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# *UNDER THE SKIN:* THE INTERVAL BETWEEN SEX AND MEANING

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Panel: Return of the Monstrous Feminine      Moderator: Prof. Catherine Constable

This paper begins with two scenes that I smear together, one from Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film *Under The Skin* and the other from Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, two scenes that on first reading seem to stick one unto the other, agglutinating into one sustained mediation on the relationship between sex, secretions and vision. This scene behind me, of a peculiar interval that seems to visibly redraw the horizon of fecundity between two sexes, resonates with a poetic sentiment expressed by Irigaray in the text: '*a remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this threshold which has never been examined as such: the female sex, a threshold that gives access to mucous, of the lips, which are strangers to dichotomy and opposition.*'<sup>1</sup> Holding one another close, these scenes coalesce and contrast as they intimately converse, signalling the possibility of a new sexual poetics that seeks to lubricate language and loosen how sex can be read or felt here and now.

These two scenes represent a possibility that I chase in this paper by way of Irigaray's writing on the interval: the idea that sex is always already a multiple and variable condition of life and the living, but as sexes which are not yet. Across several of Irigaray's texts, the interval manifests as a possibility or play of place where a revolutionary ethics of sexual difference can finally take place. For Irigaray, all theories of the subject have systematically denied 'woman' the possibility of constituting her own representations, discourses, and desires independent of the sexual hierarchy enacted by patriarchal language. 'She' is continually stripped, Irigaray contends in *Speculum*, of even the words that are expected of her, converted to a discourse that forever denies the specificity of her pleasure, while simultaneously portraying her as the

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*", trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 18.

hollow, negative other to her male counterpart.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this, the interval that Irigaray invokes time and again in her writing represents a threshold of sexual specificity where the indeterminacy of the lips and its mucous call for the arrival of a new sexual poetics that might unstick the language of rationality that binds sex and meaning together.<sup>3</sup>

Before considering how Irigaray's notion of the interval might unstick the cultural bond that equates sex with meaning through a visual reading of *Under the Skin*, I turn to a wider issue which poses significant concern for Irigaray around how sex has become rationalised in philosophy, an issue which largely stems from a Hegelian perspective on the question of sex.

Overall, Irigaray's work evidences a somewhat understated, yet deeply critical interrogation of the Hegelian dialectic and its presence in philosophy as a doctrine which advances binary, hierarchal, and teleological systems of rationalisation. In fact, while Hegel's name appears only once in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, which is normally read as a challenge to Freudian psychoanalysis where sexuality is figured as oneness rather than a multiplicity,<sup>4</sup> the formulation of the title itself can be also considered an indirect challenge to Hegel's motif of the family in *Philosophy of Right* and its supporting claim that 'one sex [as such] is therefore spiritual.'<sup>5</sup>

In a section devoted to the ethical life of the family unit, Hegel privileges this social arrangement over all others as the immediate substantiality of what he calls 'spirit', as the *rational* awareness or self-conscious certainty of one's own being in reality through sensory perception and intuition. Within the family, the individual is not an independent person but a member of an ethical, legal and social formation based on *rationality*, where marriage serves as the glue which binds familial relations and the actuality of the human species together, transforming the 'natural sexes' into a spiritual union.<sup>6</sup> However, 'women', in Hegelianism 'are not made for the higher sciences, philosophy, and certain artistic productions that require a universal element,' since they are deemed closer to the sensible conditions of life (*being-in-oneseelf*), whereas man acquires his privileged position of personal self-sufficiency in society

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<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Any Theory of the Subject" in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray, "Sexual Difference", 5; 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Bolton, "The Camera as an Irigarayan Speculum" in *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 32

