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Skin

Asja Szafraniec

Critique today, in one aspect at least, forks out in two directions, differing with regard to the analyzed “object.” The first prong remains faithful to the transcendental focus inherited from Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, addressing the categories in which we lift the world out of chaos (the criteria, the dividing lines, the modalities of thought). The critique that is affirmative and nonetheless intervening is one which attends to the appropriateness of those dividing lines and the way in which they influence our understanding, in the hope of discovering spaces for adjustment, for creative supplementation, for emphasis, for affirmation. The second prong abandons the Kantian model as detracting our attention from the empirical and proposes to focus instead on the analysis of states of affairs. While its call for getting closer to the “matters of concern” – a renewed empiricism – is utterly convincing, it remains to be examined whether attention to “matters of concern” requires an abandoning of the transcendental inquiry (Latour 2004, 231).

This question becomes particularly urgent when it comes to categories of “things” (not necessarily the scientific “objects” examined by Bruno Latour) that seem to have the characteristics of “matters of concern,” but also function as categories in terms of which we perceive other “things.” Skin might be one example of such a “thing,” in which, on a micro-level, the critical tension

162 between the empirical and the transcendental plays out. Skin is a bodily organ that distributes stimuli and protects the inside from the outside. But it is also a name for a set of mental constructs, each of which is a dispositif we use to regulate our relation to the outside world. At its most extreme, skin is a name for any surface that topologically produces sense by the sheer trajectory it traces (which makes it a condition of possibility of what it separates – constituting the in- and outside) – a plane of **immanence**. Since the ways in which it is construed are multiple and complex and crucially impact our view of the world, skin must also be seen as a matter of concern. It is the figure for the most urgent political, ethical, and philosophical problems of our time: for our ethical and ecological relation to other beings endowed with (another, different) skin, for the political issues of integration or assimilation, and finally for the understanding of the origin of human subjectivity and the nature of our relation to the world. As a surface on which an organism negotiates between the inside and the outside skin is also a figure for “**work**” as artistic production. On how we understand skin – its degrees of permeability, its capacity for **affect**, its interaction with its inside and outside – depends what we will be able to say about both the organism and the world. Often misunderstood in terms of a neutral partition separating an organism from its environment, skin remains on the outskirts of critical discourse. But this phenomenal and semantic region and the tensions that it hosts, might be said to respond in many ways to the objectives contemporary critique sets for itself: to find out “who ‘we’ might be” (Kaiser, Thiele, and Bunz 2014) (Are we contained inside our skins? Is the outside really outside?). Also, different conceptions of skin lead not only to different ideas about the need for, the manner, and the desired degree and trajectory of any possible intervention, **affirmation**, re-orientation, etc. but also to different ideas about the way in which affirmation is also intervention, about what precisely should be affirmed and where (by what affirming instance).

Two currents of thought that critique draws on today refer to skin as a site of potentially affirmative receptivity: the French tradition (Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan) and a tradition influenced by a certain understanding of "Romanticism" (Wittgenstein, Cavell, Benjamin). They do so in seemingly opposed ways: on the one hand, the French investment in difference, on the other, the Romantic yearning for seamlessness. For the first current, skin is always an operator of difference, the place where difference is thematized, endorsed, and amplified. For the "Romantically" inflected philosophies, in contrast, skin, and analogous surfaces or textures are so many figures of yearning for effortless alignment with the world, the site of a desire for seamlessness, for the closing of the skeptical gap – in other words for a disappearance or at least an attenuation of difference (Cavell 2002, 61; Benjamin 1999, 590). Each of those approaches suggests a possible response to the problems of our relation to the world (and to the pervasive question: How do we change the world?). And each does so through its concern with receptivity and with the production of sense. The response of the French-inspired approaches has often been taken to be "through difference" – through differing from the world, distancing or some form of collective negation of some aspect of the world (an affirmation of one aspect is usually a negation of another). Against this backdrop, the response of the "Romantic" approaches, in terms of perfect alignment with the world, might be taken to suggest a form of (political) quietism: the absorption of the world as it is in its entirety, without negation.

