

Vilém Flusser

Skin¹

Skin atlases? There are some, (for instance Jacobi's). Dermatological texts. And dermatology is about skin diseases. This is not enough. We need a broader dermatology, a science of the skin as a limit between myself and the world. And an atlas that would show the regions through which that limit passes. We need a dermatology that is anthropology, and an atlas that shows our being in the world. But in order to have such a science and such an atlas we must change our attitude. We must become superficial. It must be the surfaces and not the mysteries that are said to cover up, that must interest us. We must concentrate upon mere appearance, ("phainomenon"). Only if we desist from all explanations and significations of appearances, the surface "skin" will become visible. Mystery is not hidden. It lies on the surface of the skin. "Not how the skin is mysterious, but that it is." The mystery is not that I am, or that the world is. Such things may be explained. The mystery is that I am in the world. This cannot be explained, because it is a concrete fact. Theoretically the skin is the limit between myself and the world. But concretely "I" and the "world" are limits of the skin, horizons. Let us be superficial and consider the concrete mystery skin.

The view that is a surface that covers my body is extreme. It is due to my curious capacity to stop outside myself into theory and view myself ecstatically as a body covered by skin. Such an ecstasy is not a very good point of departure for a concrete skin consideration. If I look at the skin surface concretely I am under the impression that it is a plane on which everything happens. I was told, it is true, that some things happen outside the skin, (the "purely objective" and the "purely subjective" ones), but whether what I was told is true is one of the questions a concrete consideration of the skin should be able to answer. Therefore my impression that everything happens on the skin surface is the point of departure of this essay.

The happenings on the skin surface must be classified, if we are to map them. Several categories offer themselves for such classification. For instance the category "agreeable – disagreeable". Thus the happening would become experiences, and the skin an "erogenous" and "pathogenous" surface. A good method to start projecting skin maps. But it will not be applied here. Here the skin surface will be considered a plane on which I happen to the world and the world happens to me. Thus the happenings become facts. It goes without saying that several categories will have to

¹ The typewritten text – original title "The Skin" – on which this edition has been based, was not intended by Flusser for immediate publication. We have therefore kept unfinished or fragmentary sentences but corrected obvious errors of punctuation as well as typing-mistakes or forms of semantic incorrectness. Flusser uses for instance the English reflexion and information in the plural. This might be explained by the fact that the text is probably a self-translation from the German version.

be combined in the future, if our skin atlas is to have usefulness.

Considered thus, (as a place for facts), the skin is a surface which protrudes into the third dimension of space, and does so dynamically along the dimension of time. It is a space-time continuum without losing its two dimensional characteristics. The curves of the skin are its “geographic”, and its dynamics are its “historical” accidents. Some accidents are more or less permanent, (like the abyss “mouth”); others are more ephemeral, (like wounds and other shallow valleys). Skin maps will have to show such features. But they will have to draw the outlines of the continent “skin.”

Those outlines are not sharp, because the skin absorbs and secretes. What may be absorbed is a skin possibility, and it becomes real during absorption. The totality of absorbable influences forms the outer horizon of the skin and may be called “my future”. Each single incoming possibility may be called “an adventure”. During the absorption of an adventure a fact happens on the skin surface. The sum total of such facts may be called “the given world” or “my passive presence in the world”. Each fact leaves a scar on the skin, (even if this may not be visible to the naked eye). This may be called “a fact remembered”. The totality of such scars may be called “my memory” or “my passive past”.

What may be excreted is another skin possibility, and it becomes real during secretion. The totality of excretable effluences forms the inner horizon of the skin and may be called “my freedom.” Each single outgoing tendency may be called “a decision”. During the secretion of a decision a fact happens on the skin surface. The sum total of such facts may be called “how I give myself to the world” or “my active presence in the world”. Each fact leaves a scar on the skin, which may be called “an action remembered”. The totality of such scars may be called “my work” or “my active past”.

