

Empathy with the Butcher, or: The Inhuman Non-Human in Michel Faber's *Under the Skin*

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This article is the first entry in a debate on “The Inhuman Non-Human in Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin*” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/the-inhuman-non-human-in-michael-fabers-under-the-skin>). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de

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Abstract

Empathy is generally understood to be a pro-social emotion and a significant aspect of social intelligence. It allows us to step into another person’s shoes and to share that person’s emotions and perspective; as such, it is closely related to sympathy and compassion. This ability should guide us in our recognition of pro-social, anti-social or even sociopathic behaviour and, as social beings, we should tend to feel drawn towards pro-sociality, altruism and reciprocity and averse to egotism, cruelty, atrocities and anti-sociality in general. This is not always the case. Not only does empathy show some weaknesses, being limited in its scope, endowed with only a short-term memory, and biased towards “us” rather than “them,” it also has its dark sides and can easily be manipulated and employed for downright dangerous or evil purposes. Among the cognitive features that can be exploited for such ends is a kind of mental inertia, a.k.a. the confirmation bias or myside bias: once we have formed a positive—or negative—opinion about real or fictional persons we are likely to avoid any change of mind and tend to select and evaluate information accordingly. Faber’s science fiction novel *Under the Skin* is an extreme example of our willingness to ‘forgive and forget’ even the worst atrocities. Our paper explores the literary strategies that influence our responses to the monstrous behaviour of the novel’s extra-terrestrial protagonist, as well as the cognitive mechanisms that may be involved in our momentary acceptance of the inhuman non-human.

Empathy is generally understood to be a pro-social emotion and often regarded as a lodestone for our moral compass. Decety and Batson point out that “empathic concern or sympathy [...] is often associated with prosocial behaviors such as helping, and has been considered as a chief enabling process for altruism” (113); Suzanne Keen regards “human empathy as a precious quality of our social natures” (viii) even though she questions “the contemporary truism that novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world” (xv). Indeed, over the last years some less favourable aspects have been explored in studies that discuss the dark sides of empathy.

1) Empathy favours “the one over the many” (Bloom 9), i.e. we are far more able to empathize with individual suffering than with large-scale disasters and atrocities. According to a famous dictum, attributed, inter alia, to Joseph Stalin, “[w]hen one man dies it is a Tragedy. When thousands die it’s statistics” (McCullough 420). In consequence, pleas for empathetic response like hunger-relief ads are most successful if they employ images of solitary starving children, but “the focus on affected individuals distracts us from systemic problems that can be addressed only by interventions at an entirely different scale” (Prinz 228).

2) Empathy is temporary. It is “a limited resource” (Decety and Cowell 337), and a “form of compassion fatigue can lead to apathy and inaction, consistent with what is seen repeatedly in response to many large-scale human and environmental catastrophes” (Västfjäll et al.). Psychological defence mechanisms protect us from endless grief and even more from feeling extensively and persistently with the sorrows and sufferings of others, but it follows that empathy has a short-term memory and favours immediate action over well-planned strategies.

3) Empathy is “ineluctably local” (Prinz 228), i.e. like gravity its impact decreases with distance. As we can notice every evening in the news, local, regional and national calamities and disasters take precedence over far larger tragedies in the rest of the world. We feel most strongly with those who are near to us as part of our family or kin, our vicinity or our (imagined) community, while otherness diminishes our willingness or ability to get emotionally involved (see Prinz 227).

Unquestionably, these are problematic aspects of empathy, but we would like to suggest that they should be seen as weaknesses rather than dark sides of our cognitive and emotional faculties. Empathy in such cases fails to fulfil a valuable function, and it may even impede rational and productive action in favour of biased and short-term response. But although we can be manipulated to empathize with cute kids rather than with unruly brats equally deserving of our attention (see Prinz 229), with cuddly animals rather than with ugly beasts which may be just as much endangered, nevertheless our response would not be actively harmful or malevolent.

Empathy has, however, come under even more severe scrutiny by Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev, this time with a focus on “Mimesis, Deception, and the Magic of Alterity” (2015). They are concerned with “forms of deliberately deceptive forms of mimicry” and “the emotional and cognitive projection of oneself into the perspective or situation of another for deceptive purposes” (13). Here empathy, or rather the manipulation of empathy, indeed causes harm—the two examples chosen present mimicry and fake pleas for empathy as a hunting strategy and as a method to create political turmoil and aggression. The important element here is the manipulative use of *Theory of Mind*, the adoption of a false identity to lure the victim into an empathetic response to a deceptive behaviour or carefully constructed misinformation. In both cases, the victims are trapped and remain unaware of the deception; in the first example, the prey is simply killed by a masked hunter, in the second, a forged pamphlet suggesting a plot against an ethnic group leads to violent riots by the allegedly threatened community.