<sup>5</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 200-201; 206

(*being-for-oneself*) through the attainment of thought alone.<sup>7</sup> It is only thanks to her familial tie through marriage, apparently, that woman is saved from a regressive inner world of the senses where she would otherwise lose any possible claim of self-conscious certainty and instead fall victim to ‘unconscious desires and natural negativity.’<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the family functions as a dialectical relationship in which male and female differences are homogenised into one, solitary unit that serves the interest of property, material patrimony and sexual reproduction.<sup>9</sup> Sexes, in Hegelian logic, are reduced to one sex by the unity of marriage as a social formation marked by a patriarchal imperative for woman to submit to the genealogy of her husband and therefore sacrifice the material and ontological conditions that make her needs and desires uniquely different.<sup>10</sup> This homogenisation of sex via the Hegelian family, for Irigaray, ultimately denies women the possibility of ever inhabiting sex itself, and the specific conditions that constitute her being in the world; namely, her blood, mucous, genitals, sexual organs, desires, pleasures, fecundity, experiences, dimensions, genealogies, and so on.<sup>11</sup> It is fundamentally impossible, Irigaray argues, for Hegelianism to conceive of sex as emancipatory, since the dialectical method always submits the category of woman to a system of meaning which ultimately serves the auto-affection of the masculine subject.<sup>12</sup> In order for an ethics of sexual difference to truly come into being, Irigaray argues that we must reconceive not only how we view space and time, but also the philosophical gendering of immanence as feminine and transcendence as masculine. ‘We must constitute a possible *place* for each sex, body and flesh to inhabit,’ she argues, a place that is facilitated by an entrance to and an in-between of form and matter, What Irigaray names as the interval.<sup>13</sup>

It should be said that the word ‘place’ is a rather elusive term in Irigarayan thought, yet it can be loosely defined as the gradual, while always incomplete, actualization of each self in relation to a differently sexuate other.<sup>14</sup> Place, for Irigaray, is the ‘not yet’ of sexual being, to which no

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 206-207.

<sup>8</sup> Luce Irigaray, “The Eternal Irony of the Community,” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 215-216.

<sup>9</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Each Sex Must Have Its Own Rights” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, “Each Sex Must Have Its Own Rights”, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Irigaray, “Sexual Difference,” 18.

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Questions” in *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 122-123.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Emma R. Jones, “Finding/Founding Our Place: Thinking Luce Irigaray’s Ontology and Ethics of Sexuate Difference as Relational Limit,” in *Building a New World: Luce Irigaray: Teaching II*, ed. Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 15.

value or meaning can be assigned to its fluid actualization for risk of it being displaced by desire – or better put, by freezing its very movement *as* desire.<sup>15</sup> ‘Woman’ *is* ‘place’, according to Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, but as a figure unable to constitute within herself ‘the place that she is.’<sup>16</sup> In other words, she is never ‘here and now’ but rather frozen as an eternal elsewhere from which the desiring subject continually draws his reserves.<sup>17</sup> Thus, ‘she’ is not definitively on the side of either form or matter, but is instead rendered static between the two by a masculine economy of desire which positions the ‘maternal-feminine’ as ‘a *vessel* to receive and welcome’ life.<sup>18</sup> The potential of place, however, is that it is the junction between the physical and metaphysical enveloping of the body, the boundary of the surrounding body, the production of an intimacy that participates in the determination of matter and form.<sup>19</sup> Place is not an interval or a thing in of itself, Irigaray tells us, rather, place permits the thing to be insofar as the thing itself can exist in and outside place. Place, for all intents and purposes, is where the not yet of sex remains a condition of existence, moulding itself from one to the other, from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside.<sup>20</sup>

The interval, as distinct from place, is an intermediary between not only the boundaries of form and matter but also the configuration of space and time.<sup>21</sup> In the eroticism of the different senses or thresholds of the body, Irigaray claims, the interval remains in play as place, or the possibility of place, as an interval that is both an entrance and space between.<sup>22</sup> It is not a proverbial gap in subjecthood where the category of woman can transcend a symbolic order by means of an inherited patriarchal language, nor is the interval a fluid movement of sublation, which Hegel describes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as a ‘pure porousness,’ a force that continually unfolds the internal differences sustaining a particular line of thought until a purer, unobjective universal idea emerges.<sup>23</sup> Giving it a permanent definition, Irigaray warns, would amount to suppressing it as desire, freezing it in motion.<sup>24</sup> Rather the interval is a threshold that

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<sup>15</sup> Irigaray, “Volume-Fluidity” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 227.

