

## **The Tattoo and Identity**

Louise Kate Anderson

## Introduction

Appearance is an essential part of human beings' communication and how we psychologically construct ourselves, and is thus intricately linked to our identity and how we present ourselves to the outside world. The body modification practice of tattooing originates from many countries where it was used in place of written language to brand individuals as part of a group, symbolically worthy of a certain title or position, or merely as decoration or self-adornment. The word tattoo is derived from the Tahitian word *ta-tu* or *tatau* meaning to mark or strike (Cole 2003, p. 276). It is thought to have been used among tribal communities in Japan some ten thousand years ago, Polynesian societies are well-known for their tattooing rituals, and historical discoveries have even revealed tattooing practices in the Ancient Egyptians around 2,000 BC. It is thought that tattooing was not introduced to the Western world until the Middle Ages, and in Europe not until the voyages of Captain Cook. For a long time it was used only for a means of identification, especially on animals, and gradually moved to classifying ranks among the Naval forces. The last 40 years signifies the modernisation of the practice as applied to decoration and symbolisms in a contemporary Western context (Vincent 1981, pp. 10-13). Many people in the West have adopted the Eastern practice of tattooing not for essentially dissimilar reasons, as this essay will discuss through aesthetic, physical and emotional lenses.

## Aesthetic

The first and likely most obvious aspect of tattooing is its aesthetic component. However, when taking an aesthetic overview, one really cannot help but be biased due to personal opinions, backgrounds, belief systems and individual tastes. Stereotypically, in the past, tattooing has been associated with criminals, prostitutes, the mentally ill and typical 'working class' men such as sailors [figure 1] (Cole 2003, p. 276). Therefore it is expected that people getting tattoos outside these demographics would be tabooed, at least until society comes to terms with this as an expression of self, and breaks down their stereotypical assumptions.



Figure 1: Navy Master Chief tattoo  
<http://media.hamptonroads.com/images/news/2006/03mar/oneyeartat.jpg>

Kuwahara (2005, p. 14) separates the visual appeal of tattooing into three categories, the appearance of the tattooed body, the actual design or image of the tattoo, and the skill which the tattoo artist has applied to it. The latter is likely irrelevant or unappreciated by most people, the second would be subject to the type of design or image, and the first of course cannot be separated from personal reactions as to whether or not one finds a tattooed body attractive. He also implies that the aesthetic qualities of tattooing cannot be looked at without also considering the moral and social positions of the onlooker. This approach is affirmed by Thessander, "The ideal of beauty expresses the prevailing aesthetic values, but it is also a visualization of the morality and body image of the dominant class" (1997).

Vincent also speaks of human beings having a taught knowledge from an early age of how they are expected to look as well as the ideals of how they should look. And later as

adulthood progresses they find a means of placing themselves in the social order of convention and strict unwritten codes (1981, p. 9). Originally, tattooing was seen as a rebellion of conventional social morals, but as we move further and further into a more accepting society, has the unfashionable become fashionable and vice versa? Has tattooing lost its “exotic, primitive flavour” as DeMello calls it? (2000, p. 4) However, Sweetman asserts (2000, p. 58) that tattooing is not or should not be bonded to fashion at all, insofar as the definition implies that fashion will change, whilst tattooing is permanent.

Calefato (2004) stated that “clothes are our second skin” implying that our choices in clothing say as much about us as our skin does. It is remarkable to apply this idea to tattooing thus creating an additional layer of meaning. Kenneth Clark and his distinction between nude and naked is often applied to the moralistic and aesthetic elements of the body (Hollander 1993, p. 157). In basic terms, he proposes that ‘nude’ references an idealised form of the body typically seen in artworks of the Renaissance era, whilst ‘naked’ is solely a body with the absence of clothing. Hollander, (1993, p. 83) avows that the distinction between clothed and naked is a critical concept in Western values. Other cultures and civilizations however, have different views of what constitutes dress; there are peoples who instead of wearing clothing, have adopted other means of self-ornamentation and communication. Her tenet, when applied to tattooing can potentially be read as a practice which achieves a different reading of the undressed body. If a body is permanently marked with a word, image or symbol denoting identity, then, can such a body ever be deemed naked by Clark’s definition? Hence, the aesthetic component of tattooing is richly connected to the individual’s own identity, upbringing, personal taste, and style conventions, and therefore a strong way of communicating identity to the outside world.

