*Chapter 29*

**Our Posthuman Skin Condition**

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*Epidermal readings*

When we walk along the street our fellow humans appear to us as entities that we immediately determine or define by their skin: old or young, male or female, healthily tanned or sickly pale, scarred or with tattoos, with no, moderate or exaggerated makeup. The skin is the first and often the only part of a person that we see, and more or less acknowledge as a *presence*. A first filter of our social interaction starts with this ‘skin deep’, but somehow still relevant triage. We may not know what is *inside* the head of someone, but the skin shows us their state of mind, emotions, gender, tiredness, age and lots of other details that allow us to do a quick and superficial categorisation. Before anything else we use people’s skin to determine and read who they are. Skin is the first *text* of the other (Derrida 1981, 71), and this superficial act of ‘knowing’ is very often the *only* impression we have of a person. Before language and dialogue, before sharing beliefs, principles, worldviews, and secrets with our fellow humans, we have an *epidermal* encounter with them.

This is the point where I would like to start my *epidermal* *readings*, as a hermeneutic of the posthuman project objectified in film and television. If the Foucauldian archaeology was concerned with inspecting different *layers* of understanding, I, in contrast, will stay on the surface of the *first* *layer* of humans, non-humans, in-humans and posthumans (Herbrechter 2013, 20), to show how changes of our understanding of humanness are reflected in what I call our *posthuman* *skin* *condition*, where *condition* reflects both, the ontological status (a *conditio* post-*humana*) and the ill, abnormal, symptomatic body assessment.

Skin is conspicuously absent from the philosophical discourse. The “superficiality” of our surface is alien to the *grand* *narratives* (Lyotard 1984) of modern philosophy. The Cartesian cut between *res* *extensa* and *res* *cogitans* transformed the skin into a container of matter. Skin shows and determines the *limits* of our body, its externality and its objectifiable artefactuality. *Epidermal* means superficial. The biggest and the most exposed organ of our body is devalued, it is not central for any metaphysical discourse, until, that is, the discourse focuses on skin *colour* and the skin becomes political. But even the liberal and humanist discourse about discrimination has inherited the supposition that something other than skin is essential. In different-coloured bags we, as *homo* *humanus*, share the same *essence*; therefore we should have the same *rights*. Yet even if we are not our skin, the skin can betray us; criminals can be identified by their *fingerprints*. Fingerprints are codes, are small “narrative units” (Barthes 1977, 87) of our criminal readings of the human.

Posthuman representations of skin follow the *utopian* and the *critical* posthumanist discourse[[1]](#footnote-1). Transhuman skin glows in perfection. Frozen in our twenties, with no wrinkles, no hormonal marks, skin is meant to be a perfect package for our enhanced body, and it was one of the first body parts to be altered by technology, via cosmetics and anti-ageing. This is partially because skin is text, is an imprint of the human *curriculum* *vitae* in wrinkles, lines, dark circles. Time and events engrave human skin with signs and symbols. Wrinkles are not only epidermal lines or folds of skin, they are witnesses of our emotions and moods, feared traitors of our age. We spend more time wandering about and caring for our skin than for any other part of our body. So, why and how did the skin become so marginal? It is because we want to hide from the reader, conceal the sad textuality of age. We want to suggest that we are something other than what the other can see, that we have an *essence*, something precious *inside*. We are subjects, therefore not objectifiable by a quick external gaze. We are a consciousness, something more complex and of more worth than we appear to be in the eyes of the other.

Pursuing a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 1981) I will analyse the topics of skin *removal*, *concealing* and *ambiguous* skin, *enhanced* skin, skin-*clock* and skin as a *witness*.

