

Hot Mess: Breaking the Skin

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"Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented."

– Willem de Kooning

When I was a young child we used to play word games. A favorite teaser of ours involved a word to suggest that something naughty was taking place.

"Your epidermis is showing."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is. Your epidermis is showing."

Our minds would whirl and our bellies would laugh. Our aching prepubescent and underdeveloped sexualities would tingle. *Epidermis* sounded like something that should not be shown publicly and willingly. The suggestion in our youthful minds this silly word game produced was like that which occurred when hearing (while covering our eyes) an actress say to Eddie Murphy, "Your royal penis is clean, your Highness."¹ Not actually seeing the physical bodies in the movie gave us permission, perhaps, to imagine on a grosser scale the actions that could be taking place. We were playing within the boundaries of a vulgaris and forbidden sensual world that we could only barely begin to address, one that was mostly available through movies, television, magazines, and stories shelved too high, too out of reach for us to grasp.

I can recall the first time I was told that my epidermis was exposed. The thought of it caused delicious fright and wonder. My face flushed and panic quickened the pace of my heart. My palms dampened. I can remember thinking, "How did it get out? What got out? My epidermis? Are my pants unzipped? Is there something down there I am not aware of? Why did no one tell me?"

My younger brother and his friends walked away laughing while I was left fretting about something out of my control, something overlooked, something invisible to me yet visible to those around me. How long had it been there, unintended? Did I let something out that I did not know about, yet the boys did? The boys knew something about me that I did not? What was it? Their laughter stuck around like a refrain I was unable to shake. As we continued to romp through the woods I pretended as if I didn't care, like it was okay. So this is showing and so what?

"Your skin," my father, a pediatrician, told me that evening when he arrived home from work. "Your epidermis is your skin."

Oh thank goodness. What a relief. It was only my skin.

¹ *Coming to America*. Dir. John Landis. Paramount Pictures, 1988.

This word joke left me with an impression about skin I had not had before... it is the part of the body that is the most exposed. “Your epidermis is showing. I see your epidermis. It is everywhere.” It’s the organ most visible, experienced. It flakes, and scabs, and scars, and leaves marks. History is indexed in the flesh until the marks of it are no longer there to be seen. Through it I feel hot and cold. My skin changes color, is complex, and is one continuous elastic surface.

It’s impressive and impressionable.

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The etymology of the word epidermis comes from the prefix *epi*, meaning upper, and *dermis*, meaning skin. The epidermis is the most visible and tactile part of our skin because it makes up the surface layer. Yet there is more to it than what meets the eye. The epidermis is a surface always in motion. Our experience of it is perceptually and physically affected by outside elements. It is a surface that is anything but static. The epidermis is the layer of skin above the dermis—the dermis consists of elastic tissue made of collagen and reticular fibers that contain hair follicles, blood vessels, and nerves that transmit sensations of touch, temperature, and pressure. The epidermis is the upper layer, most exposed to air, light, and affectionate contact with the body. The dermis houses the nerves, and functions more or less as that continuous, stretchy surface that gives shape to features and expressions. The epidermis is made up of light and millions of tiny particles that work together like a thin veneer, presenting a tangibility of what is microscopically temporary. They produce a fleeting surface. When we look at a person we witness presence through constant commotion always erupting in events that contribute to a person’s outer appearance. I have naturally dry or oily skin. I tan easy, or I do not. “Visible me” is an expression of myself within the world surrounding me.

Upon and through the epidermis I sense another and he senses me, our insides turned outside. It is where two people explore one another inside and out; flesh in the world and the inner conversation our muscles make as a reaction to a sensual embrace. Our temperature and touch will produce a space of here, her, here, she, him, me, there, we, here, now. By being in the world through the flesh, I can understand “here” as a possibility *that is* and which, also, becomes *never again*. You touch my hand here, then here. I feel my dry feet on the cold concrete; my eyes see your hand half lit in the shadow of a window through which the sun shines in enriching warm tones across three of your dry, chapped fingers; here, there. Eruption, sensation, and then it’s over, and I carry all those passing moments as a way to remember you.