## Physical

A second aspect to consider revolves around the physical sensations and consequences of being tattooed, which to the tattooee are often a major component. As epitomised by ideals of beauty in the 1980's, namely a body which could be and was often visually controlled by exercise, diet, and later in the 1990's, plastic surgery, it is patent that with contemporary technology and science, the physical form is no longer natural and is now an idealistic object open to reforming and reshaping which with growing popularity now includes the practice of tattooing.

Siorat (2006, p. 368) distinguishes the pain of body modification as different to the pain experienced by patients in a biomedical context. She maintains that the former is created and necessary to the practice, whilst in the latter context, the goal is always to alleviate pain. Perhaps this idea is better situated in a psychiatric framework, where one can question whether or not the physical and emotional aspects of pain are mutually exclusive? It can be argued that tattooing in some respects is essentially a mainstream, more socially accepted form of self harm. Although it seems to be a very fine line between body modification and self harm, there can be similarities drawn from both ends of the spectrum, the most prominent being in the desire is to regain a semblance of balance between what is felt on the inside, and what is seen on the outside.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that the physical sensations of being tattooed are an important characteristic of its appeal. As Vincent (1981) stated, "What gives tattoo its peculiar fascination is that it is an indelible part of the living flesh and its effect derives not so much from the symbolic nature of the motif but the mysterious, threatening and seductive potency of the human body which displays it". The undergoing of pain is usually part of the tattoo's lure, many people consider the pain itself to be a kind of catharsis, proudly announcing how many hours theirs took to ink, as Siorat states "what shocks, and unsettles, are not only the aesthetic symbols adorned but in some ways more fundamentally, the moral implications of having been through the process itself" (2006), not to mention the physical medical risks one entertains by having such a procedure.

Siorat (2006, pp. 373-375) explains her own process of learning to be a tattoo artist and being tattooed herself. Many artists are encouraged to first practice on their own skin, to develop an understanding of what being in such pain can feel like. "Pain is a highly antisocial event. It is experienced by the individual at a level of consciousness that renders usual modes of social expressions particularly inadequate. We can all feel some form of empathy

towards a suffering fellow human being but we cannot experience ourselves the particular pain that they are experiencing themselves” (Siorat 2006). Interestingly, the suffering of pain is fundamentally an individual and solitary experience, since you cannot experience another’s pain in contrast to their pain threshold and therefore cannot compare it to your own. Perhaps this aspect is another crucial allure of tattooing, and furthermore, an element inextricably linked to one’s own identity and experience of the world. In this context, tattooing can be seen as a method of self-discovery.

The facet of permanence seems to be another one of the attractions of tattooing. Although Sweetman believes that the tattoo’s capacity to be removed has increased its popularity, he also asserts that its permanence is a significant element of its appeal (2000, p. 58). In this way the tattoo can be seen as a marker of identity and expression more profound than hairstyles or clothing, since it is usually not done on impulse and transcends fads and fashion. Drawing on these ideas of physical impressions and lasting inscriptions of pain, it is evident that tattooing is representative of an inexplicably personal process which surely is exclusive and unique to each person’s identity and their experience of it.

## Emotional

Lastly, the practice of tattooing can also be looked at through an emotional perspective much of which is associated with a psychological need to define one's identity. As Clarke simply puts it "While our self is more than our face, it is our face that greets the world" (2000) and Entwistle seems to parallel this theory, explaining that our "bodies are what give us our expression in the world" (2001). DeMello states, "The tattoo is a powerful symbol of affiliation and identity" (2000). She also goes on to describe the idea of 'tattoo narratives', in the sense that each tattoo alludes to a story behind the symbolism and the person on whom it is inscribed. It is interesting here to consider the stories of people in WW11 concentration camps [figure 2] whom have identification numbers unwillingly tattooed on their left arms, a permanent and often abhorrent reminder of a personal tragedy (<<http://www.tattooarchive.com/index.htm>> 2000, para. 7).