*Skin Removal: Gattaca and Body Worlds*

The particular discursivity of skin, as the container of our identity, is questioned together with the grand narrative of the contemporary metaphysics of DNA in *Gattaca* (1997, directed by Andrew Niccol). The film begins with hyperbolized blades of skin falling in a blue misty light. Vincent, the main protagonist, has to rub and radically clean his skin daily to maintain a fake genetic identity that allows him to pursue his dream of becoming a space pilot. Just as in Luis Buñuel’s film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), the first scene is dominated by an old-fashioned *razor* *blade*. Buñuel’s blade is cutting an eye, the symbol of knowledge and rationality. Niccol’s blade is cleaning a skin, a body, of its genetic identity. The cutting edge symbolized by the razor is once again directed against the *ratio*, or at least against the kind of *ratio* that precipitated our contemporary vision of bioscience, as a panacea that can offer perfect, functional, *manmade* bodies able to support the purposes of our society. Niccol criticizes the 1990’s strong belief in the power of gene technology to transform the world for the good of humanity, by opposing to it the power of a dream, and by highlighting the fact that this latter power is impossible to be situated, determined or explained by our genetic settings. What he actually shows is the abnormality of rationality, the way good intentions may be turned into a total suppression of what makes us human. While *Un Chien Andalou* boycotted any rational explanation of the images shown, and ventured to “open all doors to the irrational” (Buñuel 1983, 103), *Gattaca* focuses on one particular door: the one to our *identity*, and shows the contrast between what can be *rationally* *desirable* for us to be, and what it means to *make* *sense* of what we are. The film is a dichotomised storytelling about a schizophrenic *ratio* as an abstract *goal*-setting mental endeavour, and a concrete *integrative* and transformative self-project. Who or what are (post)humans? The society depicted in *Gattaca* is paradoxically not one where posthumans, as rational creatures, are praised for their rationality. Vincent expects an *interview* to enter the (genetically) select team of space pilots. To his surprise, a drop of *urine* in a funnel of the machine classifies him as *valid*. The *rational*-narrative content of an interview is replaced with the *gene*-narrative, where the person is assessed only on the basis of a pure genetic potentiality. The instrumentalisation of the individual is also emphasised in the figure of the twelve-fingered piano player. When Vincent admires the virtuosic pianist, Irene, his lover, changes the perspective by pointing out: “This piece can be played *only* with twelve fingers”, which suggests that the piano player was created for the music, and not the music for the player. The rational imperatives of perfection set a weird socio-genesis in motion, via eugenics. At the beginning, we are informed about the rational reasons behind the genetic engineering of children. Vincent Freeman, the first child conceived naturally, has a high probability of several disorders, and his life span is predicted to be around 30.2 years. He is considered a genetic failure, not even worth carrying his father’s name. His parents engineer their next child Anton, starting with a morally accepted negative eugenics, aiming to eliminate any genetic diseases and disabilities, while asking the doctor to leave some traits undetermined. The difference between the two brothers in terms of what they are capable of is still considerable, which becomes vividly evident in their ‘game of chicken’: when the boys swim out into the sea as far as they dare, the designed child always wins. The difference between the brothers is their genetic *worthiness*. Genetically enhanced children have the desired *potentiality* for a specific job, like being an astronaut, for example. A form of genetic meritocracy changes the relative significance of the *actual* and the *potential*. An *actual,* demonstrated meritocracy is replaced by a *potential,* pre-supposed genetic one. The “essence” of *Gattaca’s* humans resides in their potentiality. A fierce genetic determinism identifies every child at birth as *valid* or *invalid*. Genotype profiling is used to identify *valids* for professional employment like space travelling. Vincent’s genetic potentiality makes him suitable for no more than the job of a janitor, cleaning the windows of the Gattaca Space Centre and watching the rockets shooting off into space. This nicely illustrates what Günther Anders (1956) described as *Promethean* *shame*, the fact that normal human beings perceive themselves as inferior to machines, or in this case to “manmade” techno-creatures. Vincent describes himself as a ‘Child of Love’, a ‘God’s child’, a ‘faith birth’, or a degenerate, but he has a dream; he wants to be a space pilot. His internal “essential” truth is not matching his in-*validity*. The paradox develops when the in-*valid* is helped by a *valid* invalid, Gerome Eugene, a manmade swimmer. With all his genetic perfection, Gerome only had a *silver* medal, he was the *second* best, and this disillusionment, together with “the burden of perfection”, made him attempt suicide. Half paralyzed, he lets Vincent use his *skin*, hair, urine, blood, and hence his genetic *identity*. All those superficial scraps of the paralyzed Eugene, his “superior body matter” are integrated into the new Gerome-Vincent. Customized urine pouches for frequent substance test, fingertip blood sachets for security checks, vials filled with scraps of skin, blades of hair and nails, are all what matters. Vincent’s former genetic identity needs to be constantly erased; a scrubbing of the self to a *tabula* *rasa*, so that the *cleaning* of the skin equals a *rejection* of (a particular) identity. The old skin is a traitor; the new skin is a passport to the stars, especially to a particular one, Titan, that Vincent describes as if it were his alter ego: “there is a thick cloud around, maybe there is nothing underneath”. The superficiality of the thick cloud is comparable to that of the body matter that determines what a person is in Gattaca.