In our paper we argue that the manipulation can go even further and evoke empathetic responses in the face of violence and even atrocity if the right psychological buttons are skilfully pressed. The very fact that empathy is limited and proximate can be exploited, and the tale of a single member of our (imaginary) community suffering under oppression or maltreatment from someone belonging to an ‘othered’ group may easily turn the recipients to discrimination or the acceptance of violence against the whole group. Moreover, as we respond to fictional

characters with similar empathy as to real persons, it does not even matter whether the story has any claim to veracity. This is an important element of propaganda, and as such it was employed by movies like *The Birth of a Nation* or *Jud Süß*. Suzanne Keen explicitly draws attention to the “powerful stories” employed by the Nazis to legitimate racism and genocide and writes: “If narrative fiction has the capacity to alter readers’ characters for the good, it may also possess darker powers” (25). More recent examples should readily come to mind, e.g. the faked Nayirah testimony about alleged atrocities committed by Iraqi soldiers; Fritz Breithaupt devotes a whole subchapter of his book to the “Trump Phenomenon” and his manipulation of the public’s empathy (103-14).

An additional mental feature that can be exploited to manipulate our empathy is the predisposition to stick to our opinions and beliefs, and, in consequence, an unwillingness to admit to errors that would force us to change our minds. This can be regarded as a kind of mental inertia, but also, and possibly more importantly, as a way to maintain self-esteem and save face. The phenomenon has been researched and discussed on various levels; we can find it in religious belief systems and tenacious superstitions, but also in scientific world views, and, of course, in our daily lives. As Keith Thomas wrote in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971):

It is a feature of many systems of thought, and not only primitive ones, that they possess a self-confirming character. Once their initial premises are accepted, no subsequent discovery will shake the believer’s faith, for he can always explain it away in terms of the existing system. (767)

The question is, then, not why people hold on to their beliefs, but why and how it can happen that they change them. On a smaller scale, such a “conceptual conservatism” (Nissani) and tendency to maintain and even protect once-formed opinions is closely linked to the so-called *confirmation bias*, or, as Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber prefer, *myside bias* (218-21). Experiments conducted by Lee Ross, Mark R. Lepper, and Michael Hubbard in the 1970s demonstrated that first impressions, once they have settled into a relatively stable opinion or perspective, cannot

easily be shaken and adjusted to new conditions but show a remarkable tenacity and resistance to conflicting information:

Once formed, initial impressions structure and distort the attributional processes through which subsequently considered evidence is interpreted. [...]

The perceiver, we contend, typically does not reinterpret or reattribute impression-relevant data when the basis for his original coding bias is discredited; once coded, the evidence becomes autonomous from the coding scheme, and its impact ceases to depend upon the validity of that schema. (889)

Thus, we tend to process information selectively. Data that confirm our beliefs are evaluated as more credible than those that contradict our views and opinions—a bias that is at present much discussed in the context of the selective use of information from social media and the consequently widening gap between political factions. The confirmation bias leads to a kind of self-created and avidly preserved cocoon that filters incoming information so that we ultimately receive and process only the news and “facts” that agree with our pre-formed opinions and thus give us the pleasant feeling of being consistently “right.” To create and maintain empathetic responses thus requires chiefly the creation of a positive and stable first impression and, in situations when seriously conflicting facts could challenge our beliefs, a steady trickle of supporting information to keep us on track.

Such findings, of course, contradict assumptions that humans rationally evaluate information and thus arrive at sensible and well-considered conclusions; Antonio Damasio suggests that our decisions are strongly influenced by *somatic markers*, positive or negative bodily responses on the basis of previous experiences. As such, somatic markers “probably increase the accuracy and efficiency of the decision process” (173), but they also bias us to repeat previous decisions which led to agreeable results, a tendency that might be exploited by manipulative information. And as empathy is generally a benevolent feeling towards a person, we are probably biased to maintain this emotional response even if first impressions are called into question. Of course, we occasionally change our opinion about people, but experience tells us that it requires rather strong stimuli, and the result in such cases is usually

extreme—we do not regard a lost friend with indifference, but with scorn.

Let us at this point turn to literature and the theoretical propositions about our response to fictional characters. In her book *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine suggests that our metarepresentational abilities allow us to keep track of other people's utterances and, in case of misbehaviour or wilful misinformation, to reconsider our previous opinions and change our minds about them. Unquestionably this may happen, but it involves not only the adoption of a new perspective but also the admittance, to ourselves and maybe others, that we have erred in our judgment which may then lead to doubts in our social and psychological skills and a—real or imaginary—loss of face.

