

The cultural phenomenon of SKIN

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Concentric models of the universe are known to have existed in ancient times and cultures to explain mankind's place in the world. The skin defines the border between the body, or innermost circle, and the outside world. A ritualized question and answer tradition, expressed in the form of riddles, ensured that occult knowledge of the origins and composition of the world was passed to the next generation. Their pictorial language interprets the human body as the microcosm and the universe as the macrocosm. A house is between the two - a mesocosm. In other words, the link between a person's immediate and more distant surroundings. Riddles and riddle rituals are based on mythical concepts whereby the world is created by the dismemberment of a mythical hero from whose parts the cosmos is fashioned. Myths of this kind occur throughout the Indo-European world: for example in the hymns of ancient India's *Rigveda*, the sacred knowledge of the Brahmins, or the ancient Icelandic *Edda*, a collection of sayings and songs of the gods and heroes. The core idea on which the extant texts are based is a correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, the concept that universe and body are designed to the same pattern. These ideas are expressed as analogies:

Earth – flesh;
Water – blood;
Dew – sweat;
Flora – skin, hair;
Rock – bones;
Sun, fire – eyes;
Wind – breath;
Clouds – thoughts;
Sky – head, skull.

These cosmogonic ideas are re-interpreted in the light of the Christian religion in *The Book of Enoch*, a non-canonical *Old Testament* book. The starting point is now mankind and how he was created: the section *Questions on the creation of Adam* records, "On the sixth day I commanded my wisdom to make man from seven elements: first, to make his flesh from earth, secondly his blood from dew, thirdly his eyes from the sun, fourthly his bones from rocks, fifthly his mind from the speed of the angels and the clouds, sixthly his arteries and hair [understood as adjuncts to the skin] from the grass of the earth, seventhly his soul from my spirit and the wind."

The body in its material and qualitative dimensions

The *skin* belongs to the *body* in the dualistic view of body and soul common since ancient times (*soma, corpus / pneuma, spiritus*). An early example is to be found in Homer: a scar on his leg serves as a physical mark that identifies Odysseus on his home-coming. To Greek philosophers, and to the Romans, who derived their philosophy from Greek works, the *body* was three-dimensional, visible and material: according to Plato, something "which one can push against and feel." But there are "also things with no body," namely "incorporeal ideas." This distinction persists thereafter. Since Aristotle it has been connected with the question of the relationship between the body and the basic principles of form and matter. The Aristotelian view is that all bodies consist of matter and form. Taking the more specific meaning of body as the human body, Plato applies the concept of body to the cosmos, which is likewise deemed to be a living entity endowed with a soul and reason. Similarly, he

compares the (sick) body to the (sick) state. The Greek concept that the cosmos has a living soul is later set against the Christian concept of the faithful as the body of Christ. In the Middle Ages the Classical definitions of the body are adopted. Initially they are based upon Plato's *Timaios*, a treatise on the nature of the world, the elements and the human body. Aristotelian teachings on form and matter were added later. Since the dawn of modern times the body, as an object of elementary scientific study, has increasingly attracted the attention of individual disciplines. But the relationship between body, mind and soul, between Nature and the world of ideas or morals (Kant) remains a subject for philosophers. Not until the 19th century does psychology begin to stake its claim.

There is an epistemological necessity to distinguish between the physical organism and the perceived body. In relation to the skin, three different aspects are to be kept separate: the body's functional frame of reference, the appearance of the skin and current perceptions of body and skin.

Skin (hide) and house

The semantic relationship between (modern German) HAUT and HAUS is significant when looking at the topos "skin as man's primary cover"/ "house as his secondary cover". That the etymology of these two lexemes is closely related is apparent in the fact that both have a significant unit of meaning (sememe) denoting "forming a cover/outer layer". The *Duden Semantic Dictionary* documents how human experience of the world is stored, ordered and categorized in language.

"The Common Germanic word HAUS, in Old and Middle High German hūs, corresponding with the English *house* and Swedish *hus*, belongs to the highly diversified word group derived from the Indo-Germanic root (s)keu meaning *cover, surround* (cf. the lexeme Scheune (*barn*)). Closely related Germanic words are Hose (*hose/trousers*) and Hort (*refuge*).