Figure 2: WWII identification tattoo  
[http://www.sonoma.edu/users/s/steiner/img/marinij\\_3.jpg](http://www.sonoma.edu/users/s/steiner/img/marinij_3.jpg)

Furthermore, Marscia-Lees and Sharpe (1992, p. 147) discuss tattoo as a metaphor; a skin surface onto which self-contained images can be etched. In this way the body is seen as a canvas for artwork, perhaps to illustrate the tattoo narratives of which DeMello speaks.



Figure 3: Tiger Lily back tattoo

<http://media.collegepublisher.com/media/paper951/stills/436ece07e3e7d-16-1.jpg>

The particular images chosen by tattooees express something profound about the person who chooses them, as Siorat (2006) states, "...to ink oneself is to anchor the self to a register of personal narratives, relationships, time and place." Even seemingly arbitrary motifs such as butterflies and flowers [figure 3] have in fact deep connotations of how the person perceives themselves, their beliefs, choices, values, morals and their life. Very simply, likes and dislikes are a significant marker of identity. Tattoos, just like clothes are a matter of embodiment, as Blanchard states, "the replication of the tattoo is contingent upon its sitting on the body of a specific subject" (cited in DeMello 2000, p. 64). Particular motifs as well as their placement on the body, allude to well-known semiotics, such as a tattoo of a name over the heart, symbolising a partner or loved one.



Figure 4: Song lyrics tattoo

<http://www.aeroforceone.com/af1/CMS/Contests/My%20tattoo-350.jpg>

There are many long standing symbols across varying cultures such as love indicated by roses, peace evidenced by the image of doves, the notion of eternity marked by the infinity symbol, not to mention quotes, song lyrics [figure 4], poetry and so on, all when used in tattoos serving as permanent visible symbolic expressions of self [figure 5]. Moreover, another aspect of human psychology is the ability to recognise the self in others. This is made easier by the putting forward of characteristics denoting a certain identity, as Entwistle states in relation to dress, "Not only does dress form the key link between individual identity and the body, providing means, or 'raw material' for performing identity, dress is fundamentally an inter-subjective and social phenomenon, an important link between individual identity and social belonging" (2001). In other words, just like uniforms serve professional groups to belong and unify, so does clothing and body modification, which are very often the key elements of subculture [figure 6], along with taste in music and jewellery.