Zunshine offers Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as an example in which the characters change their minds about others and, possibly, so do the readers.

Elizabeth Bennet (and, through her, the reader) can get over her prejudice toward Mr. Darcy because one of the important representations on which she has based her deep dislike of him—Mr. Wickham's account of how Mr. Darcy had mistreated him in the past—is stored in her (and our) mind as metarepresentation. (61)

She then goes on to declare:

Throw a strong *a priori* doubt on Mr. Wickham's character and see if Elizabeth Bennet will take his stories about Mr. Darcy's iniquity quite so uncritically, *even if she is already predisposed* to dislike Mr. Darcy. (61)

This may be true for Elizabeth, but is it for the attentive reader who has previously read a passage in which Darcy begins to see Elisabeth in a new light?

Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she hardly had a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and

in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. [...]

He began to wish to know more of her [...]. (Austen 70)

Obviously, the reader receives some information early in the text indicating that Darcy will eventually turn out to be the love interest in a novel which already presents the crucial concepts in its title; indeed, this information comes quite a few pages before Wickham is first mentioned. This is a decisive passage in the novel, as it helps us not to fall for Wickham in the way Elizabeth does. Arguably, the novel would have been far less successful had the reader not been forewarned and really formed a strong empathic attachment to Wickham, the breaking of which would impede our reading pleasure. As it is, we are in the know, read Wickham's story with caution, and are well-prepared to find out that our suspicions are confirmed when we later learn the truth from Darcy. We may even feel superior to the heroine as our mindreading ability, fed by information unavailable to Elizabeth, proves to be perfectly correct.

For the rest of the paper we would like to pursue the quite different and more problematic question to what extent it is possible to present us, as readers or spectators, with increasingly villainous figures and still manipulate us to persist in our empathic response to them. Transgressive heroes have been around in literary works for a long time, e.g. in the highly popular picaresque novel. For more recent developments in popular culture, Dan Hassler-Forest suggests that "[t]wenty-first-century culture [...] offers a wide variety of iconic characters and public figures whose transgressions are an essential part of their appeal" (112), and the transgressions he mentions are quite serious. In Tim Burton's *Batman Returns*, for example, Batman is presented "deliberately and quite sadistically burning a criminal alive, running over countless henchmen with his Batmobile, and generally operating as an urban vigilante" (105). The audience, however, is obviously unwilling to change their view of a figure originally conceived as pro-social, and it probably helps that, despite his decidedly violent vigilantism, he regularly repeats that he is not above the law. In fact, popular genres occasionally

employ heroes who turn out to be decidedly anti-social (e.g. "The Man With No Name" in Spaghetti Westerns, the protagonists in *Pulp Fiction* and other films by Quentin Tarantino, or various charismatic criminals in recent TV shows like *The Sopranos* or *Boardwalk Empire*), a trend which almost amounts to a psychological experiment on what the audience will still tolerate in a protagonist. It seems as if violence among males, even if it includes a few atrocities, is no impediment to acceptance, and neither is violence against unsympathetic or dangerous women. Domestic violence or acts of cruelty against children, however, should be avoided. In other words, violence among equals as part of the battle is unproblematic while violence against supposed inferiors or people we actually like is not. And, importantly, it very much helps if the transgressive hero also occasionally suffers physically or emotionally, or if he or she faces serious problems, so that our empathy is fed and manipulated to maintain our loyalty.

One of the most radical texts testing our willingness to empathize with an unlikely heroine even in the face of cruelty and atrocity is Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (cited as *UtS*). The primary focalizer in this science fiction novel is an alien female, Isserley, who regards herself as "human." Originally a beautiful four-legged creature with lovely fur, she had to undergo a highly painful surgical treatment to resemble the malformed inhabitants of our planet, the "vodsels."¹ At present, she still constantly suffers from severe pain but also from the misery of solitude and the loss of her previous biological features. She decided to undergo this treatment to escape a fearful fate that would have awaited her on her home planet, i.e. a life in abject squalor in the so-called Estates, which resemble dungeons rather than living quarters. Promised a life among the rich, she was seduced by members of the elite but then faced the usual threat of being discarded and sent to live a miserable life deep under the surface of a dystopian planet that very much resembles the Earth as it will look in a foreseeable future if the destruction of our environment will continue unimpeded. In consequence, she loves the presently still existing nature of Earth. Her mission on our world,

