

Immersion in/of the Skin

The Potential of the Skin in Creative Practice: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

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We seek to think *about* the skin, but also
to think *with* or *through* the skin.

(Ahmed/Stacey 2001: 16)

This contribution focuses on the potential of the skin, the skin's tactility, the skin's sense perception for creative pedagogical or choreographical processes and also the process of thinking or writing on the phenomenology of dance. The reflection is about how the skin accommodates a source and place for creation. This contribution describes the theoretical foundations of it and how methodologically the creative potential of the skin can be activated through physical experiences. It explores the benefits of working with the skin in order to deepen and extend the knowledge of movement, the generation of movement and to inquire into the dynamic quality of the skin.

The skin is permanently of interest in the context of human science, artistic research, but also for the broad public. Recently the Musée de l'Homme in Paris put on a significant exhibition *Dans ma Peau* (2019), where the public was invited to immerse themselves into it. In the remarkable choreographic piece from Jefta van Dinther *Dark Field Analysis* two Protagonists are dialoguing at the beginning of the piece about the skin, about a body without a skin, about getting under someone's skin. This ambiguity invites us as a public to dive into their body, through their skin, into their process, we wish to explore with them the movement on a kinesthetic level.¹

¹ Intentionally organic or psychological/psychosomatic illness related aspects of the skin such as dermatoses, skin surgery, skin cancer or skin pain due to the treatment of cancer,

The Skin is Movement

The skin is considered as the multi-permeable membrane between space, sphere and “is lived as both a boundary and a point of connection” (Ahmed/Stacey 2001: 2). The skin expands as well as between oneself and others. The skin is “an authentic extension exposed, entirely turned outside while also enveloping the inside, a sack crammed with rumblings and musty odors. Skin touches and lets itself be touched” (Nancy 2008: 159).

He or She, the skin, depending on the context, is seen as a surface, an interface, an envelope, and is a site where creativity takes place through perception and sensation. The pronoun *S/He* should be used because the skin in our context is almost an independent identity, an entity, with her/his own non-verbal language through tactility and the skin is recognized as being a living part of a symbiotic relationship with the rest of the body and the mind. As the biggest and largest sensorial organ of the body the skin is movement:

S/He is constantly being recreated and replicated.

S/He regenerates her/himself.

S/He stretches her/himself during pregnancy.

Her/His electrodermal activity and the related psychogalvanic state are a barometer of the emotional movement (tension, release).

S/He supports in addition to that heat regulation.

And *s/he* moves with the inner space of the body because of her/his connections with the internal envelope of the body, the fascia.

The Skin is Signature

The skin, highly invested at the intimate, personal and public level testifies to modern societal evolutions through self-marking, self-stigmatization with tattoos, piercings, or henna applications. “The skin is the place where one touches and is touched by others; it is both the most intimate of experiences and the most public marker of race, sex and national history.” (Ahmed/Sta-

cutting, flaying, skin carving, perverse manifestations, nakedness or certain sexual practices related to the skin will be disregarded. Indeed, such an approach would not be relevant for the present theme and would open too broad a range of questions.

cey 2001: 2) Those manifestations are necessities for an identity signature, which demonstrates how the skin and the self are close together.

In that sense, some linguistic expressions – indicators of sensation and perception such as in French *mal dans sa peau* (one's strange feeling), *sauver sa peau* in German we find it too with the expression *seine Haut retten*, in English *save one's skin*, supports the idea that the skin and the self are linked to each other. More positively, the state of being in love as suggested by Frank Sinatra's song *I've got you under my skin* evokes this idea of integrating into oneself, as the baby and her/his mother are in the beginning, it defines the desire to find this state of being connected by a common skin again, connected by one thought. In the development of the child, he or she – the child – will have to learn and recognize that the skin of her/his mother isn't her/himself. While going through this separation, he or she will discover her/himself in the environment and the development of her/himself.

The Skin and the Self

At the level of the development of the relationship between the self and the skin the psychological development of a human being is built from his/her somatic rudiments in a co-construction of body and psyche. The body is the source of first sensory-motor experiences, of first communication and interconnection building a basis for sensation, perception, and thought. For the developmental psychologist Henri Wallon (Anzieu 2018) the skin is the base of proprioceptive sensations, and she/he has an important role in the development of thinking and character. With the principle of tactility/tactile senses, the skin enables us to feel and with it to develop a feeling of ourselves.

Even in the womb, touch is the first of the senses to be developed, appearing when the embryo is less than three centimeters long. The skin and the brain are formed from the same menbrane, the ectoderm. For the newborn but as well as the unborn baby in the womb, the skin is the most important organ of communication and contact (Benthien 2002). When the baby is born, tactile perception is for the newborn primary, followed by auditory perception and only then by visual perception. It is through the skin, the touch but also being touched that the newborn, the baby, and then the child learn where the boundaries of her/himself are. These primary experiences establish close connections between skin sensations and emotional states.

