The Limits of Phenomenology: On the Inconceivable and the Unrepresentable in Skin and Membrane Metaphors

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What I have in mind in this essay is a brief critique of phenomenological criticism. It strikes me phenomenology is one of the principal theoretical models for inquiries into bodily representation, and it tends to be used informally in a wide range of disciplines. (I should say that the strict doctrine of phenomenology is still pursued in various parts of the world; in my experience it is particularly strong in America, England, France, China, and Japan. Some places are still just discovering Merleau-Ponty: the Academy in Hangzhou, for example, is planning translations of Merleau-Ponty and Jean Clair. In America, there is a movement called "post-phenomenology," which is comprised mostly of phenomenologists.)

Here I am not interested in strict philosophy as much as in interpretive practices in medicine, history, art history, and art criticism which are loosely and informally based on Merleau-Ponty. In art history, as in several of the disciplines we've heard from in this conference, phenomenology is not only the best available account of sense-transcriptions, it is effectively the only one. Some art historians have read turn-of-the-century German authors such as Theodor Lipps and Robert Vischer, but most would invoke Merleau-Ponty. Behind his work there is existentialism, Sartre, and finally Husserl. Each of them has been named in recent accounts.

Most of the time, however, scholars don't invoke any philosophers. In America several of the most influential art historians are "secretly" disciples of Merleau-Ponty-which is to say they follow his ideas, but they don't always cite him. A number of scholars write a kind of art history and criticism that depends on taking note of the historian's own bodily reactions in front of artworks. That kind of writing is also loosely phenomenological, and it is the kind of writing I want to address today.

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First it's necessary to say that there is good reason for the historians not to cite Merleau-Ponty, because he seldom provides much support for the kinds of writing that the historians prefer. Certainly any attempt to invoke Merleau-Ponty as a theoretical source would have to account for the strong mismatch between his vocabulary (which involves words like "sensation," "horizon," "body," "head,"

"interior," "exterior," and "perspective") and the interests of nearly any art historical analysis (which depends on exact questions about the positions, shapes, textures, and colors of wrists, fingers, eyes, and other rather body parts). The same observation could be made about current cultural theory: Judith Butler's work, for example, is disembodied and abstract in this sense. In other words, I think the theory of phenomenology can't support what's actually happening in art historical practice.

By itself, the disparity between what Merleau-Ponty says and what art historians do is not significant. It is really only an instance of the common habit of citing the nearest available theory in order to get on with some more-or-less unrelated and presumably more interesting practice. But the second-hand reliance on phenomenology still concerns me, because it seems to support the idea that all phenomena relevant to a picture are potentially available to an introspective analysis.

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Two concepts can show the kind of problem I have in mind: the unrepresentable and the inconceivable.

In the study of images of the body, a central question concerns what is *representable*. If the representable is whatever can be displayed in any given context, then the unrepresentable is whatever cannot be put into an image because it has no pictorial equivalent.

Medical illustration, and paintings of the body, are particularly interesting places to look for signs of the unrepresentable, because they omit so much of their subjects. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Western medical images have become increasingly specialized, so they omit large parts of the body, simplifying or omitting all irrelevant organs and tissues, as well as irrelevant colors, motions, narratives, physiognomics, and symbolism.

A ready example of the large part played by the unrepresentable is the history of skin textures, before and after the advent of photography. In many cases it required photography to give doctors a sense of what had been unrepresentable in terms of the pictorial conventions of color lithography and engraving. Before photography, even the most vigilant medical illustrations had a property I like to call *glossing*, in which the artist's eye, and the lithographic crayon, slid over the surface of the patient's body without stopping to record the outlandish textures of pathologies such as mercury poisoning, syphilis, or neurofibromatosis.

In earlier medical illustration, the doctor's eye glossed the skin as a reader might gloss a page, missing the everyday texture. After photography, medical illustrators and doctors were forced to confront many textures and conditions that were previous left unrepresented. The unrepresentable is well known to medical students and specialists in computer-assisted medical imaging, because they constantly deal with forms, colors, and textures that cannot be captured in whatever technology

they are using —I'll come back to this toward the end. The history of medicine and the history of art lag a little behind medical practice in this regard, especially when they concentrate only on what is present in an image.

In addition to the unrepresentable there is another non-phenomonological concept I find very useful. It is more elusive and even less studied. The inconceivable is whatever is absent from *imagined* bodies, and therefore fails even to present itself as a technical or conceptual lack in an image.

Take the example of Moses's face. What did he look like? Those of you who have read the second book of the Bible know there are no illustrations, and you may also recall there are no descriptions of Moses aside from one mention of his hair and his "shining" face.