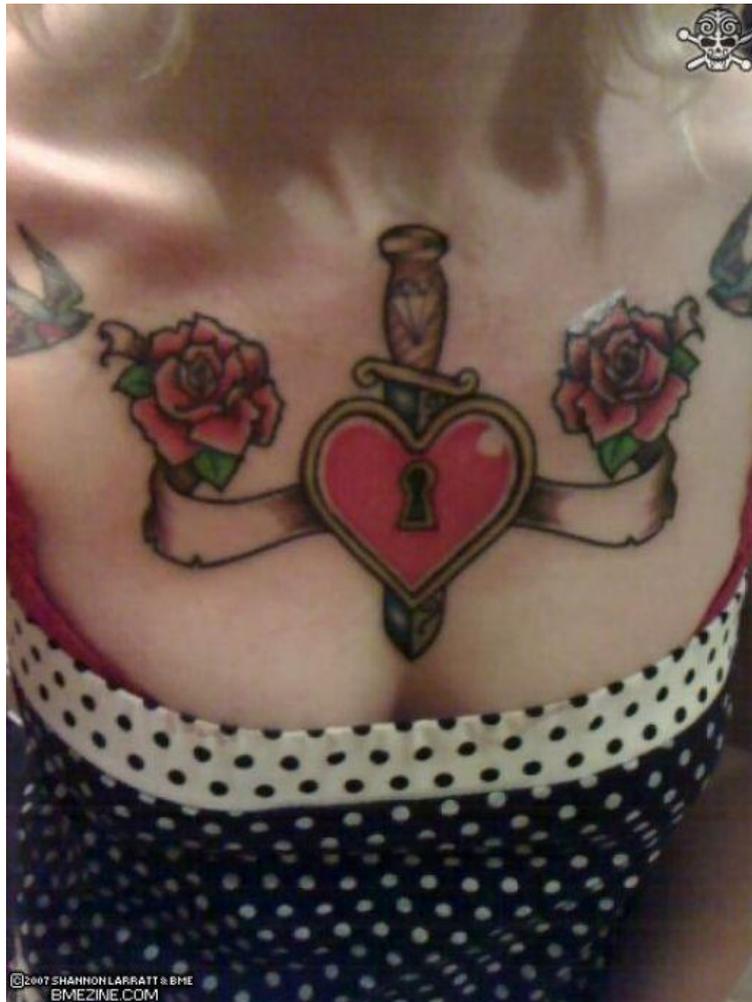


Figure 5 – Heart chest tattoo  
[http://z.hubpages.com/u/63473\\_f520.jpg](http://z.hubpages.com/u/63473_f520.jpg)

Vincent states that, “the ways in which we project our body into the social world establishes that identity we call ‘I’, the human spirit which flourishes or withers in accordance with the approval or hostility of others... We look, we imagine, we feel: it is this self awareness which shapes our most intimate ambitions and fears” (1981). Furthermore, Entwistle (2001) brings up Foucault’s tenet that the self is something which is open to change according to our choices which among many things includes dress styles, and body modification. Some WW11 victims likely hide their left arm tattoos for fear of shame, judgement or pity, whilst others view them more as historic battle scars reminiscent of what they have survived.