The superficiality of skin is complemented by the prominent use of water as an element that represents un-structure, incertitude, power of (self)genesis, the fluidity that transcends our representation of human and transhuman. Raw, murky, dark water is a medium of social and personal competition between the engineered and non-engineered child. Urine, a watery dejection of our body replaces the *curriculum vitae* as the story of life achievements. Connected with the topic of identity, the idea of *conception* reoccurs, from the biological/engineered to the self-conception, or personal recreation of identity. *In* *utero* conception is socially regarded as an in-*valid* one. For Vincent ‘the closest thing to being in a womb’ is the perspective of losing the body’s weight in space and its external significance. Vincent and Eugene become one, their destinies fused in the end, parallel departures depicting ways of leaving the Earth: when Vincent starts his voyage to the stars, Eugene’s life ends in the symbolic fire. At the end of this narrative, consuming the nonsense of genetic determinism, and underlining the importance of individual choice and sense-making, Niccol goes beyond the genes, into the atoms, and concludes: “every atom of our body was once part of a star”.

Another kind of skin removal, a more literal one, is present in a posthuman representation of death and dead bodies. Plastified human corpses populate the “Body World” Exhibition, breaking our cultural taboos of dealing with death and dead people, scientifically preserving and exposing bodies in an oddly aesthetic endeavour. Public appetite made it a cultural phenomenon, one of the most visited exhibitions and he subject of film and television. Gunter von Hagens skinned and dissected ‘live’ a corpse for Channel 4. Several Body World exhibits such as the *Poker Playing Trio* and *Rearing Horse and Rider* were featured in the film *Casino Royale* (2006). Von Hagens strips the skin of his corpses, as a way to conceal their identity, and also to expose the *content* of the human body, purportedly for its “scientific interest” and for its aesthetic quality. The dead with their skins removed become an impersonation of eternal anatomy, aiming to tame our human fear of death. Can we better overcome this fear if we see only anonymous contents of humans, but not their epidermal identity?

*Face-off: Concealing Skin*

Meaningful identity is one of the principles of realism (Herbrechter 2013, 12). Our world and our social interaction require a preservation of identity. Legal and economic systems are based on the supposed identity of the individual: passports, ID-cards, insurance numbers, facial recognition and fingerprints. While public interactions may request different and more complex forms of identity proof, daily routine is based on “recognising” a familiar face. If I see my neighbour I will suppose that it is my neighbour. I will not ask for their ID to proof it. But the habit of recognising familiar faces is challenged by the posthuman and post-phenomenological hermeneutics (Herbrechter 2013, 13). The skin, the appearance of a familiar face can conceal something else, an alien (as in Hirschbiegel’s *The Invasion*, 2007, Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956, Philip Kaufman's homonymous remake, 1978, and Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers*, 1993), a machine (Bryan Forbes’ *The Stepford Wives*, 1975, and Frank Oz’s version, 2004), an agent, a cyborg assassin (the *Terminator* films by James Cameron, 1984 and 1991, Jonathan Mostow, 2003, and McG, 2009).

