TATTOO - MARKETPLACE ICON

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Abstract

The tattoo may be considered iconic in terms of its ability to reflect and contribute to consumer culture. It encapsulates contemporary tensions between the paradigm of plasticity that has engulfed the body and skin and a disavowal of that paradigm by marking the body in a permanent fashion. Tattoos also manage to articulate discourses of deviance and the mainstream, difference and sameness. Further, the ‘invariant processual contour’ of tattoo remains the same across cultures and histories while also managing to evidence differences in emphasis. Similarly, the functions of tattoo in terms of decoration, ritual, identification and protection continue to trace the boundaries of their possibilities. Ultimately, in a culture that values individuality, these coordinates of tattoo offer a clear opportunity to (re)story the self in infinitely customizable ways.

Outlines

No clear recollection of when my fascination with tattoos was born. Snatched half-memories of Rod Steiger in The Illustrated Man. Homemade India ink tattoos worn defiantly by the older kids in my neighborhood. Popeye’s anchor. Nor do I have any vivid memory of getting my own first tattoo. A spur of the moment decision. I wasn’t under the influence of any substances, just drunk on the sudden excitement of it all. Drunk enough that the memory is lost behind a haze of diaphanous images and sensations. Not that I should have been that excited. It isn’t exactly the greatest tattoo the world has ever seen. Chosen from the yellowed pages of flash art stuck to the tattoo parlor wall, and reminiscent of an old Irish two-pence piece, the tattoo isn’t even unique to me. But it was my first tattoo and for that it is significant. Years later, I have woven together the strands of a powerful narrative about this tattoo that positions it as an attempt to reaffirm my Celtic heritage while living in a foreign land. And for this too it is significant. It allows me to tell my story.

The market for tattooing has witnessed remarkable success over the past thirty years. There are more than 21,000 tattoo parlors across the U.S., occupying both prime and secondary retail locations (Pew Research Centre 2006). Their colorful facades, almost tattooed themselves, serve as landmarks both
for the avid collector and for the casual passer-by. Tattoos have also inveigled their way into more venerable buildings. In 2014, Somerset House in London exhibited artworks by some of the industry’s more revered ink slingers, continuing a trend set by prestigious cultural institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History with its *Body Art: Marks of Identity* exhibition back in 1999. Meanwhile, advertising continues to plumb the depths of tattoo symbolism to sell everything from coffee to financial institutions. In sum, the tattoo is emblematic of contemporary culture and its contradictions; a boundary object that seems to encapsulate the pliability of the body and identity while simultaneously disavowing that very plasticity. The tattoo has gone mainstream (Bengtsson *et al.* 2005), and yet it retains an air of mystique through long-held associations with the deviant (Larsen *et al.* 2014).

I continue in this paper by tracing a brief history of tattoo as it relates to tensions between deviance and a movement into the mainstream. The ambiguity surrounding tattoos, driven by these tensions, arouses a degree of moral panic (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005) and calls upon tattooed individuals to justify their actions by constructing related narratives of personalized meaning. Next, I sketch out the process of tattoo in respect of wounding, healing, and the procurement of a mark, and allude to the traditional functions of tattoo. This ‘invariant processual contour’ of tattoo (Gell 1993) also facilitates multiple points of articulation that renders tattoo particularly useful in the construction of narratives of identity. Finally, I chart the potential for these tattoo narratives but concede that while often we write our own stories, sometimes our stories are inscribed upon us. Throughout the work I utilize poetic witness to help represent my personal experience of tattoo “as heterogeneous constellations of material objects, emotional states, mythic narratives, powerful discourses and physical forces”, (Canniford 2012, 391).
Storylines

It was the ancient Greeks who observed their neighbors, the “barbarian” Thracians, using tattoos as markers of status, and thus they themselves began to deploy tattoos as a denotation of Otherness. Associating tattooing with a lack of civilization, they only used the practice to mark criminals and slaves, making them visible within ‘normal’ society (Jones 2000). The Romans, in turn, adopted this method of social control and tattooed their criminals with either the name of the crime, the name of the emperor under whom the crime had been committed, or with the name of the punishment meted out (Gustafson 2000). Having fallen into disuse in the British Isles, tattooing was reintroduced in the late 18th Century by Captain James Cook as a practice of the primitive Other (DeMello 2000).