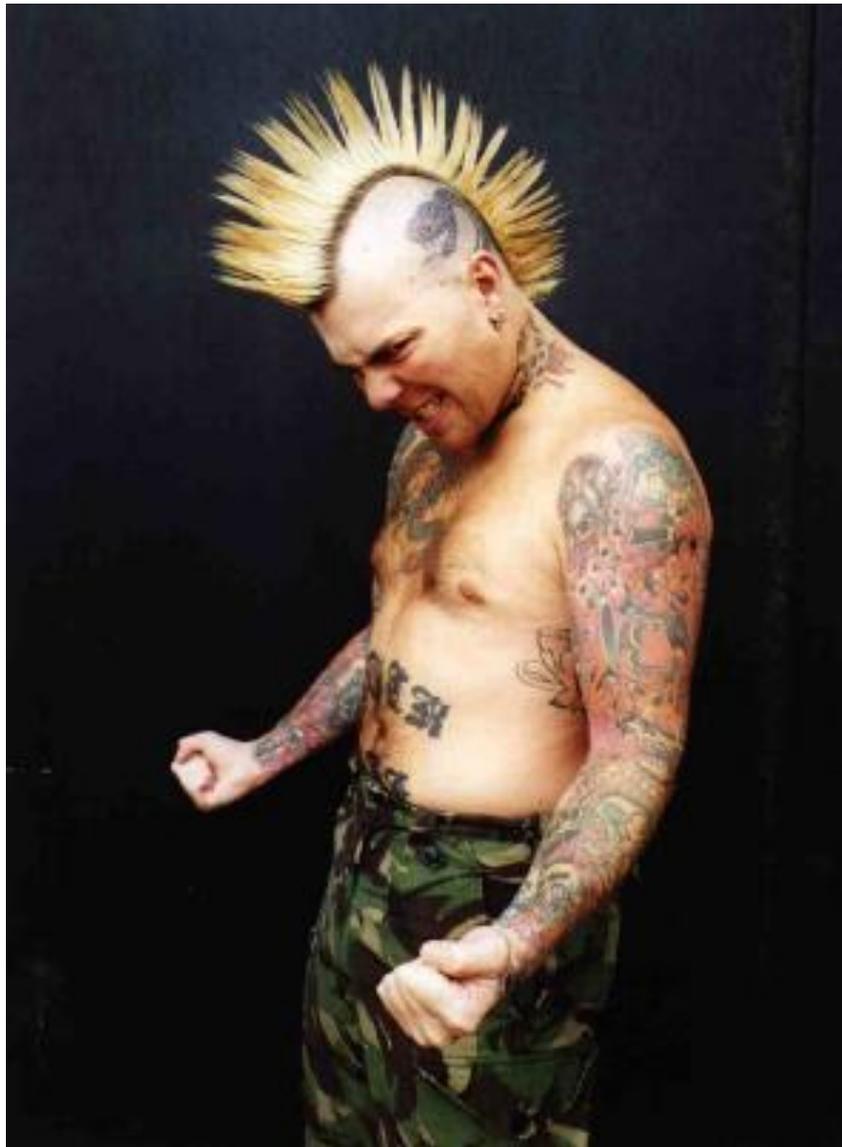


Figure 6: Punk subculture  
<http://www.seeinhell.com/images/punktat.jpg>

Returning, however, to willing tattooees, Kuwahara (2005, p. 13) applies Featherstone's statement "the sense of taking control over one's body, of making a gesture against the body natural and the tyranny of habitus formation" (2000) to Tahitian tattooing. It is thus shown that parallels can be drawn between Eastern and Western psychological reasons for being tattooed.

Since Western tattooing was first seen amongst men, female tattooing became an act of gender rebellion, power against social constructions and a defiance against beauty norms. Some women even used body modification as a means of 'reclaiming' their body after abuse or rape (Pitts 2003, pp. 49-57). To varying degrees of belief, of course, altering the natural appearance of the human body is sometimes seen as challenging religion (Vincent 1981, p. 10) or what Cole (2003) calls, "degenerating the natural condition". Hence to many, ritualistic

body modification has connotations of omnipotence, independence and having power over oneself. This is especially seen in typical families where teenagers get a tattoo or piercing to rebel against their parents' wishes. Pitts quotes a body modification artist named Lamar Van Dyke who believes that "Our bodies are one of the things that we have that nobody can take away from us. We can do whatever we want. It's a way that we can express ourselves and we can take our power back and we can put symbols on our bodies to show that in fact we have been actively involved in taking our power back" (cited in Pitts 2003, p. 208) This can be exemplified in some of the reasons why certain people choose to get certain tattoos, for instance turning a certain age or commemorating a significant event or milestone in life. One person chose to get the words "just one victory" tattooed across her arm to memorialise her sobriety, the tattoo signifying the last destructive act she would inflict upon herself (Hartley 2007, pers.comm., September 17). This kind of act is described by DeMello (2000, p. 144) as a psychological and emotional ritual, where the tattooee chooses a meaningful symbol or the like to represent an "inner state of consciousness", the tattoo artist is seen as something of a therapist and the actual act of tattooing a practice of healing and rejuvenation.



Figure 7: Orlan in surgery  
[http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol3\\_1/akman1.jpg](http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol3_1/akman1.jpg)

Relevant here is a mention of the extremely polemic French artist Orlan, who undergoes and records surgical procedures as an exploration of the body's limitations. She has had countless plastic surgeries, including the insertion of devil horns, a prosthetic chin in the style of Botticelli's Venus, and several other appropriated artistic identities [figure 8]. She throws beauty ideals to the wind, and treats her operating theatre like a performance stage, after which she documents her body's natural healing process. Clarke quotes her saying, "I am

interested in the concept that the body is obsolete” (2000). It is apparent that Orlan surrenders her natural body for a kind of emotional and spiritual rebirth, and ritual sacrifice (Clarke 2000, pp 121-194). For her it is an intense, personal ritual of self-reaffirming. Thus taking into consideration these emotional motives for body modification, it is apparent that when it comes to the psychological aspects, each instance is intricately linked to each individual's perception of themselves, their lives and the things, be they positive or negative, they have endured.

## Conclusion

Therefore, as explored by this essay, the practice of tattooing for the everyday individual in Western societies helps to form visual metaphors of the physical and psychological identity which is fundamental to the human understanding of the self. Although Eastern historical practices of tattooing were very different in their acquisition and cultural significance, the reasons for being tattooed are essentially the same. In varying ways across aesthetic, physical and emotional bearings, the tattoo to the tattooee is a profound and sincere expression of what it essentially means to be them in their past, present and predicted future.

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