however, is to capture muscular and meaty men who will then be processed as “voddissin,” a delicacy for the super-rich of her home planet. To do this, she drives up and down the A9 in Scotland to pick up and anaesthetize lonely hitchhikers who will not be missed too soon; they will then be delivered to the “farm,” muted by cutting out their tongues, “shaved, castrated, fattened, intestinally modified, chemically purified” (*UtS* 97), and finally butchered. To facilitate the contact with her victims, Isserley has been bestowed with rather huge artificial breasts, and the mental responses of her victims that we can share in the form of free indirect thought almost invariably focus on this physical feature and the possibility of a sexual encounter; in particular her first victims are presented as primitive and misogynist, and so they do not evoke sympathy or pity. When Amlis Vess, the future heir of the corporation that sent her to Earth, comes for a visit, her mission is questioned as he objects to the company’s policy and considers the treatment of vodsels as inhumane; he actually frees four captives who then have to be re-captured to prevent discovery. But, ultimately, he departs again, and business can proceed as usual. The novel ends, after some further incidents, with an accident that leaves Isserley immobilized in her car. To prevent the discovery of her transformed body and thus of her alien origin and her mission on Earth, she activates a self-destruction device, looking forward to becoming part of our natural environment when the atoms of her body will mingle with the air, the earth and the water of our planet.

Under the Skin manages to quickly dissuade its readers from expecting the ordinary—and, as it turns out, the alien Isserley is by far the most engaging character in the story. The novel plays with many of the most common tropes in science fiction and horror—the reversal of space exploration and colonization, and man-eating aliens have, of course, been around since H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and Damon Knight’s short story “To serve mankind” (1950). In contrast to these texts, however, Faber’s novel allows for insights into human concepts of empathy and mercy, which we typically see as a defining factor for our own species, from the perspective of an outsider. And while the

most impressive and shocking moments in the novel arise from the suffering of dehumanized humans, Isserley is still not constructed as a villain-protagonist. Instead, the narrative manages to portray her in a sympathetic light, and the lines between monstrosity and humanity are constantly blurred or reversed.

In the remaining part of this paper, we would like to examine the strategies the text employs in order to make the reader feel empathy towards Isserley rather than her victims, and analyse how the novel challenges the binary system of self and other, of human and non-human. For this analysis, the most pertinent questions will be: How does the story guide and influence the orientation of the readers' sympathies? Is our ability to empathize restricted by similarities in appearance or in thought? Why do readers empathize with the alien-Other despite the obvious cruelties towards humans? Of course, it is impossible to generalize the readers' response, and there are probably many who will not readily follow the textual strategies and resist manipulation. But then reviews suggest that the empathy with the in-human alien is at the core of the disturbing experience evoked by the novel, and the responses of students in seminars on recent Scottish literature or the Scottish Gothic indicate that the appeal to the dark sides of our empathy succeeds for a considerable part of the audience.

Most importantly, the text develops a kind of rhythm: once we have formed a fairly positive conception of Isserley, this view is challenged by information about her actual mission and passages of increasing cruelty. But before we actually reconsider and change our minds, some contrary information about her suffering, her solitude, and her love of nature and domestic animals like dogs or sheep lures us back on track and re-establishes our previous empathy towards her. In an interview with Ron Hogan, Faber made it quite clear that this was one of the intentions in constructing the novel:

I deliberately keep the reader's sympathies balanced as much as I can. As soon as your sympathy tips towards the plight of the vodsels, I'll put something in that reminds you how vulnerable Isserley is and how much she is just trying to get by doing a tough job. (Hogan)

Under the Skin thus continually averts and subverts prototypical science fiction plot lines of human-alien-encounters. By choosing a female alien as the main focalizer, *Under the Skin* provides an unusual perspective on the traditional image of the hostile alien. The solitude and displacement in combination with the mutilated body and the struggle to manage the requirements of daily life in an utterly unfamiliar environment pave the way towards an understanding of, and compassion with, the alien intruder. Faber explained that he had deliberately tried to reveal as little as possible about Isserley's home world or the technological achievements of her people, as catering too much to the specific demands of the genre would foreground the science fiction elements of the novel to the disadvantage of the story's focus on its main character:

"I was very careful not to talk too much about her own world and the various technologies," Faber says, "[...] because the more you talk about those sorts of things, the closer the book gets to science fiction and I'm really not interested in the furniture of science fiction, the window dressing of it. One of the big strengths of science fiction is the idea of the parable, the moral parable—and to some degree, *Under the Skin* is a parable, but, I think, at its heart it's a character study." (Hogan)

And a "character study" it is: While the story is told by a heterodiegetic narrator, it is still predominantly presented from Isserley's perspective, and the reader receives rather detailed insights into her feelings and thoughts.