These observations permit the drawing of skin outlines. It lies between the horizons of future” and “past”, of “freedom” and “given world”. These horizons overlap but still one can distinguish between an “outer” and an “inner” skin side. This is so because there are limits to the skin possibilities: it has not unlimited absorption and secretion potentialities. There is an inner limit to skin possibilities, and it may be called “I”. I am the most extreme and nebulous limit of freedom. And there is an outer limit to skin possibilities, but curiously enough, it may not be called “the given world”. Concrete observation shows that the given world is absorbable without limit. The outer limit of skin possibilities must be called “my death”. It is the most extreme and nebulous limit of my future. Therefore the classical dichotomy “I- world” must be abandoned during the drawing of skin outlines. The skin lies between the extreme limit “I” which limits the horizon of freedom, and the extreme limit “my death” which limits the horizon of the given world. But we must resist our tendency toward symmetry, (as we must resist all our prejudices).

Although the skin is a continent bathed by the Mediterranean “I” and the ocean “my death”, the two seas may not be compared easily. Both are unreal, in the sense of “merely possible”, and they never and nowhere happen as a fact. But “I” am more like a bottomless abyss below the skin surface, and “my death” is more like a sharp line behind every adventure. “I” and “my death” are different theoretical constructions.

Although the outlines of the skin are imprecise, (like the outlines of America in the 16th century), one can still try to inscribe some accidents on it. Otherwise the atlas here proposed would lose all technical interest. Four very common facts were chosen for that purpose. (a) “I eat a ham-sandwich”, (b) “I read a book”, (c) “I suffer liver pains”, and (d) “I write a letter”. These examples were chosen haphazardly, but it must be confessed that facts of the type “I meet a friend” were excluded. The happening of a different skin on my own is too complex a fact to be inscribed in the map at such early stage. Although, of course, it is facts of that type which are the decisive ones for my being in the world.

(a) A happy coincidence: the decision “I want something to eat” and the adventure “an eatable sandwich” coincide on the skin surface. It is important to note that the two incidences condition each other: The adventure “sandwich” is eatable because of my decision to eat it, and my decision “to eat a sandwich” is so because of the sandwich adventure. One is the cause of the other. This is a coincidence, and not some “psycho-physical parallelism”. Sandwich and appetite coincide, they do not run parallel. “Sandwich” and “appetite” are theoretical concepts (skin possibilities), and “psycho-physic parallelism” is the coincidence of two theories in one single concrete fact: “I eat a ham-sandwich”.

Now if explained theoretically the fact is extremely complex. All theories, (physical, physiological, sociological and so forth on one side, behaviorist, gestaltist, psychoanalytical and so forth on the other), fail to explain it fully. But if considered concretely and superficially, (from the skin surface), it is obvious like every concrete fact. What happens is that the virtualities “sandwich” and “my decision to eat it” condense about some places of the skin surface and become real there. Especially on the skin protuberance “my hand” and the shin abyss “my mouth”. On these places I become real as one who eats a sandwich, and the sandwich becomes real as my eating of it. But this is not a satisfactory description. I become real as one who eats in various ways which vary according to the skin place. I eat differently on my hand and on my mouth. And the sandwich is different on my hand, my mouth and other skin places. “I” and “sandwich” are theoretical hooks on which to hang these various aspects of the concrete fact. If I want to analyze myself and the sandwich, I must analyze the various skin places. And “I” and “sandwich” disappear from the surface of reality after my eating of the sandwich. What is left is a scar: the sandwich is remembered by me.

This fact may be inscribed on the map as follows: my passive and active presence in the world coincide on various places of the skin surface from the fact: I eat a sandwich. The fact has two futures: the adventure “sandwich” coming in from my future, and the decision to eat it coming in from my freedom. And it has two pasts: the sandwich remembered and my deed of having eaten it. “I eat a sandwich” has succeeded, although nobody will deny that it is in need of further improvement.

(b) No happy coincidence in the case of the fact “I read a book”, and no psycho-physical parallelism. In it the skin seems to point from the world to myself in a one-way dynamics. But still: even if the usual theoretical difficulties are bracketed out, the superficial aspect of the fact is complex. The adventure “book” cannot be said to flow into the abyss “eye”, to become real there as the fact “I read it”, and to leave a scar “book remembered”. Because the book can flow in only if it meets my decision to read it. Although it must be admitted that the book causes such a decision. And it does not leave just a scar, but also continues to be readable in the future. This complication renders the inscription on the map difficult, and it is no doubt due to the mystery of the specific skin spot, (the eye), where the fact happens.

