

## Strigil

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My skin is the literal limit of my subject's object. It is the end of my self as long as I am constituted in my body. Better still, my horizon, always becoming itself, rising and setting, always missing – never itself as-such. It is the site of exposure, of tact - it gives (it exposes) me to touch.

To write on my skin is tantamount to heresy. To write it, impossible. In writing, I abscond my skin – I leave its jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> The immediacy inherent to my skin is at best crudely scored into the text, a rough imprint of the “that it happened,” a sign. All you will do is touch the page.

There is an initial doubling taking place in the scan that must be addressed first. My scan accounts for both the sensory process that takes place here (no, over here), and the resultant image, this text itself. Perhaps when (now) you read, the scan turns, turns my skin over to sharing; I write “on” my skin, here and there. This scan takes place in a distended present, calling to presence my skin, *à corps perdu*; a presence only of a duct, a looping channel through which my skin differs from itself, is allowed to come and come and never arrive. Though where is this process “taking place,” where is this “on” my skin that I write? (We know when: now ... now ... now ... ) But where? Do I write about it? Yes, about, around my skin, in that place without space, the articulating spacing between here and there; always no-where exactly, but a nowhere stretched through time, now-here ... now-here ... In the end, just writing, the writing as-such coming and coming to presence, so that this scan might act like my skin: covering up, unveiling, presenting.

In the cannon of Western thought, the optic is the privileged sense. Starting with Plato, philosophy has tried to “see the *image* of truth...in thinking.”<sup>2</sup> The gathering hegemony of the visual is ruptured with the polyvalence inherent in the scan as a method for experience, for thought. I scan with my eyes, with my nose, with my ears, with my tongue, with my fingers; I scan with my mind. While the scan has (at least one) clear sense, it is simultaneously “sense-neutral” (or meta-sensible): The scan is of the order of touch, which gives way to the very sensibility of the senses. It is the technology implicit in that singular plurality of the senses that is sense itself.

To scan is a mode (or modes) of touch, the condition of possibility for the existence of our originary sharing: To scan is to touch. This does not mean, however, that to touch is to scan. The scan is a directed touch, pointed, concentrated, a matter of data acquisition: Things are already simply touching, but the scan is *our* touch (our grasping), our *technē* for touch, and our first manner. The scan, our apprehending-touch, is our sense itself, our sense as the origin of itself, incessantly demanding more sense. “Sense is not given, it is the demand *that* it be given.”<sup>3</sup> Scan, our *technē* then, is the ground for technology in the first place, and is the mode under which technology takes place, or at least under which technology is developed. For us, nature's technicians, there is the

scan. Touch, that law, perhaps *the* law, withdraws and permeates all of existence, all of sense, and the scan is tied to that majestic and incessant chiasm of touch and sense: touch giving way to sense, and yet being senseless and insensible without sense. The scan: Our tracing the constant sum of these two foci. The scan is how we make sense, or if you prefer, how sense makes itself through us. And the scan is our technological touch. The scan is with us, it has captured us, from the beginning, making sense of data. For us, the land is already landscape.

The scan is of both the careful and the casual. The scan is to examine closely (to “pore”) and also to survey hastily (to “glance”). It allows for the entirety of the range of the touch – it is for the lover’s meaningful glance, the sadist’s cruel laceration, the doctor’s clinical poring, the stranger’s anesthetized touch, the burn. It is for myself, in all of my capacities. The scan of the skin – the touch of the eye, the finger – is from that already-existing knotting of the optic and the haptic; it is the site of the syncope, that movement out of time that is the *present* in that manner in which touch calls my self into presence. In the act of touching another (or an-other, my skin), the touching thing touches itself, feels itself, brings itself to presence – the scan is inheritor to the infinitely reciprocal system of con-tact, of its vortical reflexivity. Contact also means that the touching thing is never precisely touching or touched, never exclusively addressable in the first- or third-person, but instead, “the touchable (that is, untouchable) pole of a vocative or of an apostrophizing address.”<sup>4</sup>

Touch itself is the always-already sharing out of the world to each in turn – the condition of possibility for our fundamental ontological condition of being-here-together. It is the precisely the mode under which the *with* of being-with takes place. We are here-together at once, in a disjunctive sharing. Even before our linguistic conjunction and consolidation of meaning (the disclosure of the *with*, perhaps) – simultaneously to our scan, our data-acquisition, our grasp of the world – touch is already *sharing out* our existence: We are already touching, we are touched first. The touch, that first sensibility of the senses, is the *how* of sensual data.