In an act of subversion, criminals later began to voluntarily tattoo themselves as a means of documenting their criminal careers and constructing an Othered subjectivity (DeMello 1993; Phelan and Hunt 1998; Shoham, 2010). Voluntary tattooing also spread to the military and navy where tattoos were worn as “markers of an esoteric diversity” (Guest 2000, 101), a life lived differently from those in mainstream society (Steward 1990). The European aristocracy and American upper class adopted tattooing in the late-nineteenth century (Parry 1933; Sanders 1989). Bradley (2000) refers to an article in the 1898–1899 edition of Harmsworth’s Magazine that paints the use of tattooing by royalty as a “queer craze,” rendering them as peculiar and exotic as the “primitives” from whom they had borrowed the practice. Bailkin (2005, 50) contends that upper class tattooing represented “an attempt to invigorate a devalued class, a dying breed ... the ‘savage’ tattoo was the only hope for the aristocracy to modernize, the only way to stay viable in an anti-aristocratic age.”

The connections between tattoo, Otherness and deviance were further strengthened by the ‘scientific’ work of criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Lombroso’s detailed survey of the bodies of 7,000 Italian prisoners suggested that tattoos were indicative of atavism; that is, a primitive form of humanity characterized by an inclination towards
tattoos and a diminished sensitivity to physical pain (Adams 2009). While such characteristics were considered natural and to be expected in the Pacific islands, Lombroso argued that in the West they were clear markers of a different form of human, the ‘criminal man’ (Fenske 2007). For Lombroso (2006 [1911], 58), tattoos mattered to criminals in that they were “external signs of beliefs and passions”. As a consequence, Lombroso devoted a great degree of his efforts to studying the iconography of European tattoos, for access to their symbolic code would enable the scientist to identify the particular depravity of each criminal. In this way tattoos became an external physical signifier of a depraved moral character within. These associations lasted well into the twentieth century, and to some extent are still drawn upon today (see Jacques 2017). In these ways, then, a subtle shift had taken place: where once criminals were tattooed to mark them out, now anyone who was tattooed was viewed as criminal (Fisher 2002).

However, since the 1980s the shady topography of tattooing has been undergoing something of an artistic touch-up. The boundary lines were initially re-drawn during what became known as the Tattoo Renaissance. At this time there were a number of forces working together to considerably alter mainstream perceptions of tattoos. First, tattoo aficionados began to look to traditional cultures and their tattoos for inspiration lending their work some degree of ethno-historical significance (DeMello 2000). Second, the world of tattooing was infiltrated by fine artists who began to see the practice as a legitimate artistic pursuit (Irwin 2001). Third, the art world began to accept tattoo art and artists into its realm (Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2005) on the basis that many tattoos could now be argued to have artistic merit and commanded economic value as a commercial investment (Sanders 2009). The subsequent three decades have witnessed a veritable explosion in the number of tattoo styles available on the market, from Old School to Tribal, Dotwork to Trash Polka. The result is an increasingly creative medium for tattoo artists and consumers alike.
As a consequence of these changes, tattoo art has infiltrated the mainstream, firmly establishing itself with the suburban middle-classes, but ultimately cutting across age, class, and ethnic boundaries (Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2005). Through the 1990s the tattoo sector was one of the fastest growing service industries in the United States of America. By 2006 $1.65 billion was being spent annually in the US on tattoos with 40% of adults between the ages of 26 and 40 sporting at least one tattoo (Pew Research Centre 2006). This mainstreaming of tattoo is supported by its increasing representation in the media. Indeed, television programs such as *Ink, L.A. Ink* and so on work to sanitize tattooing by depicting a practice devoid of pain, where tattoo choices are deeply meaningful, and highly artistic. Moreover, the media suggest that ours is a world replete with heavily tattooed individuals and devoid of stigma. Further, tattoos feature prominently in the visual culture of selfies on social media (Murray 2015). Ultimately, then, the mainstreaming of tattoo culture has occurred within the parameters of a new ideology of tattooing established by a variety of cultural institutions.

