Skin Care: The Sensual Surfaces of Objects

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Abstract
Aesthetic modification of objects through design activity is akin to molting; as the skin ages, it is exfoliated. Redesigning product forms with minimal improvements to utilitarian value is not an uncommon practice in design. Viewed in evaluative terms coined by Marx and Baudrillard, the skin of the object, in such cases, becomes the receptacle for its exchange-value and sign-value rather than its use-value. Creative operations are performed on the skin to add symbolism, stimulate desire and valorize capital, but are often justified as attempts to satisfy a wider range of user needs. This research attempts to study the skins of objects by drawing from the discourse of commodity aesthetics found within and outside design. Perspectives offered by Walter Benjamin about the spell cast by commodities on innocent *flâneurs* in the shopping arcades of Paris will be discussed along with Wolfgang Haug's explanation of aesthetics as mere "appearance of use-value."

These object-skins serve as boundaries and can be seen as signifiers of protection, desire, symbolism, deception, etc. Boundaries often signify separation between cultures, but if permeable, they can sometimes serve as metaphors of amalgamation full of rich multiplicity. The primary objective of this research is to treat the shells of objects as borders between the material and immaterial, between utility and fetishism, but always rich in meaning. Various types of skins, such as rigid, translucent, permeable, elastic, and flexible will be discussed in material, symbolic and cultural terms through theory, empirical information, as well as case studies.

Keywords: Skin, Object, Signifier, Fetishism, Symbolism

> Skin is a multilayered, multipurpose organ that shifts from thick to thin, tight to loose, lubricated to dry, across the landscape of the body. Skin, a knowledge-gathering device, responds to heat and cold, pleasure and pain. It lacks definitive boundaries, flowing continuously from the exposed surfaces of the body to its internal cavities. It is both living and dead, a self-repairing, self-replacing material whose exterior is senseless and inter while its inner layers are flush with nerves, glands, and capillaries. Contemporary designers approach the surfaces of products and buildings as similarly complex, ambiguous forms. Manufactured skins are richly responsive substances that modulate the meaning, function, and dimension of things.
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> Ellen Lupton, Skin: Surface, Substance + Design

Introduction

Aesthetic modification of product form is common practice in industrial design. Designers are trained to create beautiful products, which not only provide an aesthetic experience to users, but also lead to enhanced profitability. In fact, the practice of industrial design partially grew out of this very desire to increase sales in a market flooded with too many goods. Historian Jeffrey Meikle argues that, "industrial design was born of a lucky conjunction of a saturated market, which forced manufacturers to distinguish their products from others…" (1979: 39). Though referred to by responsible designers as the stigma of styling, modification

of product form for increased profits and market differentiation is not necessarily viewed as a vile practice in industrial design. In these situations, the designer's engagement is often limited to the external surfaces of the object, and I would like to refer to this practice as skin care.

In cultural studies (the discipline that deconstructs products and services to better understand their presence in society), aesthetic modification is not always viewed quite so favourably, especially in schools of thought formulated around Marxist ideologies. One of the earliest discussions of product form in post-Marxist thought is found in Wolfgang Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, in which he coins the term "commodity aesthetics." He refers to this as an illusion and believes that "appearance always promises more, much more than it can ever deliver" (1986). This discussion reveals that product surfaces can be evaluated on entirely different terms, and this paper will refer to these dialectical positions adopted by scholars in these disciplines.

I intend to create a discourse about the skins (external surfaces or shells) of objects, by creating a typology and by explaining how they are represented and critiqued in design as well as in media and cultural studies. As most interactions with objects involve some contact with their external surfaces, these skins function as locations where multiple meanings may be created by designers, users, historians and critics. These meanings will be explored through the following questions:

- What meanings and values are attached to object skins in the disciplines of design and cultural studies?
- What would be the nature of a typology of skin created based upon perceived meanings?
- Can this discourse of skins be clarified through case studies of specific objects?

Everyday life, aestheticized

"When we declare that mere surface cannot possibly have legitimate value, we deny human experience and ignore human behaviour" (Postrel 2003). In her book, *The Substance of Style*, Virginia Postrel argues that aesthetics has become a significant and omnipresent component

of everyday life in the US, and our increasing fondness of and dependence on beautiful surfaces is visible in objects, environments, architecture, interiors and our own bodies. The burgeoning profession of "image-making," manscaping metrosexuals fussing over the perfect product for the perfect look, and makeover shows on television, all testify to the fact that style has thoroughly seeped into people's lives, leading to what Postrel refers to as the aesthetic age (2003). All these processes rely on calculated manipulation of surfaces to create desired effects, often of glamour and seduction. This is skin care.