While Faber tried to "avoid any Sci-Fi explanations" (Adams) to maintain a feeling and prevailing mood that was still grounded in reality, some elements are undeniably influenced by the generic features of science fiction and help to trigger specific responses in the reader that a realistic novel might not achieve as smoothly. Traditionally, aliens were othered and presented more often than not as hostile and morally (and often technologically) inferior (see Le Guin 41). The genre thus exploits the fact that identity formation can be guided by the existence of a diverging other, as humans identify themselves through dissociation from others:

[I]deas about human subjectivity and identity have most often been established in a comparison between self (human) and Other (non-human) characters. So, in terms of the genre's codes and conventions it is possible to see how the alien or robot of science fiction may provide an example of Otherness, against which a representation of 'proper' human subjectivity is worked through. (Cornea 275)

This need not be negative, but it becomes problematic as soon as it includes a distinction based on an assumed human superiority, which was the normative view in most early science fiction. This perspective has changed to some extent over the last decades. Literary works as well as theories have explored processes of reverse othering, and the extra-terrestrial may now be the epitome of ecological virtue living in complete harmony with nature (e.g. in Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean*) and/or the victim of human aggression (e.g. in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and in Stanisław Lem's *Fiasco*). In *Under the Skin*, Isserley is not only an alien, but also female and, as a result of the radical surgery, an artificial creation sharing aspects of the cyborg. She is thus part of three groups that were traditionally othered but have since been re-valued, and, in consequence, the reader is now prepared to side with Isserley even though she turns against the humans as the default "us" of science fiction.

Of course, the narration does not simply take the reader's willingness to empathize with Isserley for granted. Among the strategies involved in the manipulation of the reader is an appeal to conceptual and linguistic conservatism. By choosing the alien as the main focalizer, the text establishes a linguistic distance between the human readers and the vodsels of the text. As in traditional science fiction, in *Under the Skin* the term *human* denotes the superior species, capable of sophisticated feelings and complex thought, i.e. the self. In contrast, the beings usually considered to be humans, i.e. the vodsels, are regarded as simple-minded, primitive, and hardly sentient mammals that populate the planet in large numbers. The "reversal of nomenclature in *Under the Skin* constitutes an ontological source of dis-ease for the reader throughout the novel" (Woodward 54). Along with their status as the

alleged pinnacle of evolution, the human victims seem to lose all fundamental rights. Calling them "vodseles," a name that has no meaning for the readers, disrupts the recognition of kinship and favours alienation. Horstkotte suggests that it is a "thingless name [that] highlights the change of perspective taking place in the text which forces the reader to accommodate himself to a full-blown terminological reversal" (82). It could, however, also be argued that the linguistic displacement feeds a cognitive inertia: We empathize with the "human" and despise the Other, and thus any terminological reversal remains unperceived by our emotional radar.

The linguistic dehumanization of the vodseles is then confirmed by their actual behaviour. Once Isserley picks up hitchhikers, the text assigns short passages to their thoughts. Although these detours are brief and of little consequence for the overall development of the plot, the effect of these glimpses into their psyches are not to be underestimated: With the exception of maybe two men (a German tourist and a guy she takes in a fit of anger after another man attempted to rape her), the future victims fail to inspire pity or compassion in the reader as their behaviour is mostly despicable. Most of them indulge in inappropriate or contemptuous thoughts about Isserley: "Fantastic tits on this one, but God, there wasn't much of her otherwise" (*UtS* 11); "She was a weird one all right. Half Baywatch babe, half little old lady" (*UtS* 12); "Breathing hard already she was, like a bitch in heat" (*UtS* 34); "Kind eyes, she had. Bloody big knockers, too" (*UtS* 80). Some make sexist or harassing comments, occasionally in strong dialect, amplifying the primitive, disrespectful and predatory attitude already displayed in their streams of consciousness: "'Are those real?' he said. [...] 'What yis goat stickin' oot in front ae yi,' he elaborated. 'Yir tits.'" (*UtS* 37). Isserley's occasional reflections on earlier experiences confirm that this behavioural pattern is widespread among her victims: "Years ago, in the very beginning, she'd stung a hitcher who had asked her, scarcely two minutes after getting into the car, if she liked having a fat cock up each hole" (*UtS* 35). Indeed, one of the men assaults Isserley, forces her to perform oral sex on him and tries to brutally rape her (see *UtS* 177-88), pushing her

towards an emotional breakdown. After the attack, she frantically seeks vengeance and insists on watching the mutilation of some hitchhikers she had captured earlier (*UtS* 212-21), but as this is still understood to be a response to the trauma, and Isserley is still in an extreme state of mind, one of the most cruel scenes of the novel is softened.