**Tattoo: Process and Function**

The second time I lie down on a tattooist's chair I am committed to a full backpiece. Seventeen and a half hours over five sittings. The blur that was my first experience leaves me with few expectations of this one. It soon becomes clear, though, that I have underestimated the pain of tattoo. The initial scratching sensation turns very quickly to something else entirely. There is no pain quite like it. Searing and shredding at the same time. After about twenty minutes, probably as the dopamine or whatever other natural chemicals flood my brain, I am detached. It is bearable once more. Two hours later the torment returns with a vengeance. Every pass of the needle brings with it the sensation that my flesh is being pared from my body. Finally, respite. My tattooist suggests a break of two weeks between each sitting in order to let the wounds heal. I’m not a good patient. A cardinal rule. Do not pick at the scabs. It causes the ink to fade. But I generally can’t resist scabs. First picking at the edges but eventually getting down and dirty. Thankfully, because it is on my back, my ability to worry away at the wound is relatively limited. Still, hairbrushes, chopsticks and all manner of other instruments are called into action. After close to three months I am the proud owner a work of art that is personal to me. My tattoo is not beautiful. Despite the Celtic swirls and such it has a direct, almost brutal aesthetic, and that does me just fine.

In truth, tattoo can be thought of as an event rather than a thing (MacCormack 2006). Alfred Gell (1993) divides this event, wherever it is exercised, into three stages: wounding, healing, and the subsequent acquisition of a mark. Cultural context determines which of these three stages receives most emphasis in readings of tattoo practice, though all stages leave their traces such that the process:
is always and everywhere submitted to in its entirety, not bit by bit. Hence differential focalization is always a relative matter; each distinct focalization carries all the others with it . . . It is a matter of emphasis (Gell 1993, 304).

The ‘invariant processual contour’ of tattoo (Gell 1993) differentiates it clearly from any other kind of contemporary fashion statement, for it brings production and consumption into immediate and painful proximity (Kosut 2006; Sweetman 1999). In the West, according to Gell (1993), we place most attention on the tattoo artifact itself. In contrast, some forms of Polynesian tattooing operate as a rite of passage and, against this backdrop, the mark acts as a memento of the wounding process and the ability to endure (Sweetman 1999). Specifically in a Samoan context, the emphasis is placed on healing and the ability of the body to complete the tattoo (Angel 2015). Because it is a matter of emphasis, while Western tattooing does focus in on the design of the tattoo, “even the most playful and ironic of contemporary tattoos retain an echo of the pain involved in their acquisition”, (Sweetman 1999, 65).

Tattooing, then, involves the willful solicitation of pain and in this way it may be associated with the grotesque; at once abhorrent and fascinating, demanding the attention of others and leading to the inevitable question: does it hurt? MacCormack (2006, 74) describes the pain of tattoo as kinetic and multiple, the product of “movement, throb and temporality”. This altogether unusual experience of pain, the prolonged penetration of the body by needles, and the blood, draw the individual into the immediacy of the real (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). Thus, the wounding of the body through tattoo brings us closer to an understanding, appreciation and consciousness of the self, its limits and its potential (Hardin 1999). In connecting to the ‘real’, pain may also help the tattooed individual emerge from the chaos of the past (Oskanen and Turtiainen 2005). In addition to the ability of pain to help us connect with our bodies, Scott et al. (2017) identify a role for pain in the unmaking and remaking of the self in role transitions, and in spiritual elevation. Thus, tattoos may operate as corporeal signifiers, bearing witness to some of life’s traumatic events while, at the same time, offering the individual some semblance of control going forward.
Tattoo styles have increasingly become a matter of individual choice and custom design. The elevation of the tattoo to artistic status during the tattoo renaissance, and the almost exclusive representation of highly artistic custom pieces in the media have driven tattooists and their clients to favor custom designs that demonstrate authenticity and capture the essence of the self (Bengtsson et al. 2005). In terms of the mark left by the process of tattooing, Gell (1993, 39) reminds us that it is more than a surface inscription. Rather, because tattoo ink penetrates the skin, inside becomes outside and outside becomes inside such that the mark represents a fold that:

allows the possibility of an endless elaboration of interacting components of the social person. The body multiplies; additional organs and subsidiary selves are created; spirits, ancestors, rulers and victims take up residence in an integument, which begins to take on a life of its own.

