

and others, will find their positions in the world networks of traffic and consumption. But the extension of the non-places corresponding to them—empirically measurable and analysable non-places whose definition is primarily economic—has already overtaken the thought of politicians, who spend more and more effort wondering where they are going only because they are less and less sure where they are.

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# 8.3

## Reflections on Skin

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity.

—Nietzsche

The deepest thing in man is his skin.

—Paul Valéry

Skin. Surface. What is so deep about skin? What is so profound about surface? What is so superficial about profundity? Though it seems obvious, it is no longer clear ... clear that we know what surface is. Nor is skin any longer transparent. We must, therefore, begin by asking about the point at which we all begin ... and end: the skin. What is skin? As is always

the case, the positive emerges through the negative, and vice versa. Thus, we might rephrase the question: What is not skin?

In the beginning, it is a question of skin. Not yet a question of bones but of skin—dermal layers that hide nothing... nothing but other dermal layers. Humpty Dumpty need not have fallen to be faulted, for every fertilized egg is always already divided between vegetal and animal poles. The process of embryonic development involves cellular division and further differentiation. Through a quasi-cybernetic process governed by preprogrammed DNA, the pluripotentiality of the ovum is limited in ways that allow for the articulation of different organic structures and functions. Cells multiply by division to create a hollow ball called a blastomere.

This sphere eventually invaginates to form a lined pocket comprised of two layers known as the endoderm and the ectoderm, which, in turn, partially peel away to generate a third surface known as the mesoderm. The mature organism develops from these three dermal layers. Since the organism as a whole is formed by a complex of dermal layers, the body is, in effect, nothing but layers of skin in which interiority and exteriority are thoroughly convoluted. [...]

First, there is a closer relationship between transparency and translucence than [Terry] Riley suggests.<sup>1</sup> Though not immediately evident, it is precisely transparency that leads to translucence. It is important to realize that the polarity of surface and depth is isomorphic with the polarity of interiority and exteriority. When depth becomes transparent, it is another surface; and when interiority becomes transparent, it is exteriorized. As everything becomes transparent, depth and interiority vanish. Paradoxically, the result of such radical transparency is not lucidity but translucence. In a certain sense, depth and interiority—even when they remain hidden—secure or ground surface as well as exteriority. If depth is surface and inferiority is exteriority, then the very proliferation of surface renders it not only opaque but enigmatic. This enigma is what renders surface profound.

Second, the profundity of surface and superficiality of profundity make it necessary to rethink both surface and depth. When depth and interiority disappear, surface is transformed. Surface, in other words, no longer can be conceived as it was when it was the opposite of depth and infe-

1 Mark Taylor refers to Terry Riley's lecture held at the symposium *Light Construction* on the occasion of the show of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1995. (editors note)

riority; it becomes something different, something other. Riley offers a gesture toward this insight when he introduces the notion of the veil and, by extension, emphasizes the *between*—or, I would prefer, the liminal character of surface. But no sooner does he offer this notion than he reinscribes it with in precisely the opposites it undoes. The veil, we are told, distances the viewer from the space or forms within and isolates the viewer within the outside world. If, however, it's surface all the way down, then does the membrane any longer separate in this way? I would suggest that we must rethink surface as interface, or, more precisely, interfacing.

Third, interfaces must be read in terms of information processes. With this observation, I return to the question of skin with which I began. Though we usually think of skin as the sack that envelops the body's organs, it is actually the largest organ of the body. This organ is not only the interface where body meets world but, like the organs that develop from it, is the interface of the so-called material and the so-called immaterial. This interface, as noted, is a quasi-cybernetic process governed by preprogrammed DNA. The skin, in other words, is an information process in which material realities appear to be immaterial processes. If, however, the entire organism develops from dermal layers, then all of the organs—even the skeleton itself—are transparent information processes. Information processes are not merely displayed on the screen of the skin but pervade the very depths of the organism. In this play of data, surface and depth, as well as exteriority and inferiority, are reinscribed. Riley is right when he argues that veils veil other veils. But, I believe, he is wrong when he insists that veils separate rather than interface.

To summarize: transparency that becomes translucent; surfaces that become interfaces; interfaces that are informational processes. Herein lies the depth of skin.

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