Obviously, Michel Faber plays with reader expectations in the way he constructs his narrative and establishes character dynamics. Isserley is as alienated as possible from her own world, and the reader encounters a protagonist who is stranded on a foreign planet, only supported by a small number of rather unsympathetic male workers from her home world. Surrounded by the unknowable and repulsive alien population, she finds solace only in nature. In the beginning, hardly any of the quite outrageous science fiction elements are spelled out; only the feeling that something is not quite right persists. There is “no mediating authority between the fantastic other and the reader, so that the latter must work out the meaning of the unfolding scenario without any aid” (Horstkotte 83). The narration is at first deliberately vague about Isserley’s motivations, and while her artificial breasts are repeatedly mentioned, the rest of her physical appearance merely appears to be slightly odd. When it is revealed that Isserley is actually a member of a completely different species and originally did not even resemble what the reader would call human, the immersion in her mental world has already produced a fairly strong attachment. At this point, readers are reluctant to let go of the pre-established notion that Isserley deserves their understanding and empathy. Moreover, as most of the victims, and in particular the first ones, are portrayed as deeply unsympathetic and morally reprehensible, the novel constantly blurs or reverses the lines between monstrosity and humanity. As Horstkotte points out, this complete reversal of perspective, the de-familiarization of the self, is unusually consistent and therefore successful in influencing the reader’s ability to empathize:

The insistence on one perspective in *Under the Skin* effectively abolishes the bipolarity of self and other discernible in other texts of the postmodern fantastic. It seems to return to the traditional fantastic’s one-dimensionality, but only to turn this one-dimensionality around by 180 degrees—now the self is

virtually invisible, and the fantastic other alone provides the standards by which to judge the world. (83)

Throughout the novel, Isserley passes relatively convincingly as a young woman, which is a requirement for her work and therefore gives her a special status among her colleagues. She is indispensable, but her artificially altered appearance is also disconcerting to them. Isserley feels deeply estranged from her own people because of her transformed physique and the knowledge that they are revulsed by her appearance:

The men she worked with on the farm had been shocked [...] but they were used to her now, more or less; they could go about their business without gawping (though if there was a lull in activities she always felt their eyes on her). No wonder she tended to keep to her cottage [...] Being a freak was so wearying. (*UtS* 75)

Her mutilated body relentlessly reminds her of her unique outsider position, and the novel just as relentlessly reminds us of the constant pain she has to endure and shows in detail how lonely and hopeless she really is “setting out in the morning, after a night of nagging pain, bad dreams and fitful sleep” (*UtS* 6). Forced to stand upright on two legs despite the pain, her tail and her teats removed and her genitals mutilated—the novel paints a pitiful picture of Isserley, who still recalls her former beauty and now has been turned into a hybrid creature who is utterly displaced. As Suzanne Keen points out, “*empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists*” (72; italics in original), and this is exploited fully in the novel.

Undoubtedly, Isserley's decision to submit to the painful surgery was made out of desperation and not as any kind of career objective: She has been “offered rescue” (*UtS* 150) from a life of poverty by Vess Industries and tries to convince herself not to regret it, as she would have had “a brutishly short lifetime” (*UtS* 64) otherwise. And as science fiction frequently offers imaginative expressions for the readers' very real experiences, we may actually recognize some aspects of our lives in her conditions: “The conflicts she deals with, though, aren't much different from those many Earthlings experience, including a deep alienation

from her coworkers and resentment towards the class iniquities that have forced her to take such degrading work" (Hogan). This results in the image of a vulnerable young woman instead of a frightful and murderous alien.

For most of the time, Isserley's morals are the text's morals, and her intimate point of view constantly invites the readers to accept her perspective and also her biases. This becomes particularly interesting when she is confronted by the privileged, rich Amlis Vess. Before he arrives, the reader is already infected by Isserley's views about "the big man's son" who "never had a job of any kind," but is "always in the news, for the usual rich-young-pretender reasons," and "[c]ountless times, some girl or other made a fuss, claiming to be pregnant with his baby" (*UtS* 72-73). In addition, he is, according to Isserley's "human" standards, incredibly handsome, the "most beautiful man she had ever seen" (*UtS* 110). This serves two contradictory purposes; on the one hand, his physical perfection constantly reminds Isserley of her own disfigurement and frustrates any hope that he might still find her desirable, while, on the other hand, his features including fur, a "prehensile tail," "long spearhead ears," and a "vulpine snout" (110) do not really invite our empathy. Thus, when he finally emerges as an "animal rights activist" and tries to stop the corporation's barbarous but highly profitable slaughter of Earth's inhabitants, he has been firmly established as an intruder, a source of frustration, and one more problem that Isserley has to deal with. Her annoyance at his snobbish attitude seeps through the text and keeps us from rationally processing his arguments. When he tries to confront her with the cruelty of the treatment of Earthlings, Isserley is outraged by the fact that he seems to value vodsels more than her: "Typical man: so obsessed with his own idealism he was incapable of feeling empathy for a human being suffering right under his nose" (*UtS* 167). Her dismissive and hostile attitude towards the vodsels serves as a kind of defence mechanism, because she struggles to define what is left of her as a "human being" when she has been physically altered to a degree of unrecognizability. Consequently, she feels that Amlis's sympathy for the vodsels is greatly misplaced,