Another cinematic instance where faces are used to conceal identity is presented in *Face/Off* (1997). Can we still be ourselves with someone else’s face on? Assuming the identity of a terrorist in a secret operation, the FBI agent sees in the mirror the image of his child’s killer. Even if we know that he is still ‘inside’ the killer face, his new identity makes him act differently. A new *mask* (the old Greek meaning of persona) has its own normative requests. Looking like an FBI agent makes Castor act like an FBI agent, at least at the beginning. However the *Face/Off* motive questions the duality of essence and appearance and our habits of assessing identity. The posthumanist discourse on *identity* has become more *radical*, but it does not transcend the humanist representations. The posthuman *skin* does not move too far from the modern paradigm of thought, because the supposition that what skin shows us is *accidental* seems to be unbroken[[2]](#endnote-1). Descartes already raised the question: “what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs? (1641/1901, 2nd Med, 13).

*Skin-technology-reality*

Skin is connected with the phenomenology of the gaze; it is the border where we start to objectify the other, and where the other appears to us like a part of the ‘real world’. Skin as the possibility of reification is a proof of *reality* (or of a time-space presence). David Cronenberg’s film, *eXistenZ* (1999) features a posthuman representation of computer technology merging with the biological support of the body. New virtual reality games uses organic consoles called ‘game pods’. They look like a human placenta and are attached via biotechnological umbilical cords to "bio-ports," inserted into a player’s back. It is significant thata group of ‘realists’ fight the game companies to prevent the *deformation* of reality. The greatest game designer, Allegra Geller, is testing her latest virtual reality game, *eXistenZ,* when she is shotby an assassin with an organic pistol. To save the only copy of the *eXistenZ* game, she must play the game with another player she can trust, but her companion, Pikul, is reluctant to have a bio-port installed into his own body. He is afraid of having his body (skin) penetrated and invokes the possibility of an *infection*. Infection becomes actually a leitmotif in the film, from epidermal infection, to the viral infection of a program, and infection as a distortion of reality. After a certain point we no longer know if the actions are those of the film’s heroes or of their game characters. At the end it is not even clear which game is played, if is *eXistenZ* or *transCendenZ*, a subtle allusion to the fact that with a dislocated concept of reality the lines between existence and transcendence are blurred. Skin is a guardian of the body, not only to delimit exteriority, but also to protect from it. Hurt skin allows the body to be infected. The bio-port design is not a hole in the skin, but a kind of *entry*, something that Allegra compares to her mouth. Similar to the way the mouth opens the surface of the body without putting it at risk, a bio-port should provide a safe way into our neural system. A bio-port is a *fold* (un pli) (Deleuze 1993, 113-133). The Deleuzian *fold* is constructed in connection with the production of subjectivity, and of ‘non-human’ forms of ‘subjectivity’, like those of a game character. The fold is a critique of subjectivity – because the concepts of interiority and exteriority (appearance and essence), will disappear in the fold. The *inside* of it is nothing more than a fold of the *outside*. The folds of our body are *topoi* where new or alternative realities may *unfold*. Similar ideas about folds of the human body that open the way to the technological non-humans are presented in Cronenberg’s horror film *Videodrome* (1983), where Max’s torso transforms into a gaping hole that functions as a VCR.

*The Skin Clock*

A skin device that functions as a biological clock is a central theme of another dystopian film of Niccol’s: *In Time* (2011). Skin is actually an indicator of our age, but what would happen if we could stop its ageing around our 25th birthday and thus remain young forever? The film is set in the year 2169, when all people are genetically engineered to a digital clock on their forearm, just under their skin. When they turn 25 years old, they stop ageing, but their clock begins counting down from one year. If they want to live longer than that year, they have to work to gain more life time. When the biological clock stops, a technological one appears under the forearm skin, telling you exactly how much time you still have to live. Time has become the universal currency and is used to pay for expenses. Through epidermal contact time can be transferred between people. The society is divided into “time zones” that reflect the wealth of the population, from people living from one day to the next in *Dayton*, to the New Greenwich of the wealthiest. The ageless society of the rich is confusing: the daughter, the wife and the mother-in-law of the time-loaning businessman, Philippe Weis, are all frozen in their twenties, making it impossible to infer family relationships from appearance. This underlines the role of *perceived* *age* in categorising the relationships someone is involved in. At the beginning of the film we at first take Rachel, the young woman living with the hero, to be his lover, before it is revealed that she is actually his mother.