*Le toucher* (the sense of touch, I touch him, and all the possible senses of the sense of touch) is of course simultaneously already-mediated by and dependent to an initial discreteness. To begin to conceive touch, or at least to imagine a touching subject and a touched object, we must understand that at the same moment we are touching, we are here concretely and discretely. One is here, and is one, singular – one who is already touching the world (in that strong sense of touch) that one may touch another, who is also already here, simultaneously and successively. We are here together singularly, and we may touch: We can hardly avoid it. This conjunctive disjunction that is the world (as each one is the origin of the world, and these worlds together are nothing more than the world) reciprocally constitutes the “network of all surfaces” that gives way to touch in turn. And let us say further that the world is liable to sense, to this sense, to touch – this is the only way it can be.<sup>5</sup>

The skin is the recipient of that other more specific sense of touch, the etymological *toccare*; hit, knock. It is the organ whose mode of interaction is literally designated by the extracutaneous and indiscriminately synaesthetic signifier for all of sense. The skin is the site of the tactile touch (Derrida calls it “tact”). As the system of tactile objects spirals outward, whatever I touch, I, the touching thing, feel myself touching (my self-touching). With this tactile touch, my skin is a site of origin of my sense and more basically, my sensibility to the other. The limits of sensibility are exactly the last site of touch, necessarily they are defined by their touchability . . .

That grand maestro of the sign, Roland Barthes attempts to frame the lover’s system of touch as a regime of signs: a festival not of the senses, but of meaning. His lover, Werther is “in the crucible of meaning.”<sup>6</sup> But let Charlotte blow gently on Werther’s skin – the signs of touch are founded in the sensible. Or better still, there are no hermeneutics in the discourse of touch, only sense(s).

I scan my skin means that I touch and I am touched. I scan your skin means the same. Likewise, I scan the horizon.

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In order for the skin to be understood as a limit for the subject, the degree to which it constitutes the psychic horizon must also be put into play, its role as not simply *noemata* but *noesis* as well. The materialist psychology of Deleuze and Guattari provides an excellent moment for this weaving in its conception of the body-without-organs, the recording surface upon which networks of relations to objects are reinscribed after the neutralization of initial “connective” psychic investments (Freudian *cathexis*).<sup>7</sup> In other words: A psychic investment is made to an object/organ, say in the connection (through a scan) of an eye to a breast. This investment “charges” (produces a charge for) the breast with some kind of libidinal currency (territorializes it). This is constantly happening, and the connections are multiple and heterogeneous. Deleuze and Guattari’s idea is that there is also a generally underdeveloped counter-balancing (anti-productive) force that desexualizes the object, or, as such, the breast, freeing desire from the need for fixation (mechanical repetition) or neurosis. This “free repetition” of desire represents, for Deleuze and Guattari, the optimally schizophrenic desire-map for an organ-machine. The psychic space upon which this rhizome of freed connections is drawn is the body-without-organs. This allows the sharing-out of desire to be structured in the manner of “either this...or this...or this...or...” (in the same way that the connective investments are structured “this, and this ...and this...and...”). Functionally, the body-without-organs is the recording surface for the psyche. In this way, the body-without-organs can be understood as a wildly heterogeneously structured “memory bank” of desire; the body-without-organization, or the body dis-organized.

Clearly, however, the BwO must exist simultaneously to the organ-ized body, the organization of organs (the organ-ism or organ-machine): the “body-soul”. The skin-organ occupies an interesting territory in relation of the organ-ism to the

BwO. Certainly, the technology for mapping the desire-connections on the BwO is nothing less than the scan – investments are made quickly as the eye scans a mouth, a leg, the fingers scan hair, a cheek grazes against a cheek. The scan is the technology for the mapping and remapping of psychic charges. Whether the schizophrenic only and constantly remapping or the paranoiac desperately and neurotically fixating on the existing connections, the relay for the inscription process is always the scan.

As such, the skin visually organizes the organ-ized body, while at the same time dis-organizing the body in the sense that its function is precisely to cover the body's organ-ization, all the while maintaining its distinctness as an organ itself. In this way, it might be thought that the skin is the organ that shares out to the body its shares of organization and disorganization – as the *touch-point* for the technē of the body, the point at which the body folds, the sensual horizon for both the psychic and physical aspects of the organ-machine.