The SKIN (German Haut) is defined as the *covering* of the human body. The Old Germanic word – Middle and Old High German hūt, Dutch *huid*, English *hide*, Swedish *hud* – stems from the Indo-Germanic root (s)keu - augmented by 't' – meaning *cover, surround* (cf. Scheune (*barn*)). [Translator's note: The English word *skin* comes from the Proto-Germanic **skintha* meaning to *flay, take the skin off* (cf. modern German *schinden* with the same meaning) which gradually replaced the native word *hide* among English-speakers; *hide* the noun now refers to *animal skins*, but the verb *hide* still contains the meaning *to cover from view*]. Closely related Germanic words are Hode(n) (*testicles*) and Hütte (*hut*). In non-Germanic languages there are similarities with e.g. Greek *kýtos cover, skin, receptacle* and Latin *cutis skin*."

Some examples from world culture reveal just how deeply the topos that human beings are covered by vertical, concentric layers is rooted in our collective consciousness. The humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti writes in his *Della Architettura* (1485) that the body of an ideal building should be covered in a "skin" made of many layers. And in the 1980s the artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser describes architecture as man's "third skin" – the first skin being the body's own tissue, with clothing forming a kind of "second skin." The concept of the body as house and receptacle of the soul has its origins in early Christianity and world-views that pre-date it. In the iconography of visual arts, the soul is represented by a bird or small child that, on death, leaves the house of the body via the door of the mouth (e.g. in "Death of Mary" genre paintings; cf. also El Greco's 1586 work *The Burial of Count Orgaz*). The image of an outer covering is also present in the structure of thought whereby the human soul moves up or down through concentric spheres (Dante's *Divine Comedy*). As late as 1835, the title figure in Georg Büchner's drama *Danton's Death* uses the image of the outer

covering when, facing his imminent execution, he says, “We are all buried alive and interred like kings in three or four coffins; under the skies, in our houses, in our shirts and jackets. We scrape at the coffin lid for fifty years.”

The skin’s memory

The concept that the skin is humankind’s immediate covering, serving to separate his (physical) body containing its living soul from the outside world, proves to be an extremely old figure of thought – the self *inside* the skin. Various figures of speech are based on this idea, e.g. “to jump out of one’s skin”, “to get under one’s skin”. The concept of the self *inside* the skin is especially strong in pars-pro-toto expressions to describe a person’s character in terms of their skin; for example, someone may be “thick-skinned” or, conversely, “thin-skinned”. The extended world model then adds second, third and fourth skins, i.e. clothing, house and environment, to the first skin.

Marks and scars from injuries the body has received are stored in the individual’s skin memory. But these marks also create a characteristic signature in history’s skin memory, where the abuse of people and their bodies is stored. Where the Nazis were in power, these scars testify to ill-treatment and the tattooing of numbers on concentration camp inmates (1st skin). But other stages preceded the physical marks: an attack on clothing (2nd skin), in that Jews were forced to wear a yellow Star of David, an attack on Jewish houses and businesses (3rd skin) and the ideological stigmatization and virulent anti-Jewish rhetoric in the political and social spheres (4th skin).

