

## Skin

*Ugo Volli*

All living beings, from single cells to human beings, are improbable organisations from a thermodynamic point of view. They are destined to degrade and blend with their environment. That is why the surface that separates them from the world is essential: not only does it safeguard the difference (physical, chemical etc.) between the organism and the world, preventing dispersion, but it actively produces it, introducing certain compounds in the living being, expelling others, and gathering information from the environment with special receptors, which will then process these communications, influencing the organism, etc. This is therefore a complex place of relations: it is, at the same time, and for different reasons, the space of *disjunction* and *conjunction* from/with the world.

In human beings, this junction is the skin. This place has become more important and significant because human beings are "nude monkeys" (Morris), rare mammals without any fur. Human skin, not concealed by fur should therefore *naturally* always be in view - a place of interaction not only biologically with the environment, but also culturally with society. We become purple or pale, we stretch our skin into a smile or knot our forehead when we are puzzled. In spite of this function, or perhaps because of it, there is no human tribe which simply leaves the skin bare, i.e. leaves the skin visible in its natural state. They all perforate it, cut it, produce scars, paint it, partly or wholly depilate it, perfume it, insert extraneous elements into it such as stones or metal rings, cover certain zones of the skin (often almost all of it) according to various degrees of obligation, with those skin prostheses that we call clothes, leaving just a glimpse of some highly eroticised strips.

So, for all human societies, skin is first of all a surface for inscriptions, a place for writing. It has very probably been that before it was discovered that other surfaces, such as the walls of caves could be used.. Not to mention artificial supports such as clay tablets, paper, papyrus or parchment (the latter in turn produced from tanned animal skin). To write on the skin, cut it, paint it or mark it, is not, first of all, a purely aesthetic operation, in the sense of the beautician but not of the aesthetologist, as we

believe today (although most of our practices do not actually point in that direction). It is rather an act of identification, a marking which establishes that a particular body belongs to a tribe or clan, to an age group or to a social role, or it establishes its relationship with a certain divinity or its vocation toward a purpose. This is why we are so impressed that tattoos are indelible: and, it is due to this that Kafka's terrible metaphor in the "Penal Colony" describes the human condition through the death sentence of an individual, executed by a machine that writes its sentence on his skin.

Whether it is written on voluntarily or not, for us the skin is always a reading place: on it we decipher sex and age, beauty and fatigue, ethnic origin and symptoms of illnesses. It causes desire or estrangement, disgust or tenderness. It is, all in all, the place where the sense of the basis of human relations is fixed - even if we are usually unaware of looking at it and think we can see the person underneath it. But a person, as etymology teaches us, is a surface category, derived from *prosopon*, the mask (as ever skin in most cases) that by itself transforms the face of an actor into another.

As it is located explicitly over this background, and explores it in a very original manner, the artistic work of Dario Neira is particularly interesting. His creations detaches skin from its contact with the body's integrity and look at it for what it is: a complicated, rough surface, full of imperfections and individualities. Sometimes Neira restricts himself to reading the skin, and making us see it as a natural object, perhaps using the techniques of state-of-the-art medical diagnosis to estrange and re-materialise it. In other cases, Neira uses the skin as a support. With this surface, rather with numerous diversely imperfect epidermises, imaginary words and 'marks' are composed. What clearly emerges in these cases, is indeed writing, the intimate relationship between skin and writing. In one case or another, a skin art shows us the problematic relationship between body and subject. The material nature of the body, skin in this case, exhibits the fact that every human being is (also) a thing, an object that can be manipulated and used for purposes that do not concern it, like a sheet of paper or a blackboard. To recall this fact through an artistic work means making a problem of our notion of humanity ("as an end, not a means" said Kant). Not in an attempt to deny it, but to remember how it is in fact so often compromised and refuted. That is Kafka's point: we, the inventors of language and writing, often undergo various degrees of degradation by communications operators referred to brands,

linguistic and non-linguistic goods. To make us reflect about this and face up to the elementary mechanism that can turn us into things to be written over, is the sense and importance of Neira' s artistic project.

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