

# Skin Flaying and the Transgression of Boundaries

Flaying. A gruesome skin-event highly significant for a discussion of bodily boundaries. The great concern with flayed bodies found in Renaissance and Baroque iconography reflects the epistemological shift induced by the emergence of anatomy, the new discipline that penetrates the frontiers of the human body and labors towards the colonisation of its interiority. A virgin land upon which the new science's authority imposes its flag, the body's secretive spaces are invaded in the same way in which geographical explorations put new territories on the map of the globe. Flaying can be taken as the marker of a passage occurred between the 15th and 17th century in the cultural construction of bodily boundaries and, by extension, in the constitution of modern identity.

## 1. *Ecorches* and the interrupted metamorphosis

The role played in this process by images of flaying is well documented in anatomical atlases as well as in reference to penal punishment. A disturbing convergence emerges between the use of flaying in the production of medical knowledge and as a terminal torture. Flaying is the raw and unforgettable visual indicator of the material and symbolic rupture suffered by the body and of its subsequent reconfiguration as an individuality sealed within an impenetrable boundary. Whereas the skin of the medieval body was both a porous membrane and a permeable filter enclosing a human made of the same flowing matter as the universe s/he inhabited, the violently removed skin of 16th and 17th century *ecorches*<sup>(1)</sup> represents the irremediable cut that objectifies bodies and uproots them from the forces of creation and destruction that kept them within a system of correspondences, affinities, sympathies, attraction and repulsion with the entire cosmos. According to Claudia Benthien (2002) the skin was still considered a permeable surface well into the 18th century. It was then that the development of medicine and hygiene culminated into a closed skin demarcating an impermeable skin-tight individual. It is flaying however that turns bodies into things interrupting the endless transmutation they are capable of. As the scalpel removes the skin, the modern body begins. No longer *terra incognita*, it now functions instead of existing, its exposed interiority no longer a mystery but a system of mechanical parts (Foucault 1973). For philosopher Jose Gil (1978, 1998) flaying is the iconic expression of an epistemological change: the evacuation of body's power of metamorphosis and the establishment of science's new regime of signs.

One of the most famous *ecorche* is Juan Valverde's 'the masked man'. A portrayal of a body to all intent alive holding a knife in one hand and in the other his own skin, as if it was a coat or a mask. About this image, contained in Salamanca and Lafreri (1560), Gil writes: 'Here he stands, Valverde's flayed, brandishing his skin, as if a strange force had obliged him to inflict this torment onto himself. This force exists; it is called science' (Gil 1998). Like many other similar images, this flayed creature exhibits the horror of the terminal cut whose effect is to solidify the flows that traverse bodies. Skinless, stripped of their surface of inscription and at the mercy of modern forces, bodies are terminally objectified into 'the body'. No longer plural. Upon them the scientific discourse enforces methods of investigation that leave no recess untouched, nor secret unveiled. The obscenity of the far too visible, exposed by the anatomist, constructs this body as an object of observation. Matter without a soul cast against a soul that rejects matter, this body becomes the reified container where subject and consciousness coincide in a skintight trap.

## 2. The myth of Marsyas

The iconographical roots of flayed bodies are found in a mannerist elaboration of classical themes, such as Hercules holding a lion's skin and especially the myth of Marsyas, the satyr who dared to challenge Apollo in a musical contest and as a punishment was flayed alive. The myth of Marsyas has been analysed as a tale pointedly expressing the preoccupation generated by the new science (Sawday 1995). Cultural historian Edith Wyss (1996) offers an historical interpretation by asking which symbolism this tale that so utterly fascinated Renaissance and Baroque artists may contain for our contemporary sensibilities. Embedded on a shared understanding of the edifying value of ancient mythology, its narration of *hubris* and punishment never fails to arouse a morbid fascination; the richness of its allegory always ready to be peered