Desperate eyes on the digital skin-clock show that radicalized posthuman epidermal readings tend to be no longer connected with age, beauty or health, but with a different story of imminent finitude. Removing *age,* as immanent manifestation of time, from the *conditio* *humana* has a *price*, which is metaphorically portrayed as *time* itself. To analyse the significance of *time* I will follow the ancient Greek distinction between *chronos* and *bios*. Chronos is the chronological, or sequential time that we can measure and administer. In a posthuman paradigm we may even be able to economize it and turn into a consumable good, which can be bought and sold. But for the individual what has particular significance is time as the setting of our life-story. *Lebenslauf* (life-walk), or *curriculum* *vitae* is a time of significance, a qualitative time, what the Greeks called *bios*. In the essay “Thinking about Death on the Basis of Time” (2000, 106) Emmanuel Levinas asked: “Can one understand time as a relationship with the Other, rather than seeing it in the relationship with the end?” *In* *Time* is a film about this question. The time-zones of its dystopian society divide the ontological statuses of posthuman beings. The love story between Will and Sylvia transcends not only the normal social strata, but brings together two different *biotic* experiences.

*Skin as reliable witness*

For Deleuze, the *folds* of time are memories, and they contain the possibility of narratives. *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) is not a film about posthumans, but a unique posthumanist critique of the way we understand and explain ourselves through memory, subjectivity, and consciousness. The challenge of this film is to try to make sense of what we are and what we want in the absence of the possibility of a linear narrative. Every 15 minutes the main protagonist’s brain is reset and there is no short time memory, no fold. Lenny cannot remember trivial things like having met someone, seeing someone spit in his beer, as well as more complex ones having to do with the *meaning* of his actions, the *motive* for wanting to kill, or *who* he wants to kill. It is an impossible, almost unliveable situation that can only be captured in paradox as when Lenny exclaims: “I don’t remember to forget my wife”, thus underlining the role that time play in the structuring of grief and loss. In the new, nonlinear narrative structure of the hero’s life, skin is used to fix and preserve memories. Tattoos documenting supposed ‘facts’ such as “John G is the one who raped and killed your wife” are engraved in the skin in a desperate attempt to supply a meaning to one’s life that is normally supplied by our short time memory. But even so, the ‘facts’ are not enough for reconstructing a meaningful narrative, because, paraphrasing Nietzsche, there are no facts, only *interpretations*. Skin can bear messages about supposed facts, but the *message* itself is a subject of interpretation. What is the number marking his skin? Who is ‘John G’? Can we trust our skin to be a reliable witness? Can it ‘protect’ us against the loss of memory, supporting the *pharmakon* (Derrida 1972, 95) of writing? Or should skin just be engineered to provide the best protection of the posthuman body?

*Enhanced Skin and Identity*

Pedro Almodóvar’s film *The Skin I Live In* (2011) presents the idea of engineering and transforming skin into a kind of armour. The protagonist, Doctor Ledgard, starts out with cultivating artificial skin that is resistant to burns and insect bites, but later conducts illegal transgenic experiments on humans in his secluded house. His obsession with redesigning skin derives from the tragic accident of his wife, Gal, who survived a car crash badly burnt. Kept in a dark room without any mirrors, she heard her daughter Norma sing in the garden and saw her own *reflection* in the window. Terrified by the sight, she jumped and killed herself. Years later, Norma meets a young man called Vicente at a wedding and starts having sex with him, when she hears the same fatal song she sung as a child, causing a panic attack. Doctor Ledgard finds her unconscious, blames Vicente and tracks him down to get revenge. He kidnaps him and, over six years, re-skins his body and changes his sex, physically transforming Vicente into an image of his late wife. Ledgard calls him Vera, which means true, indicating that what we get is the real thing once more. The film plays with two main topics: human enhancement and personal identity. Redesigning the surface of the human body seems at the beginning a way to create a totally new identity: Vincente becomes Vera. Ledgard does with Vicente what Vicente, as a dressmaker, does with the dresses he designs. But the superficiality of a dress is different from the superficiality of the skin. Although Vincente seems to be really changed into Vera, and even, re-enacting the Pygmalion myth, to fall in love with his creator, he eventually kills Ledgard, seeking his freedom in his new female body. The main question of the film is: can we live *in* or *with* a different skin? Even something as superficial as the skin seems to define our human identity. Alterations of the skin, via accidents, or via enhancement technologies, seem to have severe repercussions for the way someone feels and assesses their own identity. Almodóvar’s film doesn’t give a final answer. Gal cannot live in a badly scarred and damaged skin. Her true image, the re-skinned Vera, just appears to be changing, but somehow Vincente still seems to be “inside” her body. Should we understand this as suggesting that all the enhancements of the human body are somehow superficial, and the humanity inside ourselves will survive any attempt to redesign? Or is it maybe a warning that damaging human identity, via technology, will transform humans into monsters?