<sup>16</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 37-39.

<sup>17</sup> Irigaray, “Volume-Fluidity”, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Irigaray, “Place, Interval”, 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, 12. Irigaray, “Place, Interval”, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 81; 115.

<sup>24</sup> Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, 8.

would produce a place where sex speaks to an indeterminate multiplicity, where the specificity of sexual difference can take place without a recourse to language as such. This specificity of an indeterminate sexual multiplicity, in this context, is a *self-touching* that is infinitely porous, voluminous, and mucosal, a site or horizon of fecundity that is always already an opening to thought and life through sex itself.<sup>25</sup> Famously for Irigaray, this self-touching is expressed through the senses and threshold of the lips, at least two sets of lips where the fecundity of touch is always already in existence before orality.<sup>26</sup> These lips that speak together, and Irigaray is careful to not specify which, embrace sex before speech, language and meaning. Together, they communion with one another in the interval that takes place, according to Irigaray, through the most intimate and subtle of mucous membranes.<sup>27</sup> Mucous, for Irigaray, is a porousness of the body that desire fails freeze. Instead, it is a fluidity that welcomes the fecundity of self-touch and the exchange of secrets among multiple lips. Thus, the interval as the intermediary between form and matter, space and time, gives place to the most extreme experience of sensation, where ‘one discovers the self in that experience which is inexpressible yet forms the supple grounding of life and language.’<sup>28</sup>

In order to think through the complex nature of Irigaray’s register and how the notion of place and the interval might unstick the bond of rationality that equates sex with meaning, I turn to Jonathan Glazer’s sci-fi horror *Under the Skin*, which has already been richly introduced to us on the first day of the conference. While Irigaray rarely comments on the medium of film in her writing, the poetic lyricism of her work is highly sensitive to a cinematic register. While any attempt to represent her thinking through moving images might run the risk of freezing the place of a revolutionary ethics of sexual difference, I find myself agreeing with Lucy Bolton in *Film and Female Consciousness*, that there is some necessity in trying to enunciate a new female symbolic or imaginary through the distinct morphological figurality, gestures and colours of Irigarayan philosophy, of trying to imagine scenes where sex can be figured as generative condition of life but as sexes that are not yet, sexes that are always in the process of translating a self-touch that eludes or smears the effects of a language that tries to freeze sex with meaning.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Hill, “Interval, Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and Henri Bergson” *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 129.

<sup>26</sup> Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, 18; Luce Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 187.

<sup>27</sup> Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Bolton, “The Camera as an Irigarayan Speculum”, 34; Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 18-19.

*Under the Skin*, for those who have not seen it, is a deeply evocative and compelling exploration on the relationship between sex, secretions and vision. Among its many layered associations and translations, the film also presents itself as a story in which sex is not one, in which sex cannot be reified into one distilled essence or substance, but rather in which sex becomes dimensional, voluminous, morphological and lubricious. It follows an otherworldly being in humanoid form, played by Scarlett Johansson, who drives through the streets of Glasgow and the surrounding countryside in a tired white van, searching for and seducing wayward men. Clearly, it is a film that on the surface twists the expected narrative of predation in the beginning, where men appear to initially be the victims of an ominous plot, however the film does revisit familiar issues of female sexual vulnerability as it progresses, in which this otherworldly being who is gendered female begins to visibly unravel onscreen.