The desire to possess beautiful objects is by no means a recent phenomenon, but over the last decade, it has been commodified and its value as a driver for commercial success has been realized by a large number of American corporations such as Pottery Barn, Target, K-Mart, The Great Indoors, and many more. It would not be inaccurate to say that there is a general increase in the number of variations of products available at these stores and many of them exhibit reasonably well-resolved formal characteristics. Increasing ranks of design professionals, growing media coverage and advice literature, and faster online shopping have made access to these goods much easier than ever before.

The signifying skin

In his work on the shopping arcades of the 1800s, Walter Benjamin writes about the gentlemen (*flâneurs*) who leisurely walked through these spaces in Paris (at times with pet turtles who set the pace) eyeing the various luxury goods on display. The skins of these goods that Benjamin's *flâneurs* saw on their lazy strolls while window-shopping seduced them and beckoned them into consumption. "The commodity itself is a speaker here... the commodity whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop-window containing beautiful and expensive things. These objects are not interested in this person; they do not empathize with him" (Benjamin 1973). The object-skins here are beguiling; they signify desire to the *flâneur*, deception to a critic such as Benjamin and monetary gain to the capitalist. They operate as 'floating signifiers,' with non-specific, fluid and shifting 'signifieds' that mean different things to different people. The epidermis is polysemous; lacking fixity in meaning, it provides us with an "infinite range of meanings" (Hebdige 1979). The meanings of object skins, therefore, can be studied in material as well as symbolic terms. The parameters responsible for these multiple meanings lie in their corporeality, their reliance on financial systems and their existence within social structures. They assume various forms; they maybe

rigid, elastic, permeable, dense, translucent, faux, smart, green, ordinary, or fantastic. They may be understood as boundaries between the inside and the outside, the visible surface and invisible technology, or the designed and the engineered. They may be conceived as borders that signify utility and fetishism, use-value and exchange-value, or art and machine. Rich in meaning, object skins can also be seen as signifiers of protection, desire, status, sensuality, deception, etc.

Human and object skins

Human skin forms the boundary between our viscera and the external environment, and provide sensation and protection. It is also the most visible of all organs and one that records and exhibits all the markings of the aging process. Constantly in the process of change, the human skin regenerates itself on a regular basis, shedding its old self for newer, improved versions. It is the location of beauty and lust, but also of disappointment and despair. In humanities and cultural studies, the skin has been discussed mainly in relation to issues of race and profiling (white/black) or within psychoanalytic theory, in relation to the self and ego. Freud, for instance, writes of the development of the ego and its connection to the body surface (1923). Ashley Montagu (1986) in *Touch: The Human Significance of Skin*, recommends that such studies should start from the skin and proceed inwards to the mind, rather than the more commonly practiced psychosomatic approach of mind outwards to skin. Following the footsteps of Freud and Montagu, Didier Anzieu (who also worked with Lacan) elaborates this approach and explains the concept of Skin Ego. He lists nine functions that the Skin Ego can perform for the ego or self, based upon the functions performed by the skin for the body: supporting, containing, shielding, individuating, connecting, sexualizing, recharging, signifying and assaulting/destroying. For example, the Skin Ego can *support* the psyche just as the skin supports the skeleton and muscles, it can *contain* its functions, it can *shield* against external forces, it can *individuate* and give a unique identity to the ego, it can *connect* sensations, it can act as a *sexualizing* surface, it has the ability of libidinal *recharging*, it can, (like tattoos and scars on skin) *signify* sensory marks, and it is a location for taking *assault* from emotions such as anger and self-destruction. These functions of corporeal Skin and ethereal Skin Ego offer an early framework by which to develop a typology of skins for objects.

Skin types

In order to classify and organize the various meanings of surfaces that emerge in the process of production and consumption of the objects, and to facilitate a more holistic reading, it is necessary to create a catalog of skin types. This typology consists of five major categories that signify the primary functions of the object skins: protective skins, informational skins, sensorial skins, technological/intelligent skins, and mythical/fetishistic skins. It is significant to note that the boundaries of these categories define the principal functions, they are permeable and therefore a skin may be simultaneously sensorial (visual or tactile) and mythical/fetishistic, or intelligent and protective.

