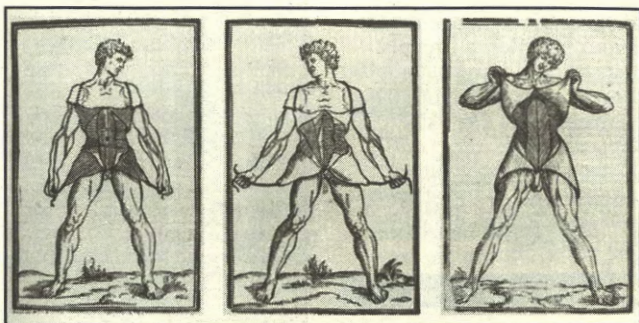


# Skinny dipping in the semiotics pond

*A study of the meaning of skin*

Steven Connor's reluctance to try to resolve, let alone systematise, the polymorphous topic of the skin is undoubtedly the strong point of his book. What could be annoying to some—the lack of a linear argument for instance, or a style that at times borders on pedantry—is precisely the book's force. Professor Connor's writing is determined to go under the skin itself, to become what it is trying to describe, to turn into mark, disease, parasite, stain, stigma, but above all to become that very same skin folding it dreams of. Thus, *The book of skin* is made of a multiplicity of layers, each a possible book still to be written. No wonder that, as its title declares, this is a book "of" skin, rather than "on" skin, its structure uncurling apparently away from its subject only to plunge back into it by way of unexpected, daring connections.

Skin has dominated two decades of critical theory, especially French—Lyotard, Deleuze, Serres, Baudrillard, Derrida are all duly quoted—and Professor Connor config-



Male figure holding open the skin of his torso, from Jacopo Berengario da Carpini's *Anatomia* (Bologna, 1521)

ures his enterprise by working his way from the materiality of the skin to the metaphorical expressions. He performs this with a mix of erudition and abandon, like an obsessive epidermiologist for whom a prodigious inventory is nothing without the pleasure of digression.

The effect is centrifugal. Skin disintegrates into a myriad of chronicles, myths and narratives woven by Professor Connor into an encyclopaedic tapestry along with alchemy, hysteria, the shroud, itches and witches, the anatomy of colours, medical folklore, tat-

tooing, maternal impression, tactility, aromatherapy and moles (to name but a handful of the topics covered).

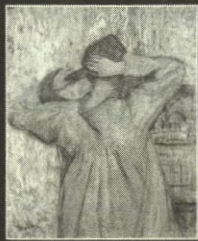
However, the fragmentary and inchoate skinscape that Professor Connor evokes is always related to specific treatments of skin and their histories. Indeed, the basic reason for our fixation with skin lies in an organic explanation that skin, brain and sex are generated by the same embryonic layer. Hence, as psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu has claimed, all human life can be said to develop through its experience of, and encounters with, other skins, other surfaces.

The many roles of skin—as a social marker, an embodiment of a threshold, a shared terrain of coding and interpretation, a material-semiotic form of cultural processes that shape identity, a fetishised object of separation and displacement, a site of socio-symbolic inscriptions—cannot but reverberate in the imagination of artists and curators who have been using the skin to pursue a circuit between surface and depth. To rethink the skin beyond the many competing explanations means therefore to question the paradigms at the core of thought. Professor Connor's book is an erudite and poetic homage to the history and meanings of skin, readable and touchable, stretched and unavoidably marked, through time.

**Betti Marenko**

□ "Skin: texture/textuality/word/image", an interdisciplinary three-day conference on the significance of Skin, organised by the University of London Institute of English Studies School of Advanced Study, is being held 13-15 April 2004 at the Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU. For details: ☎ +44 (0)20 7862 8675, fax +44 (0)20 7862 8720, email: ies@sas.ac.uk

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Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Toilette*, 1891

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