Blanchard (1991) outlines the four interrelated functions traditionally associated with tattooing: a decorative function, a ritual function, an identificatory function, and an apotropaic function. In a culture that focalizes the tattoo artifact, it could be argued that the decorative qualities of the tattoo take on extra significance. From fantastical beasts to religious iconography, tribal swirls to lovers’ names, the decorative function of tattoo plays a major role in media representations and lay understandings of tattoo in the West. Indeed, the tattoo renaissance was predicated on a reimagining of tattoo from desecration to decoration (Fenske 2007), and the incorporation of creative contributions by clients into an increasingly customized art form (Taylor 1995). Further, the aesthetic dimensions of contemporary tattooing allow consumers to make judgments about which visual style is for them. In this way tattoos operate as an indication of taste and as a means of creative expression through which aesthetic sensibilities are inscribed on the body and communicated to others (Langman 2003). And yet, much of the academic literature on tattoo quickly dismisses the aesthetic dimensions of tattoo in favor of other interpretations; it seems, tattoo is more than mere decoration.
From the earliest days of Cook’s voyages to the Pacific it was clear that tattoos could have an emphatic ritual dimension. Wright (2009), for example, suggests that the sailors on these voyages were more likely to choose Tahitian designs because they were less codified with particular rituals than their New Zealand counterparts. She also makes the point that contemporary tattoo is just as likely to have ritualistic functions. These body rites and intentional ordeals are characterized as “physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging activities that are pursued for their potential psychological, social, and spiritual benefits” (Dryer, 2007, cited in Thomas 2012, 2). Thus, in a Western society distinguished by the loss of traditional ritual, the long-standing ritualistic dimensions of tattoo continue to be used to plot important life events and to express a sense of self and personal growth (Pitts 2002).

Choice enables individuals to pursue fulfillment, autonomy and freedom (Bauman 1988) and endeavor to ‘become’ (Giddens 1991). In this regard, consumers have long been understood as identity-seekers and consumption performs a crucial service by bolstering identity over time. As a process, tattooing testifies to the open-ended and sometimes problematic nature of identity and its constant (re)negotiation with others (Sullivan 2001); it reflects our dynamic navigation of self and society, of personal identity projects and commitments to the social. Further, the cultural imperative to work upon identity has become inescapable, demanding symbolic work of consumers at unprecedented levels and emphasizing the individual’s responsibility to limitlessly improve and change themselves in a creative fashion. In contrast to the mass-marketed, pre-packaged, and commodified forms of difference that most consumer products offer, the potential customizability of tattoo lends itself perfectly to the demands for difference and individuality in contemporary consumer culture (Atkinson 2004).

As we have seen, tattooing suggests an opening up of the inner self to the outside world. But it may also represent a source of protection from that world. Indeed, by intentionally marking the body
through tattoo we manufacture an excess of visibility, reifying the surface of the skin and drawing attention to its protective features (Bloustein 2003). Tattoos, then, are permanent marks on the body that operate as ‘character armor’ (Gell 1993), helping to defy change and anchor the self (Sweetman 1999). They allow us to question and ameliorate the uncertainty of the future and the confusion engendered by the postmodern fragmentation of identity (Benson 2000).

**Tattoo: Narrative**

Conversations around me fade. The mechanical buzz of the tattoo machine. The medicinal yet welcoming smell of green soap. Machine dips into blackness. Lucy’s hand maneuvers my arm into position. A small group of well-marshalled bees take to my skin. The slow, hot scratch of the first line. Periods of drifting. Moments of clarity. Hours later, an image of a warrior princess inscribed in my skin. Sadhbh, Fionn’s wife. A Celtic myth about a footrace to the top of a mountain to become the chosen one. The mountain that stood outside the bedroom window of my younger self. The mountain represented in a local song delivered most famously by my uncle, the tenor. Not Danny Boy from Miller’s Crossing, but powerful nonetheless. The image itself an illustration by a famous Irish artist, the one responsible for that iconic portrayal of Che Guevara and countless Thin Lizzy album covers. In the end an image of a handsome young woman in an emerald dress. Red hair, full breasts, and a wild look about the eyes. A mark of difference. A summons. Metamorphosis. And after all, a mark of sameness.