Protective skins

Skins that serve the specific, utilitarian task of safeguarding are classified as protective, and these are further divided into sub-categories titled shielding, green, and faux. Protection, in this case, is understood in fairly broad terms, as it could signify the safeguarding of technology, the environment, or material identity.

Shielding skins

For a large number of products, the skin serves the primary function of providing an enclosure for technology, or to borrow Anzieu's terms, it supports, contains and shields the components. This is demonstrated in an early example of industrial design practice, the Gestetner duplicator redesigned by Raymond Loewy in 1929. "I decided to limit my efforts to amputation (the four legs) and plastic surgery on the body. By this I meant a face-lift job. I would simply encase all the gadgety organs of the machine within a neat, well-shaped, and easily removable shell" (Loewy 2002). Loewy's use of corporeal metaphors in describing the object as well as the process of design testifies to his thinking of the product in animate terms. For Loewy, the visual quality of the skin was also important, but in this case, it was the primary function of shielding that gave it the desired aesthetic.

Green skins

The growing realization amongst designers and manufacturers about the need to embrace environmental responsibility and sustainability has led to significant research into recycled plastics, organic materials such as biopolymers, and durable object skins. For instance, the skins of lampshades made from rock salt crystals are entirely organic, they dehumidify the

air, they reduce air pollution, they can be composted, and their textured surfaces signify and exhibit their 'greenness.' Philippe Starck's Jim Nature television set for Saba has a molded high-density particleboard shell, which too, through its color, texture and other surface characteristics signifies a sustainable replacement for polymers.

Faux skins

Semi-synthetic plastics were initially employed in the imitation of more expensive naturally existing materials. For example, in 1862, Alexander Parkes cooked up a doughy substance called Parkesine (it was cellulose nitrate produced by mixing cellulose with nitric acid and sulfuric acid), which could be pressed into molds to manufacture small objects. Parkesine could be colored or white, transparent or opaque, and was used to imitate materials such as ivory and tortoise shell. Further development of synthetic polymers led to materials such as acrylic that imitated glass and rhinestones, urea formaldehyde that reproduced the skin characteristics of marble or alabaster, and polyvinyl chloride that could look like leather or suede. The skins of objects made from these materials function as protectors of the true identities of these polymers, extending the length of their secret lives.

New polymers with better structural as well as visual and tactile properties are invented in laboratories everyday, often to precise requirements of designers and engineers. As these materials become more and more versatile, they become more and more difficult to distinguish from each other. This ability of imitation has led to a loss of recognition (Manzini 1989) and increased anonymity of the plastic skins.

Informational skins

The skin may be transparent so that it reveals or it may be translucent so it may seduce. It may be coded in language and graphics to inform, or it may be left bare, also to inform.

Revealing transparent skins

Informational skins act as message boards where designers and consumers of objects post meanings. When folded, the laptop computer hides its informational skin of screen, keyboard, and track pad; but when open, these surfaces are exposed and the exchange of data begins. These are permeable skins through which words, images and numbers travel. Transparent skins first started to appear on small consumer appliances such as radios and telephones in

the 1970s, revealing all the operational details of the gadgets. Looking into one of these, one could clearly see brilliantly hued wires snaking over dull green printed circuit boards and tiny multi-colored electronic components. These skins dissolve into their own transparence, becoming nearly invisible. Their clarity makes them immaterial, bringing the design of the inside rather than the outside into sharp, stark focus. Raymond Loewy's desire to shroud the machine is turned upside down into a voyeurism of function.

Seductive translucent skins

The iMacs from Apple introduced in 1998 led to an orgy of translucent objects, not only in computer peripherals but in other product categories as well, including office products and furniture. These translucent skins invite users to look inside, but offer only frosted-glass glimpses of the inner secrets of the object; they seduce without revealing too much. Referring to their translucent radios and CD players, Sony's Richard Gioscia says that "part of the idea is to show that the inside is as well designed as the outside" (Patton 1999). Unlike transparent skin, the translucent skin suggests its own presence against the backdrop of the dimly visible technology within.

Technological/Intelligent skins

This group of skins contains two types: the Responsive Skins that employ smart or intelligent materials, and the Technological Skins or the ones which used advanced materials such as polyamide composites.

