

Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*,
Routledge, New York and London. 1997: a review

by Penelope Deutscher.

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Kirby writes in the wake of a post-structuralist intellectual current whose truths include: that there is no outside of the text. That reality is really a reality-effect. That natural bodies are cultural productions. But we may be least likely to ask whether we have properly understood our own truths. If there is no outside of the text, then flesh and matter must be theorisable as 'corporeographies', matter and flesh as 'literate'.

What is the appropriate place for deconstruction, Kirby asks, if not reflection on embodiment, flesh, matter, the atom, the neuron as a 'writing'? The point is not that the body as text is a disputed truth. So many have assented to this with alacrity -- those influenced by Foucault, by feminism, by psychoanalysis, by social constructionism -- all those who have written of the body as the site of so-called 'cultural inscription'. It is precisely because 'the body as text' has become such a truism that *Telling Flesh* is fascinating in its originality and complexity. Kirby refigures the nexus of deconstruction, feminism, philosophy of embodiment and cultural studies. The point of the truism is not whether we recognise it, but whether we assign it to what Saussure might have called its 'proper place'. Kirby disputes not that we know it, but how and where we know it.

Kirby's interpretation of matter as textuality is grounded in a rigorous reconsideration of early twentieth-century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Kirby locates the points at which Saussure falls back from the most extreme aspects of his own project. Arguing that signified and signifier are an indissoluble unity, Saussure nevertheless distinguishes them as analogous to the (distinguishable) back and front of a piece of paper (Kirby 1997: 11). The linguist for whom reality is an 'abstraction, inaccessible to human understanding because mediated by language', repeatedly conflates "the concept" (signified) with "the thing," (or real object), nevertheless (Kirby 1997: 19) But Kirby offers no corrective to, or 'critique' of Saussure, which might reprove him for his 'careless mistakes'. Instead, Saussure's most 'disabling contradictions and apparent confusion' are interpreted in terms of their 'constitutive importance to his innovative vision' (Kirby 1997: 9), as almost inevitable to the complexity of his work.

Saussure is best known for his analysis of the arbitrary nature of the sign. But as Saussure commented: 'No-one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place' (Kirby 1997: 9). The concept of the sign as 'arbitrary' arises from a rejection of nomenclature, in which a word is said to designate a real thing which precedes it in the material world. 'Arbitrary' evokes the point that there is no inevitable naming of 'that thing' by 'this word'. Almost no-one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign. But what is the proper place for this truth? Is the relationship between signifier and signified arbitrary? No, writes Benveniste, for once the sign is understood as a unity there can be no account of signified and signifier separable such that their relationship could be described as 'arbitrary'.

Is it the relationship between reality and sign which is arbitrary? No, challenges Kirby, not once we grant that the referent does not precede language. Reality and sign *must* not be distinguishable, and Saussure's 'routine [elision] of the difference between the "the thing" and the "concept of the thing"', though a mistake within the terms of his own argument' (Kirby

1997:19), is therefore almost inevitable. Kirby brilliantly (re)presents a Saussure whose fundamental truth is that there is no proper place for the truth that the sign is arbitrary. Think of the position Saussure embarks by rejecting: that the sign is not arbitrary, that it is inevitable. Is this not the position to which Saussure is virtually folded back over at his most extreme moment? It is Saussure's text itself which must inevitably say that the sign is *not* arbitrary?

How, then, have we thought the body as a cultural inscription? Kirby argues that a strenuous reading of this truism may tell us the truth of its apparent contrary: the body is not the scene of a cultural inscription:

once you are seriously displacing the nature/language opposition, you have to be arguing that nature, far from being written on, and insofar as it cannot be said to 'lack language', 'must be articulate' (Kirby 1997: 90)

Judith Butler and Jane Gallop may well offer concepts of the body, of sex, as always already cultural writing but, asks Kirby, how successfully insofar as we do not hear of 'the peristaltic movements of the viscera, the mitosis of cells, the electrical activity that plays across a synapse, the itinerary of a virus' as 'textual adventure'?:

Virtual
W.
Concrete =>

is this a 'text' and a 'writing' whose tissue includes all the oozings and pulsings that . . . make up the differential stuff of the body's extra-ordinary circuitry? (Kirby 1997: 76)

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Usually not, for it seems feminist poststructuralism has repeatedly returned to the metaphor of inscription, to a body *written on* by culture, and often only at the exterior. As Kirby says of Butler: 'her intervention is limited to the surface of the surface' (Kirby 1997: 126). If nature and culture are no longer discrete poles, then we should be able to theorise every aspect of embodiment and matter, the cell, the atom, electric activity, the neuron, the rock as always already culture, text. But at some point the argument always stops, and one is left with a bedrock of matter written on by culture, whose symptom is the ubiquitous 'body-as-inscription' metaphor itself.

