

Hillman identified three interlocking prerequisites to finding a cure for 'titanism'. 'Reawakening the sense of soul in the world goes hand in hand with an aesthetic response – the sense of beauty and ugliness – to each and everything.' (*Ibid.*). That demands integration of the opposites whereby both individuals and societies learn to live with their shadows. In turn, that necessitates 'trusting the emotions ... as the felt

immediacy of the gods in our bodily lives, and their concern that this world, our planet, their neighbor, does not become the late great planet earth.' (*Ibid.*).

As flames consume the duo when they stagger out of the trees to collapse in snow, they fill each other's gaze lovingly. Alien-Laura cannot escape death nor, unlike Daphne, transform into a tree. Yet, once in the clearing, they do metamorphose. Something occurs analogous to the Toltec ritual of dismembering and re-membering (to this day the deep crux of a shamanic practitioner's initiation rites). While the duo burn, black smoke rises thickly through the falling snow that covers the boggy landscape. They are a sacrifice offered for transformation, not as before through the death of a person like the girl killed when the aliens landed, but of collective *personal* values: the one-sided culture filled with unyielding longings and ossified ways of being. Anima has successfully discriminated itself from the feeling life. Psyche has become one with Nature and is transformed. White and black, when presented as archetypal images, evoke 'the remotest depths of the unconscious, where it becomes an almost abstract, pure structure with no human feeling' (Von Franz, 1997: 49). Immersed in nature's opposites, the beautiful relationship between them embodies a newly developed feminine attained through the act of reflection. All is changed utterly and 'a terrible beauty is born'.

We have arrived at a most powerful conjunction presenting itself to viewers puzzled by the twofold nature of Alien / Laura. As Campbell wrote, 'The life of a mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors delivering, not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence, infinity and abundance...' (1986: xx). When the inner eye of viewers is awakened and a revelation arises from their inner space to meet impressions brought to mind by the senses from outer space (here, the film), 'the significance of the conjunction is lost unless the outward image opens to receive and embody the elementary idea – this being the whole sense of the transformation of nature in art' (1986: 8).

Mercea Eliade observed that 'The very dialect of the sacred tends to repeat a series of archetypes, so that a hierophany [a revelation of the supernatural or sacred] realized at a certain historical moment is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later' (1964: xvii). Therefore, to revert to Hillman, a symptom can be

interpreted as a *kairos* moment. ‘There is a meaningful pattern in the precisions of a symptom itself, its picture, its immediate effects. Then a case is not only an abnormality, nor is a symptom merely a disorder. They are opportunities’ (2005: 108). For Eliade, such revelations tend to show the sacred in its totality, ‘even if the human beings in whose consciousness the sacred “shows itself” fasten upon only one aspect or one small part of it. In the most elementary hierophany *everything is declared*. The manifestation of the sacred in a stone or a tree is neither less mysterious nor less noble than its manifestation as a “god”’ (1964: xvii, emphasis original).

In a development of Hillman’s project for combatting titanism, Cambray invites us to consider our visions of the cosmos, understanding that they are limited by the dominant archetypes of an era (both personal and collective). Our souls get hidden in the world of the collective unconscious where images interact; but the human imagination is capable of understanding these visions because they give rise to beauty, and beauty puts us in touch with complexities. Furthermore, beauty is an embodied way to experience complexity since soul may be hiding in the images themselves (2016). If it is ever to be found, soul must be in the integration of a renewed feminine. Little wonder that the dying alien gazes on Laura’s not quite dead mask before both are caught in the flames set by a man. This lasting image epitomizes the psychological reality that the persona presides over the collective conscious, as the anima rules the inner world of the collective unconscious.

Snow falls on the lens and gradually obscures every object that lies in front of it, but lets light seep through. Symbols, as Susan Rowland tells us, unite the human psyche to the animism of the non-human world (2015: 91); for the psyche is the only immediate reality we are able to experience. The process of individuation, both personal and cultural, leads us toward wholeness, toward uniting our inner and outer worlds. Images, then, are the language of the unconscious which *Under the Skin* (in its final shot from beneath the snowy membrane) encourages us to persevere bringing to consciousness – perhaps birthing through hierophany a new living myth.

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