Responsive skins

Certain object skins may be manufactured out of smart or intelligent materials that respond in ways previously unimagined, and have properties that can be dramatically altered with the appropriate stimuli. For example, photochromic and thermochromic materials change color when exposed to light and heat, electroluminescent and phosphorescent materials can absorb and emit light, and piezoelectric materials can generate small amounts of electricity when stressed. The insertion of microprocessor chips within objects also creates responsive skins that can adjust themselves to individual needs and desires. Kyocera has introduced a SmartSkin telephone, the 7135 Smartphone, which has a shell embedded with a personalization chip that allows substantial amount of customization of the gadget. Designed and marketed specifically towards youth, this shell not only permits changes in the

appearance of the product but also in the software that drives all its features such as the organizer, MP3 player, camera, internet connection, etc. Such skins are capable of "reading" the users' needs to provide the precise type of virtual environments they prefer. These skins can be removed and replaced with newer ones. The SmartSkins website introduces another phone with similar capabilities called Identity, as "the first phone that is designed to communicate who you are, and when you change your SmartSkin, you change your identity" (www.Smartskins.com, accessed April 4, 2004). Smartskin is at once physical and virtual, able to change the phone from inside out; it is at once empowering and powerful, capable of changing its own identity to suit you, and touted as powerful enough to change yours.

Technological skins

New advancements in materials science filter their way into consumer applications pushing boundaries of aesthetic as well as functional capabilities of object skins. Jackets manufactured from Aramid fibers can be bullet proof or heat resistant, providing a second skin that is functionally far more resistant to the elements than human skin. Carbon fiber and epoxy composite helmets can withstand substantial shock in case of high impact crashes. Technological skins may also provide aesthetic value in certain cases. Titanium is a superior structural material with an excellent strength to weight ratio, but its application in the Apple G4 portable computer, in eyeglasses, and wristbands is largely a function of its visual appeal.

Sensorial skins

Designers, acutely aware of the sensual power of objects, play close attention to the selection of materials, making sure to provide the right elasticity for a confident grip and the glossiest color for the desired impact. The stunning variety seen in forms, colors, and textures of object skins, testifies to our lust for sensual surfaces. These skins can be divided into Tactile Skins and Visual Skins (and in the near future, other senses will be included as well).

Tactile skins

Elastomers (synthetic rubbers of variable elasticity) that provide a non-slip grip have started appearing on the handles of the simplest of products such as toothbrushes and spatulas, (almost) making terms such as Santoprene and Neoprene household names. Latex, silicone, polyurethane, and polybutylene are all flexible polymers that can be molded into virtually any form to act as skins over products. In contrast to the frigid sensory qualities of cold, hard

plastics, these malleable materials possess quasi-human warmth, which may be responsible for their tremendous success in the domestic sphere. Fabrics also function as tactile skins that can be tautly stretched over skeletal frames, a technique used widely in the 1960s by Italian furniture designers. Using wooden or metal structures for support, polyurethane foam for padding and nylon jersey fabric for the cover, these designers approximated the human body in their forms. Leather too provides a similar warmth in furniture, especially when applied on chrome and steel chairs. Alvar Aalto used leather to soften the coldness of steel in his interiors.

Visual skins

Generation of new product form is one of the core competencies of industrial design practice. Designers create skin for technology to give objects a human interface. These skins, in many cases, play an important role in the buying decisions. Visual skins also act as signifiers of history, as movements in design are often based upon shared skin characteristics of product groups. For example, objects classified as representatives of the streamlining era possess similar formal skin qualities, as do the objects of Art Deco. Skins with graphic adornments, such as hoods and panels of lowrider cars with their exotic airbrushed artworks, are akin to tattooed skins; they arouse admiration and fear, curiosity and contempt. Social meanings of these graphics and visual treatments can be traced back to the owners and their subcultural identities.

Mythical/Fetishistic skins

According to Barthes, myth is a mode of signification, and its construction relies on a second-order semiological system. The first-order semiological system of sign, signifier, and signified forms the basis of the second so that the sign of the first acts as signifier for the second (1972). Barthes makes it clear that everything can be a myth, and object skins certainly can. Acting primarily as protective, visual, or technological surfaces, skins, at another level, hold vestiges of larger economic and political systems as well as individual desires and fetishes.