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over, probed and peeled of its many layers. In the 14th century, in line with the didactic purpose of the myth, the flaying of the satyr was seen as signifying ‘the exposure of Marsyas’s errors, the baring of his true worthless self’ (Wyss 1996), thus posing the issue as a contest between error and truth. Another interpretation suggests that the flaying was necessary in order to bring forth Marsyas’ inner worth. In any case, the shedding of the outer layer was deemed necessary to reveal the truth hidden within. This allegory became widely popular in the mid 16th century thanks to the revival of the neoplatonic metaphor which compared Marsyas to Socrates. Elaborated by, among others, Pico Della Mirandola and Erasmus of Rotterdam, for whom Christ himself was a ‘wondrous Silene’, this theme expressed the inverted link between superficial appearance and hidden knowledge. As if truth, wisdom and beauty were always disguised beneath an ugly appearance and accessible only via a penetrative and interpretative action.

3. The paradigm surface vs. depth

Driven by the desire to reveal the hidden within the body, both Apollo and the anatomist’s act of flaying equates the surface/skin and the always deceiving world of appearance that must be removed to reach the real truth. As Gil puts it, this entails a ‘general imperative toward representation’. No wonder that the opposition between surface and depth is described by psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (1989) as the epistemological obsession that has marked Western patterns of thought since the Renaissance. This dominant paradigm is based on the polarization between margins-surface on one side and core-depth on the other, with the latter standing for the ‘real truth’ obtainable only via the flaying of the surface. Not only does this paradigm configure the acquisition of knowledge as a movement from the periphery to the centre; it also presupposes that the surface is always derivative, secondary and less truthful than the depth. In other words, what we face here is the problem of representation, whereby the surface is taken as what represents and the depth as the ‘real thing’ that is represented. Thus, flaying leads us straight to the uneasy relationship between expression and content. In Deleuze and Guattari’s critique, expression is no longer a function of the content. Instead, it is postulated as a force of transformation, continuously unfolding, stretching and shedding. Like a skin.

4. Sciencelore

If the birth of science is so entwined with skin flaying, how does science view skin today? What are its modes of representation of the bodily surface?

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Physiologically, the skin is described as an highly complex living structure that in an adult covers a surface of approx. 18000 sq. cm. and amounts to more than 10% of the whole body weight. It keeps the body temperature balanced, minimises water loss, protects against abrasion, secretes fluids to keep the surface lubricated and, thanks to a selective absorption of substances, defends against potential toxic agents. Mostly, it is as an agent of communication between the body and the world. It is made of two strata. The outer layer (epidermis) is a stratified, continuously renewing tissue, devoid of blood supply and made of various cells that produce also fingernails, toenails and hair. The inner layer (dermis), less rich in cells, is made of elastic fibres and connective tissue floating in a semifluid, amorphous mixture made of collagen, fat cells, blood vessels, sensory receptors and nerve fibres. The great majority of cells in the dermis (keratinocytes) are organised in layers, each corresponding to a progressive stage of differentiation. In normal keratinocytes the transit from one mitosis to the next takes around 300 hours. This means that to migrate from the basal layer to the outer one a normal skin cell takes approximately 14 days. As the cells travel toward the outer strata they progressively change their composition until they reach the external layer where they spend a further 14 days gradually shedding. Thus, while about half of the lifetime of a skin cell is taken by an ongoing differentiation, in the other half the cell exists as a dead component ready to be eventually shed. This process known as keratinisation creates terminally differentiated dead cells that compose the stratum corneum, the outermost layer, a nonliving, semipermeable membrane made of toughened cellular tissue. Here is where the boundaries between the skin and the world become undetectable. As epidermal cells encounter the environment and are shed by desquamation the frontier

turns in a no man's land.