What is compelling to consider in this instance is how *Under the Skin* seems to invoke an Irigarayan sexual poetics which, as I mentioned towards the beginning, redraws the horizon of fecundity between the sexes, where each encounter that takes place between two sexuate beings brings us out of the real world and into a voluptuously abyssal, dark interiority or space, which I would argue tackles the homogenising force of the Hegelian dialectic head-on by luxating sex from meaning by a set of lips that are not yet. Under Glazer's directorship, the so-called natural determinacy prescribed to man by Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*, as a sex that is for-itself, is treated to a deep suspicion by the void in which he finds himself. No words are ever exchanged between the two in these scenes which are multiple. Within this space that plays with the possibility of being a place, there is no imperative for woman to submit to a masculine genealogy or language. Speech, it would seem, is not possible in this interval. Naked, his motivation is made visible to us by his purposeful walk, his swagger, his vertical erect posture and the erection of his penis, which orientates him towards his desire. She, on the other hand, moves backwards and away from him entirely, not as a sign of deference, but as an act of maintaining the interval between them. 'The locomotion toward and reduction in the interval' Irigaray argues, 'is the movements of desire [...] overcoming the interval is its aim, the cause of its locomotion.'<sup>30</sup> In *Under the Skin*, however, we can see not only a purposeful maintenance of both distance and place between two sexes, we see also see a knock-on effect of this interval,

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<sup>30</sup> Irigaray, "Place-Interval", 48.

a scene where the embodiment of masculine desire becomes mired by some indiscernible liquid or mucous which I am going to suggest in a moment actually takes place in the throat.

Mucous, as I mentioned, is a fluidity in Irigarayan thought that welcomes the translation and fecundity of self-touch but also maintains a gesture of the not yet, a sexual self-touch that maintains an interval between an ethics of sexual difference and the sublation of sex via the Hegelian dialectic. The dialectic method for Hegel is expressed as an inward movement, a self-engendering and advancing of internal contradictions, before returning into itself as a substantiated concept.<sup>31</sup> Difference, for Hegel, becomes a property of the final concept through the fluid movement of sublation. The movement of dialectics dissolves difference, and, when applied to the question of sex, reduces the thinking of sexual difference to a ‘natural determinacy’ of two sexes which attains a position of truthful significance through the concrete unity of their ‘rational’ opposition to one another.<sup>32</sup>

These scenes from *Under the Skin*, however, visibly maintains an interval that not only resists the sublation of sex via the Hegelian dialectic but in doing so maintains the ambiguity of the multiple lips. We do not know if this interval here onscreen is labial, facial, or somewhere else in-between. If this place was a set of lips closer to the face, and if this interval was akin to the vocal cords, then it is possible that this scene can be considered a critique of the very patriarchal language or speech that Irigaray vehemently rejects throughout her work. If, as I suggest, this scene of sexual difference might take place in the interval beyond the lips of the face, then I might suggest that this figure of masculine desire onscreen is treated to the subversive phonemic stress of a glottal stop which takes place in the throat prior to conveyance of meaning through speech.

A glottal stop a type of consonant sound, a ‘gl’ or ‘cl’, that is produced when speaking by the forceful closing and reopening of the vocal cords when the air of the lungs is released with force.<sup>33</sup> In *Glas*, Derrida writes persuasively about the subversive nature of the ‘gl effect’ that

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<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> The decision to use *gl* is arguably inherited from Genet’s “What Remains of a Rembrandt” which Derrida himself refers to on the opening page of the text. In this short work, Genet reflects on a curious encounter with a dishevelled passenger on a train, a man that Genet realised ‘has the same value as every other.’ Despite his repulsion to the man’s general appearance (‘graceless body and face, ugly in certain details, even vile), Genet recalls what he describes as a moment of self-oblivion when his eyes met with this stranger. ‘I was flowing out of my body,’ Genet writes, ‘through the eyes, into his at the same time he was flowing into mine.’ This ‘*fl* effect,’ of