We accumulate experience on this terrain. On the skin our sensitivity builds in a momentum of “and, and, and” because the activity that affects it never stops. It is constant. Renewed skin cells eventually come to the surface to interact with other non-organic elements. The epidermis is made of five types of tissue—from the uppermost cells that shed every two weeks (and which may be invisible to us at moments) to the bottom most layer where cells divide and push their way to the top to eventually flatten and die. It is a layer in continual regeneration, an ever-changing organ that gathers sensory information from an environment,

a surface upon which light produces form and allows something to be seen, something always exposed in appearance and disappearance.

When observing a figure depicted in a painting, we usually take a few moments to notice how the skin is painted. This informs us of the genre of the painting, the artist's style, the ideas about the figure, etc. We treat this fixture of brush marks to define the subject as form and/or as sign. Sometimes artists place symbols around figures in order to suggest qualities that relate to the subject represented. In Jan Van Eyck's paintings the compositional arrangement, where a subject is represented in a particular environment, combines gestures and a body—or bodies—that are distorted or accented in order to present a way to interpret an image. In addition to the textual, narrative, and symbolic references in the pictorial elements, we are standing in front of an object, a painting upon which an imitation of flesh is depicted. It defines the parameters of a subject's outward physique and helps us to feel the figure in the space he or she or they are in. Qualities of the flesh in a painting inform us of a dimension that cannot be discerned through an assemblage of signs.

Flesh tones and skin have been depicted in various ways throughout art history, addressing something that an artist is attempting to communicate. It can create context through its reconstitution or narrative qualities. It's fair to suggest that we all too often find comfort in situating a distance between one another through ideas that re-color our skin and have grown accustomed to relying on interpretation as a way to understand painted flesh in art as well. Identifying difference opens a space for us to think about what unites us in our heterogeneity, like the fact that we all breathe, sense heat, sweat, etc. We know this is part of life because we can sense it. It is all so natural, all so human, to experience these automatic and unavoidable truths about our bodies and lived experiences. But we remain different as subjects in a time and place that is unique in its expression in language. As a consequence and need for that language, we necessitate sets of objective qualifications of an event (or a subject's being or becoming through an event) which, in the moment of emergence, is unaware of its consequences and hence its disparity. I am not interested in the language and inscription of the moment; rather, I want to know more through the rendering of its unawareness.

The Residue of the Veil

“The skin, the envelope of the body ancient physiognomy had almost overlooked in favour of more permanent signs of the human character, will then be seen more and more as a canvas on which the passions of the soul spread their colors.”²

Much of what has been obtained from research in the natural sciences has found its way to the canvas of painters who, for whatever reasons, fuse these studies with ideas about pictorial representation. Physiognomy is one such field of study that makes itself available for painting. In physiognomy, a person assesses another's personality and character based on their outward appearance. In his 1568 work *On Human Physiognomy*, Della Porta insists on the traditional thought that facial features are the site of the soul. He elaborates on this idea in his writing, claiming the eyes are a dominate feature of the face by suggesting that they are the windows to the soul. Della Porta also speaks of art and, in particular, painting. In his

² Stimilli, David, *The face of immortality: physiognomy and criticism* (SUNY Press, 2005), 68.

description of portraiture he remarks that the canvas is a place of air that falls like a curtain from the eyes, veiling the features of the face. It is a puzzling, elusive statement. It seems that Della Porta thinks of the canvas as a surface which situates itself simultaneously in front of and behind a picture, the eyes peering out at us from an indeterminate yet deep space (an intrinsic feature of a painting). Something emerges for us not just through the eyes but through the veil. Through color and brush work we sense the depicted figure's invisible features. The canvas is like skin—a veil—an outer surface of activity as well as a feature that indicates immeasurable depth and human spirit. It is a material that reveals. Della Porta is suggesting that, above anything else, the part of the face that reveals the invisible (soul) is made visible through a veil, not through the eyes. The veil comes forth from the eyes, making the inside visible on the outward features of a depicted subject. His or her nose, mouth, skin, chin, etc., all become places through which to experience a psychology and/or spirit of the subject.

Della Porta uses the idea of the veil to suggest properties of a subject that extend beyond the recognizably visible and symbolic facial features and gestures. This designates an essence of an individual, naked to the eye yet, at the same time, knowable through physical presence.