Yet if a Westerner imagines Moses, he or she will almost surely think of the actor Charlton Heston, who played Moses in a famous film. I'm fairly sure Moses didn't look like Charlton Heston, and I know from reading *Exodus* and *Numbers* that the best idea of Moses's face would be to have no idea at all, if that were possible-if it were possible to read the story of Exodus without thinking of a face at all. In terms of the text, his face is unconceived, and even (so I would argue) inconceivable; and in addition it is unrepresented and unrepresentable.

There are more intricate examples, but I only want to say enough here to introduce the distinction between the unrepresentable and the inconceivable. On the one hand, there is the unrepresentable: whatever is taken to be properly not an attribute of the visualized body, so that it is excluded from representation, slurred, glossed, or otherwise inadequately or partially shown. On the other hand, there is the inconceivable: whatever can be described as a conceptual absence, a gap or lack *in the concept of the representable itself.*

The two concepts are especially helpful when it comes to images that do not fit the canons and conceptions of the figure in the Western history of art. Images such as: the uncatalogued kinds of abbreviated figures in rock art and neolithic artifacts, the glyphs in Mayan writing, the anthropomorphic forms from Chinese Shang dynasty vessels and the early oracle bone script, are all example of represented bodies that depend heavily on forms that were taken to be unrepresentable, or were more deeply inconceivable. It isn't enough, looking at such figures, to speak about the departures from Western realism and perspective as phenomenologists do. Those departures *seem* like they're fundamentally at odds with Western canons of naturalism, and therefore they *seem* like they're properly the concern of phenomenology: but actually the odd features of such pictures are neither departures from Western norms, nor transcriptions of bodily experiences. They depend, at a basic level, on what they omit.

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In a moment I will go on to the examples I've chosen for this essay, skin metaphors in Western art and medical illustration. But before I do that, I want to spend just a few minutes describing a possible non-phenomenological ground for the theory of the unrepresentable and the inconceivable.

A very useful starting-point, I've found, is the difference between two Platonic conceptions of truth, which both occur in the *Republic*. In the first, truth is something that is "disclosed," and in the second it is "negotiated." Both are discussed in Heidegger's reading of Plato's *Republic*, and in subsequent accounts by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jacques Derrida. *Aletheia*, in my reading, presents the best opportunity to speak of the concept of the inconceivable, and *homoiosis*, or adequation, is the place where the unrepresentable negotiates with the representable, revealing partial or working truths.

The disclosure or "unconcealment" (*aletheia*), the fundamental figure for the appearance of truth in book 5 of the *Republic*, changes when Plato begins to speak of "aedequation" (*homoiosis*) to truth in book 10. In Lacoue-Labarthe's terms, in book 7 "Plato no longer understands the essence and meaning of *aletheia*... but instead begins to interpret it in terms of *homoiosis*, adequation." For Heidegger and Lacoue-Labarthe, that shift in meaning be taken as the exemplary drama in which the two forms of truth we still inherit first became visible.

There are many ways to translate the difference between aletheia and homoiosis into modern discourses. I could say, for example, that aletheia implies truth is found in a correspondence with the world, and homoisosis in coherence among accounts: in that case, Plato's two usages would become the "correspondence" and "coherence" theories of truth. In an unpublished seminar, Foucault makes a comparable distinction between an "analytics of truth," "concerned with determining how to ensure that a statement is true," and a "critical" tradition, concerned with "knowing who is able to tell the truth" and why the truth should be told. And there is also the question of representation in psychoanalysis, where the *inconceivable* unconscious idea may be *represented* to consciousness by a symptom or other sign. I do not mean to make strict parallels in any of these cases-I am only pointing out the extremely wide possibilities of the fundamental construction of aletheia and homoiosis, and suggesting that Foucauldian or Freudian discourse might not be the only ways of opening these questions.

According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger did not quite succeed in keeping homoiosis "secondary or derived" in relation to aletheia, opening the way to what Derrida calls "an inadequation or an instability belonging to homoiosis." The recent readings-Derrida on Lacoue-Labarthe on Heidegger-have become increasingly subtle, and Lacoue-Labarthe attempts to initiate a new kind of experience of truth motivated by a "play" with the return of homoiosis. One of Derrida's central

comments is that Lacoue-Labarthe may not be able to control that play, and that aletheia may perpetually dissolve into homoiosis-so that their relation may not be susceptible to such a managed rearrangement.

This is a fascinating subject, and it couldn't be more important for the history of Western philosophy. Here I only want to remark that it is also a good place to start when it's a matter of thinking about what cannot find a place in images. Truth understood as aletheia perpetually discloses what was inconceivable, and truth as homoiosis may be said to concern itself principally with what can be represented. Phenomenologically, of course, truth isn't in question-it has to be adequate and unveiled-because phenomenology is an attempt to short-circuit the notion of experience beyond phenomena.