Tattoo consumption is mobilized, more often than not, in the service of identity, allowing the bearer to (re)produce a coherent narrative of the self that connects the past, present and future. Indeed, those of us with tattoos are routinely called upon to justify our actions by constructing narratives of personalized meaning around them. It has always been thus. Bristolian, John Rutherford turned his narrative into a profitable enterprise in the early nineteenth century. Rutherford toured his heavily tattooed body across Europe in the 1820s and 1830s. He claimed to have been captured by a Maori tribe in New Zealand in 1816 and forced to endure the torture of tattooing against his will. The story of his time spent with the Maori was embellished with scenes of nakedness, cannibalism, and marriage to the chief’s daughter. In truth, Rutherford had jumped ship in New Zealand, had willingly become tattooed, and had in fact collected other tattoos in Tahiti and Fiji (Oettermann 2000), belying his story of six years spent with the Maori. Meanwhile, Irishman James F. O’Connell, the ‘celebrated tattooed man’, became the first inked individual to exhibit in America. Part of P.T. Barnum’s
American Museum, O’Connell borrowed heavily from the captivity story of Horace Holden (Oettermann 2000). He told of how he had been shipwrecked on the Caroline Islands in Micronesia, entertained the natives with Irish jigs, and was forcibly tattooed, head to foot, by voluptuous virgins. Similarly, Nora Hildebrandt, a circus woman with 365 tattoos, made her initial appearance in a dime museum in 1882. Her father, Martin, was the first person to open a permanent tattoo shop in the U.S. To increase the value of her attraction, Nora concocted a story about how she and her father were captured by ‘red skin devils’ and how he was forced to tattoo her every day for a year. These narratives speak in similar ways to issues of difference and sameness, bolstering ‘whiteness’ while exoticizing the savage Other (Braunberger 2000; Werner 2005).

Mary Kosut (2000) charts the coordinates of three broad categories of tattoo narratives that circulate in popular discourse. Naturally, no tattoo story fits unproblematically into just one of these categories, but they are useful nonetheless in helping to interpret the stories that people do tell. First are narratives that chart social landscapes. Here, tattooed individuals understand the communicative possibilities of tattoos and their ability to mark a person out as Other. At play here are issues of conformity and resistance, lines drawn between liberation, celebration and agency on one hand and repression, disciplinarity and conformity on the other. Second are narratives of the self that seek both to present a symbolic self-portrait of the individual and to document her or his passage through life. At a basic level tattoos speak of the self through their design and placement. For example, many commentators have suggested that, as a general rule, men tend to favor large, bold designs on visible parts of their bodies, while women limit themselves to small, delicate, ‘feminine’ designs located on parts of their bodies that remain essentially private. At another level the semiotic gloves come off as people deploy all manner of marks, designs and styles to represent the truth of themselves. Tattoos may also be used to capture key events and memorialize those things that are felt to be of significance to the individual. In this way they can be said to chart personal growth, movement from one version of the self to another - “a flesh journey … [chronicling] … changes in one’s identity, relationships, thoughts, or
emotions over time”, (Atkinson and Young 2001, 118). Of course, modern methods of tattoo removal mean that some memories, and some tattoos may also be erased from the body. Third are narratives of the body, acknowledging its mortality, and sometimes reclaiming it for the self. The mortality of the body is brought into focus by the relatively permanent nature of tattoo. Contrasted with the aging, deteriorating body, the tattoo is a reminder of our very corporeality. For some, tattooing may also represent a means of drawing attention to power relations circulating around our bodies and transgressing everyday injunctions about how our bodies should look and how their purity should be safeguarded. Across each of these categories Woodstock (2014, 780) contends that there is increasingly a therapeutic ethos at work: “By placing their life experiences within the templates of therapeutic narratives, individuals frame themselves as emotionally sturdy people who can emerge from difficulty able to contribute to a well-functioning social order”.

The stories we tell of our tattoos borrow heavily from the narratives that surround us in popular culture. It is no accident, therefore, that in contemporary society tattoo narratives speak to the demand for work on the body and, particularly, to the pursuit of individuality through customization. The reservoir of narratives is also full to overflowing with tales of deep meaning and personal significance that serve to legitimize the practice and bestowed upon the individual an aura of responsibility.

Alas, we are never free to just tell our own story. The interpretation of lived bodies, and the legibility of identity though tattoo and other consumption artifacts, is never guaranteed. Though the tattooed surfaces of bodies may come with a degree of pre-coded significance, we can rarely control the meanings brought to bear by others. Moreover, embodiment and identity are written upon as much as they are processes of writing (Fenske 2007) and our skin is both a primary site for the inscription of ideology and a text upon which we as individuals write our own stories. While tattooing carries with it the potential for agency in narrating our identities, it may be nothing more than a brief stepping out from under the smothering inscriptions of ideology (Braunberger 2000).

References