Not the Forbidden Fruit

Today it seems more popular to understand body, in particular skin, as an attribute that denotes a subject's persona as cultural identity rather than as something presenting us with a permeable mobile being that is lively and, in this kind of liveliness, an impossibly stiff carcass for notation. Sometimes we insist on the importance of reading the features and physical attributes of people as a means to *know* them—through their history as carriers of signs. This knowing relies on symbols; the invisible depth of what is there, regardless of these characteristic symbols, does not. It may be something felt and sensed but not wholly graspable with language. That one must read facial features, and subsequently body parts and gestures, in order to communicate proposes constituting oneself as a body of signs that reads another as a body of signs, and through this system of communication we identify distance, similarities, and differences. A veil in this regard covers and hides a person from another. But for someone like Della Porta, the veil does not create an impossibility of knowing another. It reveals a depth; one that makes possible an exploration of the face to discern not what is on the surface but a moment of interior investigation. The distance, though still there, is not one of difference but of a much larger, immeasurable dimension that actually brings us closer, almost immediately, with that which we look onto. The veil is thought of as an object which points to a feature that is otherwise hidden, and for our reasons we should consider it a feature that expresses a vast expanse of what lies beneath rather than a feature which conceals—a soul, an encompassing psychology, a universal invisibility.

The veil is an invisible blanket that covers the face: a “transparency” enacted by material activity. The fact that paint sits on the surface of the canvas is an important truth about painting, and while it may be thought of as “covering the “truth” of the painted object (because color does, by its very condition, confuse the surface upon which it is painted), it may also be fruitful to think about how it embraces universals. Artists have concerned themselves with universal ideas that expand beyond the realm of the figural face and into the constellations of forces unseen. A painting of a veil may credit a subject's essence. It also

works as an analogy that designates the universality of color and forms—the materials that make up activity in painting.

The Inefficiency of the Eyes

In his *Convivio*, Dante tells us how the soul works through the figure and shapes the face. “...no face is the counterpart of another: since the final potentiality latent in the subject matter, which is in all cases somewhat different, is here reduced to actuality.” Dante believes the eyes are windows to the soul. Though he also says, in pictorial representation, that the expression of the mouth also operates as a window into the soul, Dante sees the eyes as a better way to function for this cause: “The mouth is more opaque, as it were like color behind glass (*quasi come colore dopo vetro*).”³ This thought has made its way to popular diction. When a person is not communicating much with their eyes, we describe their look as a “glassy-eyed stare,” which implies our inability to sense what someone is truly feeling. The eyes in this empty expression are like color behind glass, not letting air in or out, not letting the canvas function as still air. The same could be said of pursed, closed, or stiff lips. They do not breathe but rather sit as a feature on the face that we attempt to read. However, both the eyes and the mouth operate as a place for air, and this is an idea that echoes in the Renaissance illustrations of Dante’s “graceful smile.” Depicting the soul by looking closely at the eyes and mouth will continue up through the eighteenth century. Eventually, scientific study will become enamored with how our skin and muscles are connected and how our muscular movements shape our features, and this study of muscular movements on the face will shape the way an artist renders a sitter’s portrait. Artists, in their translations of such ideas, will shift their interest from the eyes and mouth to the whole face, and with that, the skin.

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“[The skin of the face] is of a particular constitution, which one does not find elsewhere. All over the body the skin is separated from the flesh: on the face, they are so tightly bound together that one cannot separate them without tearing them apart. This makes the skin of the face somehow transparent, and more suited to receive and to paint for us on the outside the different colours that the various occurring movements excite.”

— Jacques Perneti, *Letters Philosophiques sur les Physionies*, 1746

During the Enlightenment and up through the Renaissance, painting a face meant more than capturing a visibly understood and legible likeness of a person; the project included capturing a person’s countenance, or *vultus*. The word countenance means the face, visage, an expression... but as an idea it refers to what is more complex and less determinate than a feature of a figure that works as a sign. There is a relationship between Della Porta’s definition of a veil, the still air of the canvas, and the *vultus*. The veil and the *vultus* imply an expression and the sense of that expression—what is visible as well as what is usually not visible to the human eye but which could emerge through the movement of elements and characteristics that give expression to a face. Perhaps this is similar to the twentieth century interest in illustrating a person’s psychological depth. The flesh is more than a physical

³ Stimilli, David, *The face of immortality: physiognomy and criticism* (SUNY Press, 2005), 67.

attribute that signifies and forms a body—it is through skin, saturation of colors, and expression of emotions that a person comes alive on the canvas. Skin and painting can both be thought of as airy, light surfaces that reveal and provide for us a glimpse of what is virtually impossible to grasp as an absolute entity.