considering that nobody really seems to acknowledge her own quiet suffering: “‘You don’t know what cruelty is,’ she said, feeling all the places on and inside her body where she had been mutilated” (*UtS* 229). She wishes to see her work as work only and prefers not to get emotionally involved; and Amlis’s challenging of her detached view scares her, as she does not only see her own suffering diminished but also feels that Amlis lumps her together with the perceived animals: “‘I don’t know what you expect of me,’ Isserley burst out, suddenly near tears. ‘I’m a human being, not a vodsel’” (*UtS* 173).

Moments when the captive humans are shown in their utterly degraded and abused state are, of course, the most serious challenges to our empathic response to Isserley, as now we should review our perspective, feel compassion with them, and loathe her mission on Earth. Quite possibly many readers do, and Shildrick suggests that these passages cause conflicting reactions within the reader that are normally reserved for confrontations with the monstrous, namely “denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification” (17; emphasis in original). Readers would then be encouraged to feel pity for the vodsel and be outraged at their treatment, but at the same time it is almost impossible to imagine them as humans who could still be rescued and then carry on with their lives. The text tries to steer us through these moments of horror without any change of mind by a series of carefully implemented narrative strategies. Our first encounter with the mutilated victims is the culminating moment of a hunt, i.e. Isserley has to re-capture the vodsel that have been set free by Amlis if she wants to preserve her mission. Her desperation and the fever of the hunt are transferred to the audience, so that the discovery of a vodsel comes as a relief. What we are presented with, then, is the result of a transformation that robbed the man of any identity and dignity, making him unrecognisable and unsuitable as a figure of identification for the reader as he has fallen deep into the “uncanny valley” (Mori):

It had the typical look of a monthling, its shaved nub of a head nestled like a bud atop the disproportionately massive body. Its empty scrotal sac dangled like a pale oak leaf under its dark acorn of a penis. A thin stream of blueish-

black diarrhea clattered onto the ground between its legs. Its fists swept the air jerkily. Its mouth opened wide to show its cored molars and the docked stub of its tongue. 'Ng-ng-ng-ng-gh!' it cried. (*UtS* 100)

This hunt could be seen as “the moral equivalent of a trick with mirrors: you’re unsure whether to root for the horribly mistreated men or for Isserley and her fellow aliens” (Alexis). One of the tricks involved is a deflection of pity in a moment when Isserley expresses a modicum of compassion for her victims. When she thinks that “Amlis Vess had done this poor animal no favours in letting it go” (*UtS* 100), she does, in fact, not question their status or the harm that has been done to them but merely expresses some concern for their unpleasant situation in the forest. We are guided to associate the terrible sight and the misery with the escape, with the solitude and coldness, with the embarrassment the vodsel would feel if discovered by the police, and thus the death by being shot appears almost like a mercy killing. Isserley later, in a discussion with Amlis, again draws attention to the vodsel’s suffering and death resulting from his supposedly cruel choice of letting four monthlings out of their prison (*UtS* 114-15). Of course, Amlis is quick to retaliate that they were prepared for slaughter, but his arguments are tainted because in his general evaluation of the vodsel’s status he actually does not differ from Isserley, and he repeatedly refers to them as “animals” (*UtS* 114). His view is thus abstract, hers concrete, as she points to the corpse’s frostbites and suggests that he would have frozen to death in consequence of Amlis’s inconsiderate intervention.

At times, Isserley struggles with her own attitude towards the vodsel, alternating between reluctant compassion and outright hostility and rejection: “But isn’t it true, she asked herself, that [the vodsel] have that dignity? Isserley pushed the thought away,” and instead she focuses on “their stink, their look of idiocy, the way the shit oozed up between their toes,” afraid that she was “so badly butchered, brought so close to an animal state physically, that she was losing her hold on humanity and actually *identifying* with animals” (*UtS* 172). While the reader can easily recognize the plight of the vodsel, the pain suffered in the aftermath of Isserley’s surgical mutilation takes up a far larger

part of the novel and balances or even submerges the tortures inflicted on her dehumanized victims.