#### 5. Immune system, skin and *horror autotoxicus*

Another scientific discourse that places the skin firmly at the core of the establishment of the bodily boundaries is immunology. As a series of tropes rooted upon, and defining, the establishment of self vs. non-self through a 'semantics of defence and invasion' (Haraway 1991) the discursive construction of the immune system is tightly bound to a notion of the skin as a boundary to patrol and defend in order to preserve the identity of the body/self. The military analogies proliferate. An integral part of our immune system and constantly exposed to potentially dangerous guests (fungi, parasites, bacteria, viruses), the skin is portrayed as a defence organ, either attacked by outer invaders or in revolt against itself. Self preservation depends, crucially, upon a consistently correct distinction between self and non self. However when the delicate mechanism of feedback that regulates immune system's communication breaks down, the body begins to misunderstand the incoming messages and mistakes itself for a foreign organism. This confusion can instigate a chain of events culminating in self destruction. The organism ends up being, literally, in revolt against itself: *horror autotoxicus*. A notable example of *horror autotoxicus* is psoriasis, a disease that traps the skin in a vicious circle of hyper-production of cells, itching, scratching and further cellular proliferation. While in normal conditions between 40% and 60% of skin cells are actively reproducing at any time, in a body affected by psoriasis the whole 100% of the cells multiply continuously, speeding up the process of differentiation from 300 hours to a mere 36. What immunology reads as a misunderstanding between self and non self can be seen, however as a 'disease of speed and excess' (Taylor 1997). Here skin's intensities, responsible for cellular hyper-proliferation, generate an accumulation of non living matter at the boundary with the world. The speed increases, the surface breaks down, the skin returns to the cosmos.

#### 6. Skin as a membrane

The skin can be rethought by borrowing the image of the molecular membrane. Biochemistry sees membranes as chemically active agents instrumental to the production of a 'notion of an 'inside' and of an 'outside'' (Anzieu 1989), and thus of a sense of self. Anatomically the membrane is 'a nonspatial division between two adjacent spaces' that "separates two regions of different constitution' (Elkins 1999). While the skin is considered as that which divides a living inside from a nonliving outside, a membrane instead divides outside from outside and inside from inside. By considering the skin as a membrane we therefore emphasise its osmotic qualities. Indeed, they are very similar. Both unfold; both possess no identifiable boundaries; both communicate with the outside by contact, pressure and stretching; both self reproduce by differentiation. For Elkins the affinity between skin and membranes is such to consider the skin no longer a part of the body but a 'condition of its intelligibility'. As the human body develops through progressive unfoldings, invaginations, enclosures and layering, the involvement of the skin with other organs makes it unsustainable to pinpoint precisely where organs ends and skin starts. All these movements produce bodily outcomes that 'quickly become too various to sustain the inside/outside polarity' (Elkins 1999). The effect, at once material and semiotic, is that the skin is eventually peeled off from its role of barrier. Not only does it cease to be the boundary that separates surface and depth and divides 'what we are and what we are not', but it may be argued that the skin itself 'is the body, and we ourselves are skin' (Elkins 1999).

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#### 7. Matter in movement. Skin's strata, renewal, becoming

The skin is layered matter in unrelenting movement, made of uncountable strata traversed by flows of particles. Strata, renewal, movement. Strata of skin unfolding into other strata. Renewing layers. Movement of cells migrating toward the surface, proceeding towards their dissolution at the border with the world, a movement of becoming imperceptible. This description of the skin echoes what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) say about stratification, 'the creation of the world from chaos, a continual, renewed creation'. Similarly, skin's renewal and movement can be read as spatio-temporal becoming. Rhythms, speeds, unfoldings. As far as skin cells are concerned, the bodies that are us are constantly coalescing with the world. Dead skin cells in proximity of the atmosphere enter into composition with other cells, substances, particles, molecules, bodies, to form more or less articulate entities and contribute to their increment or demise. As its cells dissolve into air the skin becomes the world. The all-encompassing, lovely debris that makes up 90% of house dust.

## Notes

(1) From the French 'flayed', 'a figure in which the muscles are represented as stripped of the skin, for scientific or artistic study' (Gil 1998). As reported by Gil, 'the first flayed to appear was in a work by Mondino, a Bolognese doctor' in 1319. See the images made by great anatomists like Andrea Vesalio, the author of the *De humani corporis fabrica*, published in 1543.

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