There are excellent phenomenologies of the eye and of the glance, for instance Merleau-Ponty’s, Bachelard’s and Ortega’s. Still, the mystery remains inviolated. The reason may be that the eye, unlike other spots of the skin, is immediately invisible. It may be seen only through the glance of somebody else’s eyes (for instance the mirror’s). A glance, (even if it be a phenomenological one), must glance at a glance in order to see it. This methodological complication undoubtedly reflects the fact that the eye is an abyss which reaches deep into freedom and from which the “I” swells to the skin surface most immediately. In the case under consideration the mystery of the eye manifests itself as its capacity for reading. The eye can glance at an adventure as if it were decipherable, (as if it had some meaning). It glances at the sandwich in a way that is different from the glance at the book: the eye makes different decisions. But this is not the whole problem. The glance depends on what it sees; it is conditioned by it and reflects it. The book conditions the eye toward a reading decision. But the glance has a certain autonomy with regard to what it sees. It may try to read the sandwich and to look at the book as if it were something to eat. Theoretically much may be said to explain this reading faculty of the eye, and theory of communication does so. But no theory can explain the mystery of the eye fully.

If one tries to inscribe the fact “I read a book” on the skin map in spite of this, one would have to do this approximately as follows: a possible adventure “book” comes in from the given world of my future, provokes the decision to read it on the skin spot “eye” and becomes real in the fact “I read it”. Its future is double: the given adventure and my decision to read it. But the future “adventure” is anterior to the future “decision”, and the given world is anterior to my

freedom. After its realization the fact bifurcates into a past, (“book remembered”), and a future, (“the possibility to read it again”). Nobody will consider such an attempt to describe the fact to have been very successful, but some may think that it is worth while trying.

(c) The fact that I suffer liver pains offers difficulties of inscription within the map which are of quite a different order. In order to face them we must resist the temptation to fall back into the extreme point of view which we have abandoned with such an effort. If we consider the skin to be the surface which covers the body, then, of course, the liver, being a part of the body, lies on its inner side and liver pains come in from the inner skin side. But if we consider the fact “I suffer liver pains” from the surface, “liver pains” are seen as one of my possible adventures which come in, like the sandwich and the book, from out of my given world, from the skin outside. Such a view shows the liver pains to be a theoretical concept before its realization on the skin, just like the sandwich and the book, and therefore to lie in my future as one of the skin possibilities. But, of course, there can be no liver pains without a liver. The liver is thus shown to be an adventure which lies behind the liver pains, therefore farther away in the given world, in my future, (more theoretical and less possible than liver pains). Now this raises two questions as far as inscription into the skin is concerned: how to inscribe the body, and how to use the scale.

Seen “objectively”, the body is a synchronized organism. But seen concretely it is a vague concept which tries to cover a field of very disparate parts. The eye is a part of the body where the future becomes real as the given world. The finger is a part of the body where I become real in the world. The liver is a part of the body which makes it possible that the fact “I suffer liver pains” happens. Ribonucleinic acids are parts of the body which make it possible to theoretically explain certain facts that happen on the skin surface. Therefore the body will have to appear on the skin map as sporadically scattered parts which lie at various distances from the skin surface within the given world, or are part of the surface.

The scale of the map will have to base itself on A. Moles’ research into “proximity”. Moles projects a space-time structure according to which dimension is the distance between myself and things, (“objets”²), and the measure of which is the interest the things peak in me. Thus the sandwich is nearer than the liver, if I want to eat it, and the liver nearer than the sandwich if I suffer pains. But Moles’ space-time has myself at its center, whereas the skin map has the skin surface, (the dialectics between myself and the thing) as its center. The “théorie des objets”³ must be adapted to the map structure before it is used as a scale for map inscriptions.

This will allow the following inscription of the fact “I suffer liver pains”: out from the future, (the given world), the adventure “I suffer liver pain” comes in and becomes real on the skin

² French in the text.

³ French in the text.

surface as the fact “I suffer them”. Behind that future there is a more distant one, (the liver), which is more objective in the sense of further away in the given world. The skin spot where the fact happens is part of my passive being in the world, (a “suffering”). The fact leaves a scar “liver pains remembered”, and thus becomes part of the past. This seems to be a quite satisfactory way to inscribe the fact into the skin map.