*Ambiguous Skin: Critical Posthumanist Discourse*

Can we transform our skin into a manifesto? Can our skin manifest ideas or ideologies that we truly believe in? *Conchita* *Wurst* is a drag stage persona of Thomas Neuwirth. She was a moment of international television by winning the Eurovision Song Contest (2014) in Copenhagen with the song "Rise Like a Phoenix". Eurovision is one of the longest-running television programs, broadcasting every year since 1956, with a recent audience between 100 million and 600 million international viewers. Fifty-two countries voted in 2014 for Conchita Wurst, the bearded woman. The total of 290 points showed more than appreciation of the musical quality; it showed an understanding and approval of a message of tolerance and non-discrimination as well. The meaning of this TV event and its large audience for the posthumanist debate is that we seem to be getting more and more tolerant towards marginal or seemingly “abnormal” forms of humanity.

Her name, Conchita Wurst, is in itself the object of an interesting hermeneutics. Neuwirth explained that the German "Wurst", meaning “sausage” should point to the common German expression “Das ist mir doch alles Wurscht” (it's all the same to me, or I don’t care). Wurst/sausage is a mixture of meat/flesh formed by its *skin*. In a Freudian interpretation, *wurst* is a phallic symbol, matching the *beard*. The literal origin of Conchita is “little seashell”, but it is also Spanish slang for “little cunt”.

The novelty and the posthuman character of Conchita consists in his/her ambiguity. S/he combines on the same face a woman’s makeup: glamorous eyeshades, long and heavy eyelashes and sensual read lips, with the masculinity of a full beard. Her face defies our habits of reading the human face. Something breaks in the middle of our discourse, the ambivalent, schizophrenic narrative of her face. Her ambiguous image is different from the usual appearance of a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) person that assumes the facial identity specific to their chosen gender. A beard is a sign of masculinity, quite a strong gender characteristic, so that a *bearded* *woman* provokes an ontological ambiguity. Conchita Wurst is a posthuman manifesto of skin that calls for more than non-discrimination, it calls for tolerance to ambiguity. This is a crucial point because all strong metaphysics (like the radical religious ones), or *final* *vocabularies* (present in political ideologies) have an intolerance to ambiguity (Rorty 1989, 93). It is not surprising that her act attracted the criticism of Eastern European Orthodox Churches and Russian politicians (like Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and Valery Rashkin) by confounding their final vocabularies. They voiced their disapproval using her to sanction Ukraine’s bid for integration into the EU: “their European future: a *bearded* *girl”* (Davies 2014). The Russian Orthodox Church officially condemned her as “yet one more step in the rejection of the Christian identity of European culture”, and as an attempt to “reinforce new cultural norms” (Kishkovsky 2014). This last claim is at least partially right: new cultural norms are indeed transgressing the usual representations of skin. The skin is a mark of social identity and it was stained with colour and gender discrimination throughout our ‘human history’. Wurst is indeed an attempt to reinforce the new critical project and the cultural norms of posthumanity.

1. I will distinguish between *utopian* and *critical* posthumanism; utopian posthumanism encompasses doctrines like Transhumanism, which encourages and pursues the *evolution* of the human into something superior to our actual condition. Critical posthumanism, on the other hand, incorporates deconstructivism, feminist critique, and generally currents of thought that contest our anthropocentrism and the image of the human that was presupposed and reinforced in modern philosophy (from Descartes to Kant). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With the possible exception of zombies, where their decomposing skin and their decomposing essence seem to be a match. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)