Let's refer to the joint work from Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby (1965) and the theory of attachment. Through the following variables, sucking, holding i.e. contact – containment, embracing of the baby i.e. warm skin contact, accompaniment of the mother or caregiver, they develop a base for a relationship. A good investment of those variables provided by the caregiver for the child, permits the construction of a safe haven and a secure base to explore the world. A child can return to the caregiver for comfort and soothing whenever the child feels threatened or afraid. In the prolongation, the child will have a secure area to grow up, physically, psychologically, socially. Those variables are also foundations for the potential space – a creative space developed by the british psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (2005).

In the relationship between mind and body, skin and self, we should direct our attention towards the unprecedented work and unique approach of human subjectivity of Didier Anzieu, a french psychoanalyst, concerning the relations between the experience of the skin and the formation and sustenance of the ego. In his book *Le Moi-peau (The Skin-ego)*, Anzieu sees the skin as a crucially constituent of the mind's structures and functions. According to Anzieu, the Skin-ego, which the child has to achieve is "a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use, during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body" (Anzieu 2018: 43).

The infant will recognize that she/he has her/his own skin and by extension her/his own insides and outsides. The acquisition of the skin ego marks the point at which the infant develops the capacity to imagine her/himself, is able to transpose her/his somatic experiences of the skin into the psychic plane and figure them psychically. The skin ego is modelled not only with experience on the tactile level, but also on the experience of the auditory, olfactory, gustatory and visual sense organs. Anzieu distinguishes nine functions of the Skin-ego, as follows: supporting, containing, shielding, individuating, connecting, sexualizing, recharging, signifying, assaulting, destroying (Anzieu 2018).

Experience is neither knowledge nor non-knowledge. Experience is a passage, a transport from shore to shore, all along a tracing that develops and limits an areality. Nor does thinking pertain to the order of knowing. Thought is *being* insofar as it weighs on its borders, *being* supported, bending onto its

extremities, a fold and release of extension. Each thought is a body. (Nancy 2008: 113)

The Skin in Artistic Investigation

In order to apply the assertion presented above into artistic investigation, and with this to reach the sensitive level, a methodological approach will be presented. A first part of the investigation is based on the approach of the different qualities that the skin has to offer. Alone and as a mover in the group, the participant is invited through sensations, with the tactile senses and the representations to increase the awareness of the skin as follows:

- as the largest surface of the body
- as a clothing, an envelop of the body
- qualities of the skin – heavy warm (weight/idea of repletion) – depth of the skin (connection with the fascias) – tense/narrow/tight – loss/wide – stretching/spreading out the skin in the room – losing the skin – explosion of the skin – drifting
- the boundaries to her/himself to ourselves

The investigation can be continued in the group and focus on awareness of the inner space and the space between group members which together form a membrane.

The investigation goes on two by two. One person with eyes closed starts to move and follow where the body wants to go. At the beginning, she/he follows the idea of a warm-up in a gentle and aware way of moving her/his body, in order in a posterior phase, to be at her/his fullest physical potential. The other person, with an anatomically caring view, on the body and within the sensations, is touching with her/his hand the body of the other person. A particular intention will be given to the quality of the touch and the intensity of the pressure. In certain sessions, a special intention (for example creating space between some joints) can be given through the touch, in order to enhance the sensation of the skin of a body part and its internal and external connections. The participant, with eyes closed, will be let alone and continue in her/his pathway, letting the body move first and let the unknown emerge. Eyes open, she/he tends to continue in this direction.

In this intense state of being, the act of generating movement, perceiving or reflecting movement is taking another dimension of awareness, immediateness in touching the unknown.

Freud's most fascinating and perhaps (I say this without exaggerating) most decisive statement is in this posthumous note: *Psyche ist ausgedehnt: weiss nichts davon*. 'The psyche's extended: knows nothing about it.' The 'psyche', in other words, is *body*, and this is precisely what escapes it, and its escape (we may suppose), or its process of escape, constitutes it as 'psyche', in a dimension of not (being able/wanting)-to-know-itself. So, too, the body, or bodies, that we try to touch through thought: 'psyche's' body, the being-extended and outside-itself of presence-to-the-world. (Nancy 2008: 21)

The participants at the end of this experience generally note a great freedom in the way they move and feel themselves to be, leading to a richness in the qualitative and quantitative level of creative production. The touch and the relationship of trust that emanates through it, reminiscent of that of the early days of psychological development, give them a framework, a support through which they feel confident, and which allows them to let go.

References

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