Thus the tactile-touch of the skin, or more broadly the touch in general, allows for the possibility for the simultaneous always-deferring the dis-organ-ized body and the always-presencing singularity of the organ-ized organism. This condition of always-presencing allows not only for the more obvious *there-ness* implicit in the physical presence of an organized being (Dasein), but also for the solidification of the unity of a being, which can undergo constant change while still maintaining recognizability as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Touch is the tension between the subject and the anti-subjectification of the body, between signifiedness and anti-signification. In other words, touch, the law that organizes and disorganizes the organism, is what “unites the change of the water and the permanence of the river.”<sup>9</sup>

The skin is a relay for sense. And in a sense, what isn't? The whole world, every articulated object, joint and hinge, relaying sense between themselves, the entire system of the world, now, sense demanding more sense ... But the skin is special, although almost certainly not unique in its capacity – it provides that moment of un-sense necessary for the kind of active forgetting that is the gravity for one's unity (one's “subject,” *pace* Lacan). Specifically, it covers our organs, protects our subject – albeit not perfectly – from sensing them. At no point is this idea touched on more beautifully than in Jean-Luc Nancy's very personal narrative of his transplanted heart, *L'Intrus*.<sup>10</sup> Nancy's heart intrudes by defecting; through surgery, he assumes another (an other) heart. This organ, which had largely fallen below the horizon of the sensible, made itself present through its failure – and his cure also infects him. He literally takes the stranger in to his body, and proclaims, “In me there is the *intrus*, and I become foreign to myself.” His “I” had, “clearly become the formal index of an unverifiable and impalpable system of linkages.” (9-10) But all of our bodies in the concrete are these systems of linkages. Our networks of organs, our bodies as organ-machines, pre-exist any unity given after the fact by subjectification. This is me: my heart, my nervous system, my skin, but can these things be mine? Am I still my “I” without my skin? My heart? My brain?

## §

“I can look inside people...I only wish that I did not possess [this ability], Why, Because what the skin conceals ought never to be seen...”<sup>11</sup> The (en)acting of the technology of the scan, what happens when we scan regardless of what we scan, Heidegger calls *Gestell*, enframing. “Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens.”<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger, the act of truth is a process – truth withdraws to appear. Whether or not we want to talk about anything like truth, the technology of the scan literalizes this act of *alētheia*, is the mode of *alētheia* inasmuch as the hope of technology is clarity inside finite existence. With no Other-than-existence (and existence here as already-given to finitude, an infinite finitude, indestructible, always here, always finite) to populate the inappropriable world with sense, the touch, the scan, and data are left; the scan a lens, focusing first here, then there...

This essay is the result of my scan of my skin; it is my dermatoglyphics. I scan my skin: Though can it be mine? Like my language, my skin is mine and I am its. And yet, does my skin scan me back? Does this internal-external other, this an-other, this thing which helps to allow me to presence myself to myself (to give myself my “I”), communicate reciprocally with the very “I” that it helps to produce? Clearly, the skin is already transmitting data.<sup>13</sup> The widely-graduated sensory categories of pain and pleasure are wrought in the skin, in nociceptors, and transmitted as neural data throughout the body. Most often, as was the case for Nancy’s heart, the skin is only presented through the extreme activation of its nociceptors – a burn, a laceration – through rupture (or through another kind of rupture, say, a lover’s touch). Of course, pain is precisely the skin acting to cure itself – somatosensation here is the *pharmakon* of the skin – to speak of this “rupture” is only to speak of the rupture of forgetting that is tacit in the subjectification of the body. This presentencing is the revealing and concealing of the skin (itself) to my subject, through the technology of the scan or touch, Heidegger’s *alētheia* exactly. As such, might it be correct to say that I only scan my skin in response to my skin scanning me, altering my sense? Do I only scan my skin back?

The touch (to be touched) calls the body into presence in the usual way; it shatters our ability to forget the disappearing-appearing of the present. The present object is the present itself not forgotten. The act of holding the body *hic et nunc*, the very suspension of a being in the present is inset in the act of the touch. At the moment of being touched, one is sensibly asymptotic to the present (the now-here. Where? No-where.) This presented skin, this present experience of touch not as an object, but as a the condition of possibility upon which the object may be presented to consciousness... “annihilating acts of intention since they set up their object, diversely but constantly, as absent: not yet there, no longer there, and the there now of the present, ungraspable. Weak tensions in the night of nonbeing, subsiding to it.” (Lyotard, 45) There is no index, nothing but the touch, and the synchrony that is the touch itself frays, breaks into facets, tailing off between the past and future. All that is left is the sense-memory, or worse, that failing and abstract sign of the that-it-happened, the writing of the touch.

Permanent midnight, then, the totally Other, is the not-touched, the not-touching. An impossible meta-sensory anesthesia: The *one and only* thing, that Platonic Object self-contained and whole in the void, the inconceivably strong syncope. Our present is out-of-time-through-time, the not-touched is simply out-of-time. It is off of time's radar: the world's apnea. A being totally alone, subject to nothing. But, only ever *subject to nothing* – in other words, subjected to no thing, including nothing – certainly never nothing itself, as the no-thing, that which is no actual thing, is nothing less than reality itself, the fold of the structure, the spacing that articulates existence from within. There is no-where, no Nothing or abyss in which being, “*could impossibly enjoy its own impossibility of being.*”<sup>14</sup> Nothing, too, is touching.