(d) The fact “I write a letter” must not be considered as an opposite of the fact “I suffer liver pains” because of the one being active and the other passive. We must resist our tendency toward symmetry, because observation of concrete facts shows active ones to be far more complex than passive ones. In the fact to be described a pressure from inside the skin dominates which comes from my freedom in the form of my decision to write a letter. It is, of course, an extremely complex process, if it is considered theoretically. But even if we put all those theoretical complexities within brackets, the fact is still complex because of the counter-pressure which the decision to write a letter provokes on this skin outside.

The pressure expands the skin in an act “I stretch out my hands” through which the skin reaches out into the given world. There it strikes against one of the given possibilities of the world: a typewriter. That possibility becomes real on the hands as part of my presence in the world, but immediately turns around from the present into the future. It becomes a prolonged hand and my decision to write a letter propels it further into the future. There it strikes against a further possibility of the world: a paper. The pressure of the typewriter against the paper changes the paper and results in the concrete fact “I write a letter”.

The passive element in the active process of my decision is what makes the fact complex. My decision strikes against “objects”, (counter-pressures”) and realizes itself through them by turning them around, by “revolutions”. The typewriter imperative “write with me!”, and the paper imperative “write on me!” are turned around to become imperatives which turn the things away from me into my future.” Such revolutionable objects, such possibilities for the realization of other possibilities, may be called “instruments”, and their sum total may be called “culture”. Other objects in my future which cannot thus be revolutionized may be called “nature”. Which means that I can write a letter because part of my future, (the given world), is culture.

Now such a way to describe the fact and to try and inscribe it in the map has its advantages and its disadvantages. The advantage is that it makes the distinction between culture and nature one of degree, not of kind, and that it makes it dependent on the dialectics between the given world and my decision. The more a given adventure is revolutionable, and the more I decide to turn it around, the more it is culture and the less it is nature. The typewriter is culture, if I want to write, but less so, if I want to eat a sandwich. And if I am a Brazilian Indian, it is nature, because it is then not given as a revolutionable possibility. This is an advantage in the description, because

it allows, for instance, the distinction, on the map, between a “rightist” and a “leftist” being in the world. He who is in the world on the right has a skin where the given world happens more in the form of nature, and he who is in the world on the left pressures his skin by decisions which make the future happen in the form of a revolutionable culture.

Yet this way to describe the fact is also a disadvantage. If the difference between culture and nature is one of degree, and it depends in part on the decision toward revolution, then no adventure is definable as “culture” before I decide myself to it. It is no help to say that I decide to eat a sandwich and to write on typewriter because these possibilities offer themselves for such decision. Because they offer themselves thus only after my decisions. Thus it becomes quite mysterious why a decision at all is ever taken. This is a big disadvantage of the description, and very probably due to some mistake that occurred during the description. This must be confessed.

By the way: the same mistake must have occurred during the liver pain description. If one explains that fact objectively one has explained it from the “right” as a fact caused by this body. This is vulgar, (fascist) materialism. If one explains the fact from the skin surface, one has explained it from the “left” as a fact which results from the dialectics between the given world and my presence in it. But this is no explanation. Is liver pain nature because I cannot decide to suffer it? And if so, why can I not?

With this disadvantage in mind, one can proceed with the inscription of the fact within the map as follows: My freedom presses against the skin as a decision to write a letter, and realizes itself in the world as the act of stretching out my hands, turning around a typewriter, and changing a paper, which means as the fact “I write a letter”. This fact has two futures: my freedom and the revolutionable world of culture. And two pasts: the written letter remembered, and my work “the written letter”. This second past is the future of somebody else’s, (his adventure), but this cannot be inscribed in the map at this stage of its projection. On the other hand, what can be inscribed is this: The fact “I write a letter” is an act, i.e.: a gesture of the skin surface. The map may contain a series of gestures. Now it is very doubtful that many will agree to this way of inscribing the fact, but some will agree that it is open to further improvement.

Let us reconsider these reflections before we try to reach for a conclusion. The thesis was that concrete facts happen on a dynamic surface between myself and the world. That surface is the skin in a sense very near, but not quite identical with the sense meant in dermatology. If one means the skin thus, it becomes visible from a specific point of view, called the “superficial” one in this paper. During the attempt to define the skin it became evident that it does not lie between myself and the world, but between myself and my death. Once defined, some specific facts were taken as tests for the elaboration of a skin map. They were chosen from an ontological viewpoint,

but it was confessed that other viewpoints must complete the chosen one, if the map is to be useful. The attempt at inscription met with varying success. The question is now: is it worth while to make such a map?