Movement Emerging in Time

The vultus is perceptible but not clearly lucid, and because of this the vultus is not unlike a face. The vultus, on the other hand, describes a being through movement rather than through resolute features and characterizations:

“‘Facies’ derives from ‘facere’ and, as Aulus Gellius remarks, refers to ‘the entire shape and fashion, the make of the entire body’ ... ‘Vultus’ derives from ‘velle,’ as most etymologists agree; but another etymology, which makes ‘vultus’ derive from ‘volvere,’ ‘to turn,’ was upheld as well...”⁴

In movement, a portrait is more than a sum of its parts. The continuous activity of those parts not only constitute the illustrations that reference the sitter who is portrayed (his or her time, place, age, social status, etc.) but also present an encounter with him or her as flesh still breathing, speaking in a tongue beyond the visible made into speech. It is here that representation breaks from the idea of words and becomes movement, action; like an apparition appearing to be this person, in this space. Whether it’s a person’s will, willingness to be (velle), or an action of turning (volvere), painting a person’s vultus is likened to capturing an action that cannot be quantified nor really described. The vultus moves beyond insignia and beyond the physical attributes. It is made up of elements constituting an image on the surface of a canvas.

No other medium could depict a vultus, or veil, as well as painting because no other medium allows movement to emerge in time as a painting does. A painting unfolds life at the same time that it remains still. A painting breathes air as does its portrayed figure. Its depth is seen through its surface. The painter, whose steady hands shape these features, is not only depicting an activity of the flesh and the body, but is revealing a truth about all things that are seen. Through his actions he allows an expression to emerge, one that is both that of a subject represented and that of the painted object, revealing an invisible feature that is a condition of all visible surfaces.

“As far as words are concerned, the practitioner of physiognomy is called in Greek ‘physiognomon,’ but I prefer to call him with a new name ‘vultispector,’ and his activity ‘vultispicere.’ For ‘vultus’ is the surface that is seen, and is so called from ‘volvere.’ The term does not refer solely to the face, but to any visible surface.”⁵

Vultus is an old-world word, most often used to refer to something seen, or the eye. In Mongolia the word refers to the plains—vastness in sight. In Friulan (an early Romance language), vultus is translated as muse. In Portuguese, the word vulto (L. vultus) refers not only to face, appearance, countenance, and expression but also to a body seen at a distance

⁴ Stimilli, David, *The face of immortality: physiognomy and criticism* (SUNY Press, 2005), 72.

⁵ Lb., 72.

without discovering what it is so that it appears to be but a bulk of something unperceivable. In verb form, it means to see the bulk and enormity of a thing without perceiving what it is.⁶ The Latin word *vultus*, as singular, carries the masculine stem, but in its plural form is without gender (not neutral); containing both. It is a thing and a state of uncertainty, movement, and vastness exceeding the definite.

Portraiture that attempts to capture a presence of a subject does so as not only a depiction of a likeness of a person but, as Stimilli puts it, through “a rather immobile *vultus*.”⁷ What Stimilli says is that the three-quarter turn of the figure in many Renaissance paintings could possibly have been the attempt to capture the figure as it turns, implying movement, action, and life. This is an illusion that painting is capable of. A painting is color on a surface, and in a portrait we are witnessing color producing life, air, and breath. The idea of *vultus* is much more applicable when thinking about what a painting of a portrait harnesses. It’s not just a likeness that a painter paints, or an ensemble of signs. A portrait is an image that lives in time, presented on an object for viewers to perpetually witness. A person is not reduced to image and sign by the painterly act of imitation. He or she is universalized in an active veil—reorganizing and revealing a truth in all that we perceive.



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⁶ Vieyra, Antonio and Jacinto Dias do Canto, *A Dictionary of the Portugese and English Languages* (London, 1827).

⁷ Stimilli, David, *The face of immortality: physiognomy and criticism* (SUNY Press, 2005), 72.