By contrast with concentration camp detainees, for whom the tattooed number meant humiliation and death, having their blood group tattooed on the upper left arm was meant to ensure survival for members of the elite Waffen SS. On the dividing line between life and mortal danger, prison and camp detainees discovered that the assault on their bodily integrity and that which was inscribed in pain (F. Nietzsche) lingers longest in the skin’s memory. Clearly alluding to Franz Kafka’s novella *In the Penal Colony*, in which a harrow-like apparatus for capital punishment etches with needles the law that has been transgressed onto the condemned man’s back, Primo Levi describes the tattooing of numbers in Auschwitz: “The procedure was not very painful and took no longer than a minute, but it was traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was perfectly clear: this is an ineradicable sign, you’ll never get out of here; this is the brand put upon slaves and on animals for the slaughter; and that is what you are now. You no longer have a name; this tattoo is your name. The violence of the tattoo was primitive, entirely an end in itself, designed solely with intent to demean. Weren’t the three cloth numbers sewn onto trousers, jacket and winter coat enough? No, they weren’t enough: there had to be more, a wordless message, so that the innocent could feel his judgment being carved into his flesh. And this represented a return to barbarity that was even more disorientating for orthodox Jews, because, in order to distinguish Jews from “Barbarians”, Mosaic Law (*Leviticus* 19, 28) forbids tattoos (*The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986). A year before he, like Levi, committed suicide. Jean Améry describes in his autobiographical reflections *Beyond Crime and Punishment* (1977) torture and the tattooing of numbers suffered in the concentration camp as severe violations of the victim’s skin which resulted in a total loss of “trust in the world.” “The borders of my body are the borders of my self being. The surface of my skin seals me against the outside world: if I am to have trust in the world, my skin must only feel what I want it to feel. The first time I am hit destroys this trust in the world ... I wear on my left forearm my Auschwitz number; it’s shorter than the Pentateuch or the Talmud, and yet it conveys more information.”

Marks on the skin play a significant role in any history of the triangular trans-Atlantic trade

in the 18th and first third of the 19th century; these shipping routes were used by merchants like the Danish Schimmelmann family, who traded slaves like goods and branded them with a sign: “Some men and women, boys and girls were branded on the right breast ... just as many were branded with the sign of the heart on the left breast, heart to heart, as it were. Other parts of the body thought suitable were the shoulders or thighs, branded at random on the right or left side. We do not know who designed the mark of ownership, an S in a heart, meaning the “Society”, i.e. the Royal Appointment Guinea Company. The purpose was obvious: everyone could see at once whose property the branded slave was. If the slave was sold, the buyer presumably added his own brand.” (Ch. Degn).

Perception and stigmatization of the body

The history of culture and natural science shows that the skin transmits haptic, olfactory, visual, taste and auditory sensations. The “skin self” has intersensory functions, bringing together a number of different sensory perceptions (D. Anzieu). Since the 18th century a fundamental change has been taking place in our perceptions of the human body, leading to a concept of the skin as the outer limits of the body and mirror that can be consulted for diagnostic purposes. In the pre-modern era, the skin was still a boundary not to be crossed, hiding the mysteries inside. Not until the 16th century did people start to challenge the taboo on opening corpses. Andreas Vesalius, personal physician to Karl V and Philipp II, dissected human corpses and animal cadavers, publishing his pioneering treatise *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543. By the late 18th century the study of human anatomy has already lifted the veil of the skin. “That is moment when skin is recognized as an organ, and as a surface for the projection of inner feelings” (C. Benthien). Long before that the skin had been recognized as a place to express social stigmatization, by branding or maiming it. Ever since the late Middle Ages, physical punishment with intent to dishonour had been the logical corollary to the physicality of the concept of honour. In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault demonstrates how European penal systems gradually evolved from a public “feast of torture” to non-public forms of incarceration or penal servitude. “Physical torture relied on terror as a deterrent: physical shuddering, generalized horror and images that were seared in the memories of the spectators like the brand on the cheek or shoulder of the condemned.” From the Age of Enlightenment onwards people began to consider these “painful” punishments to a person’s “skin and hair” to be inhuman, and so branding the skin of delinquents, public lashings or head-shaving etc. were banned in European countries during the first half of the 19th century.

SKIN as a diva: myth – cult - ritual

In the course of its history Western civilization developed an ideal of beauty based on flawless skin, a well-proportioned face and body, and a luxurious head of hair. However, there has been a paradigm shift on the issue of skin colouring: whereas in bygone centuries the ruling classes of the west considered pale skin to be a sign of nobility, documenting as it did that its owner had no need to perform physical, outdoor labour, 20th-century fashion has made a slightly tanned skin desirable, because it speaks of leisure, outdoor sports and health. Members of the middle classes have increasingly come to believe that a youthful appearance spells success, partly taking their cue from show business celebrities. Nowadays anti-ageing formulas are supposed to achieve what most people in the industrialized west want: to grow old without looking older. Young skin despite a ripe old age – the fulfilment of an age-old dream (paintings such as *The Fountain of Youth* by Lukas Cranach the Elder). The logical consequence was that the ideal became a fetish, became deified and this god-like status of beautiful skin created a *myth*: the myth of eternal smoothness. The main figure in this myth is the diva Wrinkle-Free; placed on a pedestal, this figure is much revered in industrial countries