Apparently this should have been asked at the beginning of this paper. But this was impossible, because at that point the question would not reveal its meaning. One could have said then that every map is useful, if it serves orientation in a complex situation, and that it does so by simplifying the situation. If the map here proposed does so, it is useful. And it does so: it simplifies complex problems like psycho-physical parallelism, freedom / condition, the problem of the body, culture/nature, “rightist/leftist” existence, and so forth. But this is not a good answer to the question. It does not ask whether such a map would be useful, but whether it is worth while, whether the costs involved compensate its usefulness, (to speak with Moles).

At this point of the argument it has become obvious that the costs involved would be very considerable. Costs that may only be compared to those involved in the elaboration of an atlas of the Earth during the period of Discoveries. Possibly a skin atlas would not cost as many lives as the Earth atlas did, although its elaboration would not be less of an adventure. On the other hand its projection would be much more difficult and costlier than was the Mercator projection. To understand this, the following must be considered.

Traditional maps are flat projections of three-dimensional objects. A historical atlas is a good example for this problem: it is an instrument for orientation within a space-time. It projects space on individual plane maps, and time as a sequence of maps. This will not do for the skin atlas. If it were structured thus, it would not function, because it would fail to store the information coming in from superficial skin observation. The skin is a surface that has as time-space dynamics. Only an atlas of similar structure would be able to store the information coming from it. Otherwise the information in the atlas would become crowded, and it would be useless. Now we possess media of such structure. Videotapes and holograms are examples. The skin atlas here proposed must take recourse to such media, if it is to function. And this is very costly.

Not mainly because the materials are expensive, their manipulation is expensive, and their utilization. But because these media require the collaboration of very expensive workers, like scientists, philosophers, artists, and media manipulators. And because such a collaboration requires the elaboration of difficult and costly methods. What the question means is whether such costs are worth while.

He who accepts Husserl’s thesis of the necessity to reformulate the basis of science will answer the question in the affirmative. The crisis of science manifests itself, among other things, as a crisis of maps and other models. Almost all of them have been projected from a transcendent, objective viewpoint. They do not store information acquired through phenomenological observa-

tion. But this is not all: they do not even store objectively acquired information any longer. Their structural poverty prevents them from absorbing the enormous amount of daily incoming information. The information inflation from which we suffer is the other side of the map crisis. We need new types of maps, if we are to digest the information inflation. As long as we do not have them, more information means more confusion. The incapacity of science to provide us with orientation in the world is an aspect of the crisis of science.

This becomes obvious if the skin is considered. We dispose of a great amount of objective information about it. But these cannot be stored in a skin-atlas because they have been acquired through various methods of observation and are thus unrelatable to each other. And we also dispose of much information acquired through phenomenological observation. But this information is not only unstorable in present skin maps, but is covered up by such maps and disappears from our vision. As a consequence we are alienated from our skin, (we are not in our own skin, but in an alien one), which means that we are alienated from ourselves and our world. And the more we learn about the skin, the more we are alienated. The question means whether it is worth while to attempt an instrument for disalienation.

The reflections here offered do not provide any guarantee that such an attempt would be successful. The elaboration of such a skin atlas is a technical problem. As such it lies outside the competence of this writer. Therefore the purpose is this: (a) it wants to draw attention to the need of new types of maps, and to the existence of media suitable for such a purpose. (b) It wants to propose the elaboration of a specific map of the new type: a skin atlas. (c) It wants to ask scientists, artists and philosophers whether they believe such a proposal of interest, and media manipulators, whether they think it of interest and feasible.

In the last analysis, however, what this paper wants is to provoke a discussion of the following matter: The time for individual reflection is over. Even if it wants to be dialogical reflection. The time for traditional philosophy is over. From now on each single step of reflection must be made by collaboration of various disciplines, ("interface reflection"). For instance: the time for traditional philosophical anthropology is over. The interplay of various disciplines will "overcome" it. This paper wanted to show how this might happen, by proposing the elaboration of a skin map. It is, however, characteristic of our situation that this paper itself is still an individual traditional reflection. The fact that such a type of reflection is over may be regretted or hailed: no matter. What matters is that we must face the fact, and to face it together with others is the true motive and purpose of the present paper.