## §

Did I skin my skin? Can the skin be brought to presence sans tactition and not be scarred? Perhaps through that sense of touch that is touch without touching, untouchable touch, what Derrida calls the transcendental schema of touch... This scan of my skin is only my thinking my skin; that touch of thought that we touched on (and *we* did touch on it, each in turn) briefly before, residing at the limit of sense – touchable only in thinking its untouchability. The only tactile moment of my skin that is transmittable here is through the weighing of thought – only touch touching itself at its border (or beyond, perhaps, though we will never know), the writing exscribing my skin, or my skin exscribed here, or there, where you are. “Without even being watched over or pointed out, each word speaks in tongues to the skin [*touche un mot de la langue à la peau*].” (Derrida, 146)

Can I have possibly brought my skin to presence? This question folds into itself and refracts its reflexivity over time. Can this writing act like a pinch for my skin? This conscription, this trace effacing my skin: What becomes present, and when? Now? – Now is only time deferred and deferred by writing: restless, nomadic, a *différance*. No, my skin is not present in the common sense of the word, but something else is: precisely, the scan of my skin, present as the scan itself (the scan repeating itself, differing from itself in repetition). This writing, then, is my apostrophic and anesthetized touch – addressing an abstraction that is nevertheless quite real, and touching by way of the untouchable – the extrasensible touching-itself of the touch. I scan my skin, as do you, each of us only on that ontological touch's terms. And so, at the end, we are left with that semiotic skin, this leaf, the page, my gift, my presentation of my skin. I touched (on) my skin, I scanned my skin, and you now scan the scan. Out-of-time through time, we are touching.

## Notes:

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1. Like Augustine, I must write to save my skin from oblivion, yet through writing my skin must be left behind, forgotten. See Lyotard, Jean François, The Confession of Augustine, (trans: Richard Beardsworth). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. pp. 29.
2. Schroeder, Brian, *The Listening Eye: Nietzsche and Levinas* in Research in Phenomenology 31 (1), pp. 188-202, September, 2001. pp. 190; emphasis added.
3. Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Elliptical Sense* (trans: Jonathan Derbyshire) pp. 91-111 in A Finite Thinking, Ed. Simon Sparks, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. pp. 93.
4. Derrida, Jacques, *Le Toucher*, (trans: Peggy Kamuf) in Paragraph vol. 16 no. 2, pp. 122-157, 1993. pp. 137.
5. See The Sense of the World, (trans: Jeffrey S. Librett). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. pp. 59-63. Also, Nancy (in *L'Intrus*, 2002:14), who is acutely aware of his own externality, of his already-networkedness, suggests that for him and his now-recognized-as-other heart, "I am suffering" implies that there are two "I"s, "each one foreign to the other (yet touching)." The multiple multiplies indefinitely. The singular is already plural, without losing its singularity.
6. Barthes, Roland, A Lover's Discourse, (trans: Richard Howard). New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978. pp. 67.
7. This discussion refers to Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, (trans: Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
8. Inasmuch as we seem to be able to recognize the face under a very large variety of circumstances, light-contexts, changes (growth-related or otherwise), etc. this "face recognition" sense has provided an interesting problem for computer science. I won't linger here, please see Zhao, W. et. al. "Face Recognition: A Literature Survey," Technical Report CARTR-948, Center for Automation Research, University of Maryland, 2000.
9. Deleuze, Gilles, Difference and Repetition, (trans: Paul Patton). Columbia University Press, 1995. pp. 2. And truly, the law is bigger than what the 'libido' can account for – the libido is only a machination of the law of touch.
10. Nancy, Jean-Luc, *L'Intrus*, (trans: Susan Hanson). The New Centennial Review, Vol. 2 Number 3, pp. 1-14, 2002.
11. Saramago, José, Baltasar and Blimunda, (trans: Giovanni Pontiero). San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987. pp. 67-68.
12. Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology* in Basic Writings, Ed. David Farrell Krell, pp. 311-336, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977. pp. 319.
13. If for no other reason than to refocus and amplify on the technicity of the skin, let us note that in June 2004, the software giant Microsoft was granted exclusive rights to use the skin as a medium for a computer network. In other words, using the already-existing electrical conductivity of the skin, Microsoft (or whomever) could transmit power current and/or data across the body. See US Patent 6,754,472. Rather obviously, the question concerning the ethics of this kind of patent is interesting, though it falls outside the scope of this paper.
14. Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Unsacrificable* (trans: Richard Stamp and Simon Sparks) pp. 51-77 in A Finite Thinking, Ed. Simon Sparks, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. pp. 75. Yes, it should be clear, I am touched profoundly by the thought of Nancy.