Jacques Lacan's famous gloss on our embodiment, that we are "sacks of skin," when not properly contextualized, might be taken to invite a reading in which skin is seen as a boundary between the self and the world, an individuating container in which something inner (and deeper) is encapsulated (Bernet 2000). This initial interpretation of the sack's relation to the world (and to other "sacks") needs to be revised. Clearly, skin is not simply a continuous layer of tissue where impressions from the

164 environment accumulate, but rather a *selective barrier* permitting economic exchange of information, including the emergence of information to the outside (pigment, wrinkles, sweat). But for some thinkers this “membranous” reading of skin in terms of transmission, recording, selection, and exchange also needs to be qualified: for Gilles Deleuze, skin is a transcendental surface (addressed by Deleuze’s appropriation of Paul Valéry’s statement that “skin is the deepest” [Deleuze 1990, 103]). As opposed to the understanding of skin in terms of “economic exchange,” skin in this approach does not mediate between independently established entities (as in self and another self): instead, it constitutes them topologically as such – it is the origin of their sense. In so defining skin, Deleuze makes it an empirical figure for all immanent lines of discernment, critical partitions, for all “critical” surfaces.

A somewhat different course is charted by the “Romantically” inflected philosophies of skin (Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Benjamin). Among those authors, skin stands for the way in which the affinity between the world and me, as a being endowed with skin, is construed, be it skeptically, phantasmatically, or ordinarily. Unfathomability of the inner (and thus also of the outer) feeds skepticism, so it’s preferable to focus on surface instead of depth. “Wittgenstein wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge” (Wittgenstein 2003, 71; 2012, 238; Cavell 2002, 61). Consequently, the Romantics approach skin as a site of organic suture to the world, with the world conceived as the second skin, enveloping the first. This Romantic yearning for spiritual osmosis, being enfolded, seamlessness, and **plasticity** seems, on the one hand, the purest affirmation that we can have: it accepts that to our **terran** existence there is no alternative. But on the other hand, its potential for intervention seems to be attenuated – or at least an ethical rather than a political one.

Two points of convergence suggest that these approaches can be reconciled and that the Romantic approach can regain its potential for intervention. In some of the approaches (on both the French and the Romantic side), skin is not conceived as a membrane or a biological epidermis but rather a fabric (see Walter Benjamin's question whether it is to be seen as a "net" or a "mantle" [Benjamin 2006, 96] and Stanley Cavell's injunction to "word the world together" [Cavell 1994, 126] – so that it doesn't fall apart, so to speak), suggesting that affinity to the world comes from human actions and words, is fabricated or woven (see Benjamin's figures of glove, sock, etui, etc.). That those approaches meet in their understanding of skin in terms of language and "fabric" offers possibilities for affirmative intervention: "wording the world together" is not just letting it be as it is.

Another point of convergence between the two approaches that might contribute to the understanding of aspects of affirmation is their move away from thinking about skin as a border or a container so as to focus on the figure of reversibility or alignment in the negative. Walter Benjamin pleads for recasting the opposition between inside and outside: an important figure in his work is the "turning inside out" (Friedlander 2012, 104) where the inside reveals itself as its opposite (see also Mondzain 2015). It would perhaps be more appropriate to say that for both traditions, rather than "sacks of skin" (Lacan 2006, 282), we are reversible folds of the world (so that the inner is as political as the outer). The figure of "turning inside out" speaks to Baruch de Spinoza's question of "what a body might do." Suggestive of an unmediated, privileged interaction – on the "inner side" – with each and every aspect of the world, but also of the potentially unlimited reach of the "merely individual," it contests the opposition between the political and the ethical. It indicates that both the "we" of critique and its trajectory might need to be redefined.

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