

**Probing the Skin:
Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone
CONFERENCE**

April 24-26, 2013

Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena

Organizers: Prof. Caroline Rosenthal and Prof. Dirk Vanderbeke

In the last decades, the body has been at the centre of attention in both literary and cultural studies. From psychoanalytical approaches to masculinity studies, from media studies and art history to medical discourses and spatial theory, the construction, negotiation, manipulation and deconstruction of the body, whether literal or figurative, have been explored. Likewise, the senses have been discussed and scrutinized, particularly the multiple roles and functions of the eye and ear. Little attention, however, has been paid to the skin. This is surprising, as the skin is not only the largest organ receiving, and responding to, sensual stimuli but also constitutes the permeable border between inside and outside, the interior body and the outside world. Viruses and bacteria enter us via our skin and bodily fluids are exuded through our skin as well. Skin protects, adorns, and identifies us; it is what makes us knowable at first sight. Our skin is in the most literal sense our contact zone, the border where the body meets the world, where we feel heat, cold, pain, caresses and where we, voluntarily or involuntarily respond to various stimuli with goose bumps, shivers, blushing, bleeding, or physical signs of lust.

Skin is also a surface and as such has been perceived and represented differently through the ages. Dismissed in the Middle Ages as the gaudy wrapping of our less pleasant and rather messy insides, skin has a history of its own as a projection space. Skin is not only an organ but also a cluster of signs that can be veiled or revealed; as such it is always part of both real and symbolic orders. The skin is what we present to the world, it shows our youth or age, it indicates our health or sickness, excitement or boredom, it makes us ugly or pretty, and it renders our self-assuredness or uncertainty. Moreover, skin has been the most obvious marker for constructions of race or ethnicity.

Skin, then, serves as a projection sphere for collective expectations and demands as much as it is a locus of individual memory, representation and performance. We treat our skin medically

and cosmetically with ointments, creams, and unguents in our desire to let it appear in the best light and thus to reflect our inner virtues and mundane aspirations. It is the skin that is embellished by tattoos or deliberately marked in other ways to signify membership to a specific group or to ostracize, brand, and stigmatize a person. Via welts and scars the skin reflects, remembers, and gives testimony to torture and mutilation in prison, camps or during slavery and captivity. The skin is thus inscribed with individual and collective memories, experiences and traumata.

The conference intends to bring together discussions of skin across various disciplinary fields and academic discourses. We want to explore artistic reflections of skin related themes in literature, art, media studies, and anthropology. Possible questions and topics might include:

- ⇒ Skin as a medium and surface. In art, film, and literature alike, frequent parallels have been drawn between the skin and a canvas or piece of paper onto which signs are inscribed
- ⇒ Skin as *lieux de memoire*. Skin as bearing the traces of deliberate or forceful marks such as tattoos, scars, burns, or lacerations
- ⇒ Skin as a mask and performative space. Skin hides as much as it reveals. The lack of skin has been used as a sign for ultimate horror and breach of taboo in film, art, and literature
- ⇒ Skin as a contact zone, as the permeable border between inside and outside, real and imaginary orders
- ⇒ Skin as a third space, as something in-between the oppositions of nature-culture, inside-outside, body-mind
- ⇒ Skin as a means of inclusion and exclusion, as something that grants membership or exorcizes, as a marker for beauty or deformations
- ⇒ Skin as a marker for identity and individuality as an allegedly unchangeable sign of our identity
- ⇒ Skin as a medium for the senses, for hurt, lust, pain
- ⇒ Skin as a trophy, an object of value or even currency

We invite abstracts of app. 300 words from all disciplines until March 1, 2012. The language of the conference will be English.

Please submit the abstracts to one of the organizers:

Prof. Dr. Caroline Rosenthal and Prof. Dr. Dirk Vanderbeke
Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
Ernst-Abbe-Platz 8
07743 Jena
caroline.rosenthal@uni-jena.de / vanderbeke@t-online.de