During a harrowing visit to the vodsel pens, which distresses Isserley more than she initially expected, she is confronted with a human scratching the word "mercy" into the ground, but refuses to read it to her companion Amlis, as the recognition of their faculty of speech would hint at a highly developed intellect. Many of the objections Isserley raises against attempts to "anthropomorphize" the vodsels are evocative of real-world arguments about the current treatment of farm animals, and she assumes a position of authority and muses that "people who knew nothing whatsoever about them were apt to misunderstand them terribly" (*UtS* 173).

The rather blunt depiction of the cruelty the captured men have to endure can then "be read as a cultural-critical metadiscourse of the way human beings treat animals in the meat industry. The novel's ecocritical stance [...] is mainly expressed by interpolating an alien perspective, by inviting the readers to see human beings, themselves, from an alien point of view" (Gymnich and Costa 85). Again, the reader's empathy is challenged: at once, we are confronted with the abhorrent treatment of human beings *and* challenged to reflect on the way humans usually treat animals like cows, pigs, or sheep as unfeeling livestock. On this issue, Isserley unexpectedly sides with the animal lovers as, in consequence of her own original physique, she favours the familiarity that she recognizes in sheep or dogs over the strange and ugly beings that she has to deal with on a daily basis:

A sheep had strayed onto the pebbled shore not far from her, and was sniffing boulders as large as itself, licking them experimentally. Isserley was intrigued [...] She barely breathed, for fear of startling her fellow-traveller.

It was so hard to believe the creature couldn't speak. It looked so much as if it should be able to. Despite its bizarre features, there was something deeply human about it, which tempted her, not for the first time, to reach across the species divide and communicate. (*UtS* 63)

In such passages we may detect a plea for animal rights and even a vegetarian subtext in Isserley's views, and some readers may not only

embrace her love for animals and nature but even see some cosmic justice in the treatment of the predominantly brutish male victims.

In consequence of all these textual strategies, and in the face of the immense human suffering in the novel, Isserley remains predominantly a character we can identify with. When confronted with the horribly cruel and repelling treatment of the human males, the readers' compassion may momentarily waver towards them; but as the audience is also witness to their indecent and degrading thoughts about Isserley, the emotional response quickly returns to her side. Moreover, the almost quest-oriented structure of Isserley's work and the immersion into her personal thoughts and feelings encourage the reader to feel for her. According to Alexis, "[t]he reader's sympathy for Isserley almost obscures the sheer cruelty of her behavior. [...] Faber has found a playful way to ask fundamental questions. What is empathy? What is power? Can they coexist?" While the reader is most likely shocked and repelled by Isserley's participation in the continuous cruelties, the perspective elicits a kind of intimacy with her and therefore prevents feelings of outrage or hatred. As Faber points out: "Isserley's actions hurt us—get under our skin—precisely because we identify with her and want her to be OK" (Adams).

Thus, the novel can be read as an examination of our ability to empathize. Focalization, linguistic defamiliarization, reverse othering, and the skilful appeal to our confirmation bias once we have formed a first attachment contribute to the manipulation of the readers' empathy. In the course of the novel, the gap between the increasingly explicit depiction of the barbarous treatment of humans and the reminders of Isserley's pain and solitude widens, and step by step readers are invited to tolerate more and more excessive and outrageous cruelties. Thus, *Under the Skin* tests our willingness to reconsider and to reject the persuasive voice of a master narrative; it explores the possibility of employing empathy to cloud our rational faculties and to steer our sympathies towards the aggressor.

As pointed out above, some of the techniques are reminiscent of those employed in propaganda and, in particular, racist or Nazi propaganda.

Robert Jay Lifton, for example, writes in *The Nazi Doctors* how a psychological doubling and linguistic reversal turned the genocide into a form of healing (433) and the act of murder into a self-sacrifice (435). The murderers were thus cast as victims who suffer under the terrible ordeal of their selfless work, while the real victims were dehumanized as a biological threat and excluded from ethical considerations (440). Hannah Arendt has pointed out that it is the fatality of Auschwitz that it could happen again (384), and Primo Levi, similarly, wrote: "Conscience can be seduced and obscured again—even our consciences" (396).

Such a repetition would not begin with the end of the development but with some first seemingly insignificant but ultimately disastrous steps. At present, one can hardly escape the feeling that those first steps may already have been taken, and the question whether we might be seduced to tolerate them and the subsequent progression into increasingly catastrophic scenarios depends on the possible malleability of our emotional faculties and the ways in which our empathy can be manipulated. An awareness of the weaknesses and dark sides of empathy is a crucial element in the defence against such manipulations, and works like *Under the Skin* contribute to this awareness.

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NOTE

¹To avoid confusion, references to Isserley's species as being "human" will be put in inverted commas. The words human without quotation marks or *vodsel* denote our species.

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