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With that I want to turn to my subject, skin and membrane matephors: beginning with what Heinrich Wolfflin called the "Latin Renaissance."

When historians want to explain the relative absence of Renaissance interest in skin folds, dimples, softness, hardness, hairs, pores, veins, and the entire catalogue of visual forms specific to skin, they usually point to the Renaissance emulation of Greco-Roman sculpture. The unpainted statues and reliefs, it is said, corresponded to Christian thoughts of the ideal bodies and skins that would be donned in heaven, so that marmoreal textures were natural candidates for expressing the new amalgam of Catholic doctrine and recovered antiquity.

Art historical interpretations tend to stall after they mention the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions, and I'd like to propose that the concepts I have been developing can help broach the impasse. The fact that more can be said is evident, for example, from the *different* ways Renaissance artists negotiated that ideal.

Skin surfaces in Michelangelo's paintings (for instance in the Doni tondo) strenuously deny the palpable texture of skin or the difference between skin and smoothened rock or finely stitched fabric; but in Raphael skin is not so much denied as refigured in terms of very fine, even brushmarks that make the skin look like a closely combed or petted surface-a soft, warm, inviting *animal* surface, a kind of pelt, rather than anything strictly human.

Bronzino, famous for representing skin in terms of cold stone, actually does something more complex: his surfaces are both slick and frozen, like aspic or thickened animal glue spread on stone. A close look at his most labored figures reveals that when he has the time, or the interest, his way of avoiding skin takes him further from metaphors of marble or ice and closer to oil glaze, tacky resin, shellack or lacquer-the skin is not so much petrified as embalmed, encased in a brittle or viscous "second skin" (sometimes evoking, I think intentionally, the "divine garment" of the second coming).

In cases like this it is not sufficient to speak of marble or to say that the idea of skin is elided in representation: skin is *inconceivable*: it does not present itself as part of the pictured body; but it is also *represented*, as a metaphor for something else in the image.

Much the same kind of argument can be urged in relation to post-Renaissance images. Nicolas Jenty's Demonstratio uteri (1761) is an interesting case: it's a thin elephant folio of dissections of a woman who died just before she came to term. If engraving is the ideal medium for linear exposition of geometry and architecture, the mezzotint may be best for the smoky darkness of the inside of the body. Apparently the artist, Jan Van Rymsdyk, had little affinity with skin, since Jenty's first plate, showing the undissected corpse, is a little clumsy, as if he couldn't cope with an expanse of flesh without the detail of the body's inside. In later plates the forms shine softly against the rockered dark background. As the body is dissected the tissues glisten and gleam, still wet and translucent from the fresh cutting.

To Van Rymsdyk, as to many who have been seduced by viscera, the uncut skin is an enigma. It is unrepresentable, and perhaps also inconceivable: it is not part of the body as Jenty or Van Rymsdyk imagine it. But with membranes they are in their element, and perhaps also close to necrophilia.

For a great deal of medical illustration the conceivable body is a bag of tissues and organs, and what is unrepresentable is its normal outsides. This is *not* the perfect negative of the tendencies I sketched in the Italian Renaissance examples: there gross anatomy was presupposed but not represented, and here the viscera and their membranes are the representable body: in both cases the skin is inconceivable.

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The tradition I have been sketching here is one in which skin is unrepresentable and sometimes even inconceivable. Membranes become the focus of attention, and they become rich in metaphorical values. What is normally unrepresentable in fine art, the body's inner membranes, becomes the *only* representable form, and skin is irrelevant, unrepresented, or unrepresentable.

This tradition includes some of the seminal works of Western medical illustration, and so it is no surprise to see it again in the current development of medical imaging. It has only been in the last few years that imaging software has reached the point where skin or membranes can be persuasively depicted. For the most part, skin it still unrepresentable, and the body in these images is comprised of organs and bulk masses rather than boundaries between insides and outsides.

This ispart of a much larger and more complicated history, and I don't want to imply that it can be told using un-historical philosophic terms like the inconceivable. Like any other critical terms, these need to be used carefully, in the analysis of individual images. Then, I think, they can show their value as ways to

get around current interpretive customs. All too often, people in my field assume that if they pay attention to their own body's response to an image, they can gain access to meanings that are foreclosed to those who look only for signs of naural-ism, Euclidean space, and perspective. These concepts, I hope, suggest otherwise.

To me, the most interesting parts of pictures are the absences. When I encounter a new kind of image, something I've never seen before, I find myself wondering about what it omits: how and why it fails to provide the objects it sets out to represent. The wonderful thing about representation is that it always breaks down, and the wonderful thing about pictures of the body is that they break down so quickly, and fail to see so much.