Tracing this deadlock in the work of Butler, Gallop and Drucilla Cornell, Kirby proposes a switch to break to deadlock: perhaps we must theorise matter not as written on by culture but as 'speaking to us'. Perhaps we must theorise the possibility that 'nature scribbles', that 'flesh reads' (Kirby 1997: 127). Kirby's analysis of the deadlock which occurs for as long as we see flesh as *written on* is absolutely correct. If matter is inscribed, what does the inscribing (if not culture), and on what bedrock (if not nature)? Any such position necessarily posits the very body-as-exceeding-representation it wishes to avoid. Inscription metaphors have been the blindspot of every theory of social constructionism yet offered. Readers will be keen or reticent to theorise flesh as speaking but Kirby challenges the reader to come up with some other solution.

As in the paradox of Saussure's arbitrary sign, the most extreme position of post-structuralism folds back over an uncanny mutation of the account it had designated as naive and most hoped to abandon. For readers who never took the route though post-structuralist accounts of embodiment, perhaps nothing could be more obvious than a body described as speaking to us. But what has poststructuralism most wanted to depart from if not biologicistic accounts of the body which would have it that the body speaks to us? What promise has the concept of the body as text held out, if not a departure from embodiment figured as essence and origin -- to whose freakish double Kirby returns us to? The only way Kirby can avoid positing a body of feminised nature as solid ground, immutable essence and origin, 'that qualifies or limits the efficacy of representational practices' (Kirby 1997: 61) is by conjuring matter as writing, literate,

speaking, rather than written on, spoken about. There is a world of difference between thinking the body as natural, essential as *opposed to culturally inscribed* and thinking the body as natural, essential '*because indistinguishable from culture*'. But in the evocation of the 'speaking body', Kirby must risk the echoes between these positions.

Can post-structuralism break the habit of its own inscription metaphors? There are few theorists other than Kirby prepared to take on the implications. What theorist, other than Kirby, has been prepared to stand up and risk theorising 'the stone' as 'speaking' -- to the complete delight of her audience? *Telling Flesh* does what few works do: thoroughly displaces an intellectual terrain.

Three chapters, 'Accommodating Matter', 'Substance Abuse', and 'Reality Bytes' discuss matter and embodiment in the work of Butler; Cornell's work on feminist deconstruction; and Haraway's articulation of the late twentieth-century technological subject as the cyborg. Given that a huge enthusiasm about these theorists has led to a surprising paucity of critical treatment (particularly of Haraway's work), Kirby's hard, though sympathetic, look at them will be important. Do Butler, Cornell and Gallop really succeed in surmounting the positing of 'a world before or without language'? (Kirby 1997: 109 and see 89 and 76). Does Haraway really succeed in surmounting the positing of a nature before culture (Kirby 1997: 147)? Does Cornell really succeed in formulating an adequate conception of 'ethical responsibility to the Other'? (Kirby 1997: 95)

Kirby's readings are intricate and convincing, offered in alignment with the best intentions of these theorists. Because she would further, not undermine, their most radical potential, Kirby's work is a lesson in the constructive and enabling possibilities of provocative critique. Her work unsettles the new bad habit of favouring theory demarcated as 'constructive' as opposed to theory devalued as 'negative critique' (which has recently manifested as an erroneous and bizarre pro-Deleuze vs anti-Derrida antagonism). From this perspective, I found Kirby's methodological synthesis of complicity and provocation to be as important and original as the interpretations of Cornell, Gallop, Butler and Haraway generated by this method.

(Kirby has consistently rejected agonistic formulations of the relationship between self and other, nature and culture, matter and representation, and she also avoids agonistic relations between herself and the theorists she subjects to intensive scrutiny. No agonism, for in her most critical stance towards the figures she reads, she abets their most radical directions. And no agonism, because sometimes the position one most expected distance from is the position one is uncannily flung back to at the outside limit.

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*Vicki Kirby's *Telling Flesh* was published by Routledge, London and New York, in 1997.*

Link to Reality Bytes: an excerpt from *Telling Flesh*.