with a high standard of living. A full-blown *Cult* of Beautiful Skin has grown up around this mythical figure, and its worship is now bound up with strict forms of sacrifice: regular use of skin care, cosmetics and exfoliants; massages and wellness programmes, diets, purges etc. The cult sites dedicated to the Skin Diva have names like beauty farm, spa hotel, cosmetic institute, beauty salon. A *ritual* has been created, a quasi-ceremonial set of rites comprising words, pictures and actions: permanent demonstration of the normative ideal of beauty in the media, advertising for cosmetics, beauty treatments, plastic surgery (injections to treat wrinkles, face-lifts).

Anti-ageing – a neo-mythological programme that, as it turns out, serves not only the cause of making skin healthy and beautiful, but is the marketing concept for an entire industry.

The skin as canvas

For a long time, aesthetics - the “study of the beautiful” - was more or less perplexed by the view of the human body as the scene of violent acts, and the sight of maimed and damaged skin. The 18th century “Laocoon debate” on the adequate representation of pain in the visual arts documents the dilemma. The mannerist and baroque styles of art had already distanced themselves somewhat from the harmonious artistic ideals of classical and renaissance times and in the middle of the 19th century Karl Rosenkranz, a follower of Hegel, developed his *Aesthetic of the Ugly*. But the curiosity born of a mixture of shock and fascination at the sight of crippled or deliberately altered bodies never formed part of the higher levels of European culture, but remained a matter for fairs and circuses. In the early 20th century the first people to resist being terrorized by the notion that beautiful skin is smooth skin were the artists of the decadent and avant-garde – Umberto Eco speaks of a “Triumph of ugliness” – and since the 1970s they have been joined by a subculture of gothics and punks whose aim is to provoke bourgeois society. As a consequence of far less inhibited attitudes to the human body, an increasing number of people in the middle ranges of society have discovered pleasure in showing off their skin and in flouting traditional images of the body.

Whereas among primitive peoples, tattoos and decorative scars act as cult, ethnic and social signifiers, offering information about their tribe, age etc., the “tataus” that James Cook brought back to Europe from Polynesia in 1775 re-emerged in the mid 19th century as a new decorative fashion among the members of the upper class. King Edward VII, George V and members of Tsar’s family all had tattoos. Traditionally tattoos were and still are the province of sailors and the inmates of prisons or penal camps, whereby the finished product ranges from simple “teardrops” to skilfully executed body art. Unlike branding, scarification and extreme forms of body modification (“bod-mod”) which remain on the fringes of subcultures, tattoos and piercings are now expressions of an increasingly popular new enthusiasm for body art. Typical motivations are: a search for self through pain, the creation of a coherent self-image, permanently fixing memories, participation in an inclusive group aesthetic, heightened body feeling and erotic enhancement. The all pervasive culture of commercialism is to blame for the fact that firms now pay to have their logo branded onto the skin of human billboards. Decorative scarification in tribal societies or subcultures in the western world are not to be confused with clinical forms of self-abusive behaviour; in these cases patients cut their own forearms to experience a relief from mental pain and the root cause is a psychopathology.

Heinrich Heine, writer and mocker, included a critical farewell to the culture of smoothness in the prologue to his *Harz Journey*: “Farewell, you smooth halls/smooth men! Smooth women!/I want to climb the mountains,/And laugh as I look down on you”. In 1988 the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze published a book with a programmatic title *Le pli (the wrinkle)* in which he – starting with Leibniz and the age of baroque – rejects the smooth line

for both thought systems and cultural models: “The manifold is not only something with many parts, but something that is folded in many ways ... we need a “cryptography” capable of looking into the folds of material and reading in the wrinkles of the soul.”

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