Myth by material

Widely known for its fetish value, latex is a “material whose clinical functionality cloaks the eroticism of contemporary design” (Lupton 2002). A material of several seemingly

contradictory applications and available in both natural or synthetic forms, latex can be used to increase bounce in a ball as well as to reduce vibration in a machine base; to separate entities if used as an insulator and to join objects if used as a rubber band; as a means to constrain bodies in clothing and as a material that can extend through stretching. A latex skin used in surgical gloves signifies protection from contamination but used in skin-tight clothing for bondage can signify sexual arousal and fetish character.

In his essay on the myth of plastic, Barthes refers to it as a household material that, in its pervasiveness, has abolished the hierarchy of substances (1972). Similar to Manzini's concept of the loss of recognition, Barthes' idea of homogeneous plasticization reveals yet another meaning of plastic as an anonymous force of material transformation in today's society. The rapid growth in the number of object skins that are manufactured from polymers attests to this transformation.

Myth by concealment

An object that is entirely closed off with an impenetrable skin conceals its life mechanism and creates a sense of mystery. For instance, the iPod is a hermetically sealed object. It has no visible screws, it offers no access to its interior, it will mysteriously play endless music, and it suggests that it will never need to be opened because it will never break down. The skin of the iPod is flawless, it is uninterrupted by constraints of manufacturing, and is ripe for fetishization. "This tendency of design towards the perfection of surfaces and the disappearance of mechanical components radically transform(s) the relation of users to the products" (Kurtgözü 2001). This often leads to the subordination of use-value by brand-value and fetish-value. Media representations may add to its myth and fetish value as well. The description of the iPod as "an everlasting cigarette packet for those addicted to music instead of tobacco" (Arthur 2003), testifies to its fetish character.

Between design and cultural studies

The process of styling, or creating new skins on products that change appearance without added utility or other value, is often practiced in design consultancies and corporations. Vocal critics from design and cultural studies, who emphasize production-based approaches, have raised valid ethical issues about this practice. Wolfgang Haug believes that "appearance always promises more, much more than it can ever deliver" (1986). Based upon Marx's

analysis of the commodity as composed of use-value and exchange-value, the process of styling makes the skin a receptacle for its exchange-value rather than its use-value. Creative operations are performed on the skin to stimulate desire and to valorize capital, but are often justified as attempts to satisfy a wider range of user needs. Equating the buyer's gaze to voyeurism and the exchange-value to sexuality, Haug relegates the role of commodity aesthetics to the "sexing-up" of the object, a term that also appeared in Papanek's writing (1971: 151). Papanek attacked design in its effort to create object lust merely by changing its skin, a process that has since been accelerated with the rapid replacement of electromechanical components with digital ones.

In contrast to the production based studies, consumption based approaches and post-structuralist studies do not perceive humans as dupes controlled by large corporations whose sole aim is acquisition of capital, but as discerning buyers who negotiate meanings with cultural commodities in contexts of use. New products, even though merely stylistic, carry significant cultural meanings for users, and are linked to expression and identity. In many cases, designers are still viewed as "experts in the application of beauty," and some emphasize that "regardless of how important the measure of innovation and environmental impact are, beauty is the number one criteria for good design" (Viemeister 2001). This struggle between the positions taken by the disciplines is complex and difficult to resolve, as they it is intricately linked to the consumer spending index and financial growth.

The skin of the object, therefore, may also be understood as a battleground where these approaches from design and cultural studies clash.

Conclusion: skins as boundaries

Just as the human skin is the outermost layer of our body that separates itself from the environment, the object skin serves as the external layer between technology and use. Boundaries and borders often signify separation between cultures, but if permeable, they can sometimes serve as metaphors of amalgamation full of rich multiplicity. In ecological studies, an ecotone denotes an area where different habitats come together to create border areas and transitional zones of incredible biodiversity, richness, and dynamism. These are complex places where boundaries or edges meet, become porous, and allow an interchange between areas that would otherwise remain isolated and inaccessible. The interaction that occurs

between species living in these ecotones creates an environment of mutual modification, hybridity, and at times, unexpected change.

Similarly, object skins are rich boundaries. They are ecotonal locations where the inside and the outside meet, where use- and exchange-values are negotiated, where the generation of multiple meanings is supported, and where design often leaves its indelible stamp.

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