performs an ‘angular slash of opposition’ in the throat. The glottal stop of the ‘gl’ sound, Derrida, writes in *Glas*, ‘tears the “body,” “sex,” “voice” and “writing” from the logic of consciousness and representation’ that guides Hegelian dialectics. By gargling on the wet, thin layer of mucus which maintains the vocal cords as a source of speech production, *gl* performs a ‘death-effect’ that remarks the progressive and teleological work of sublation from within.<sup>34</sup> *Gl* obstructs the airway in advance of speech that exposes the speaking subject to the thrill or fear of a gentle choking in the moment of vocalisation.<sup>35</sup> *Gl* facilitates an unconscious strangulation which exposes language to a frightful mystery, an indiscernible yet irrepressible *secret* or *secretion* that causes the speaking subject to physically tremble in anticipation.<sup>36</sup>

*Gl*, Derrida indicates, is not a property of the tongue or throat; it does not belong to speech as such. Rather, it is an event, an encounter between muscle, skin, flesh, fluid and mucus, that hoists the tongue before the procedural work of sublating sound into meaning.<sup>37</sup> It can be heard as an audible gurgling that echoes from down below, as if someone was gargling or suffocating on the intrusive arrival or extruded presentation of wet saliva, sperm, or milk.<sup>38</sup> In other words, *gl* is the sound of a gagging on the Hegelian dialectic, where the mouthpiece that would provide the concept with meaning chokes on what remains anterior and exterior to the dialectical method: the living conditions that would cause language itself to be spoken or stopped in the first instance. In the very moment that air is forced from the lungs following the fleeting suffocation of a glottal stop, difference ripples from within prior to signification, owing to the mechanical vibration of the vocal cords themselves, as a fleshly operation that remains unfathomable to the inner workings of the conscious mind. The glottal action of ‘gl’, I argue, secretes the body in advance of sublation and its self-engendering of internal contradictions, concealed as what remains external to the comprehensive and logically rigorous structure of Hegel’s absolute idealism. Between the flaps of mucosal tissue in the throat, words are always lubricated, glued, melted, spewed, but always mediated by the threat of meaning being suffocated by the very operation on which it relies.

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the I flowing is both singular and universal for Genet, yet its chance discovery was one of mourning rather than spiritual elevation, of recognising that the I is neither more nor less than every other.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 235.

<sup>35</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “On First Looking into Derrida’s *Glas*,” *Paragraph* 39, no. 2 (2016):” 132.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know),” in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Glas*, 236.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Bennington and David Wills, Translator’s Preface to *Clang* by Jacques Derrida (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021),

These scenes of the interval in *Under the Skin*, as I see it, ironically positions the figure of masculine desire dissolving in the moment before vocalisation, prior to the production of an idea or thesis that would enter into the back-and-forth rationalisation of the dialectical method. Difference is *secreted* by the trembling of mucosal tissue; as an impression or feeling that is registered by the body as a vibration that starts up without warning and fades away before any rational determination or meaning can be attributed to its passing. In a physical sense, difference is secreted as a gliding movement of the tongue and wet vibration of the cords, producing an agglutination of sounds and meanings that flow out of the mouth and into language. But also in a poetic sense, is it also secreted; exuded as a resonance or feeling that resists the finality of signification and dialectical synthesis; a stealthy, clandestine, or secretive force that causes the body to tremble in anticipation of the event. In the interval, sex is read or felt as an agglutination of multiple resonances that sustains the variability of life itself; resonances that resists conception and signification; resonances of a sexual ensemble that start up and fade away without necessarily meaning *to be* anything at all.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This interpretation of sex as multiple resonances is lift from one of Derrida's textual inserts in *Clang. Klang*, which Derrida prints in reference to the German word for "sound", "strain", "note" or "ring" (used as a noun in relation to an impression or feeling), is a form of writing that is without the conception of the concept. It is a dead language that is registered like a body that vibrates in sympathy with a neighbouring sound or object. Sex, I argue, is indeed a deafening *klang*, a resounding and explosive vibration of bodies that starts up and fades away before any rational determination or meaning can be attributed to the nature of the event itself. Jacques Derrida, *Clang*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 16.