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# 'A Skin of Ink': *The Tattooist* and the Body in Performance

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## Abstract

The body is the link between us and the outside world, and its creation and exhibition shapes its performance and presentation. This paper using Peter Burger's directed movie *The Tattooist* as a referential frame, analyses relational, dynamic and procedural transformation of the body through tattooing. In the film tattoo artist Jake Sawyer, unknowingly plays a role in releasing a deadly spirit as he cuts himself with 'au ta (Samoan tattoo instrument) in his attempt to learn pe'a, the Samoan tradition of tattooing. In the movie not only cultures overlap but also distinctions are blurred between art and life and also after-life. The film amazingly explores varied meaning of the human skin, and unravels the spectacle of the tattooed body. This paper explores the psyche of tattooing from the perspective of fashioning oneself both within-and-out the norm – a type of ritual-performance on the body, transforming it simultaneously into actual and contrived, corporeal and celluloid, palpable and non-physical (feigned or eidetic). This study draws on New Zealand tradition about tattoos and focuses on tattooing as a performance, primarily seeking to elucidate on how we might conceive the performance of tattooed identity among individuals.

[**Keywords:** Body, ink, modification, performance, Samoan, sign, tattoo.]

The relationship between the human body and cultural discourse has often been taken for granted, the body merely being an "absent presence" (Shilling 16) – a fixed/ inert site of mind, where the operations of a universally prevalent reason can take place. But contemporary scholarship has forcefully contested this view, and the body has emerged from a neutral space to an active agent – our point of insertion into cultural discourse and structural relationships – a sign, invested with meaning that forms the linguistic/discursive constitution of the subject. As Synnot suggests, we can "usefully reconsider the body at the heart of sociology, rather than peripheral to the discipline, and more importantly at the heart of our social lives and our sense of self"(4). Even a perfunctory critique reveals body/ embodiment as underlying to numerous social behaviours including gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, health and medicine, disability, sport, aging, death and dying. From the dissemination of plastic surgery to the mainstreaming of tattooing, from fashion to grossness, the body and feelings of embodiment are

structured and multi-dimensional (Waskul and Vannini). As explained by Waskul and van der Riet:

A person does not 'inhabit' a static object body but is subjectively embodied in a fluid, emergent, and negotiated process of being. In this process, body, self, and social interaction are interrelated to such an extent that distinctions between them are not only permeable and shifting but also actively manipulated and configured (488).

The human body is ever 'performative' – systematically reproduced and sustained through a plethora of social activities– the myriad continuums of performance. To be more precise, we do not 'have' a body, we actively perform to produce a body. According to Goffman, the body is fashioned in ritualized social and cultural conventions,

a performed character... not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be borne to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited" (252-253).

In a consumerist society, subjective position of the body is heavily downplayed to outward appearance. There is no culture in which people do not, or did not paint, pierce, tattoo, reshape, or simply adorn their bodies. Fashions change and forms of body art come and go, but people everywhere do something or other to 'package' their appearance, with the desperate hope to own and find meaning of their own bodily selves. They are like performers in space drawing together all the elements of scenographic practice, invoking interpretations which are themselves the product of ideologies enclosed within the limit of a particular time and place. As Auslander has aptly commented, "In performance, physical presence, the body itself, is the locus at which the workings of ideological codes are perhaps the most insidious and also the most difficult to analyse, for the performing body is always both a vehicle for representation and, simply, itself" (90).

In this paper I have tried unravelling the psychology of body art, more specifically tattooing<sup>1</sup>, from the perspective of performance studies, and have used Peter Burger's directed movie *The Tattooist* as a referential frame in elucidation of my points. The movie draws on Samoan tradition about tattoos and focuses on tattooing as a performance, primarily seeking to elucidate on how we might conceive the performance of tattooed identity among individuals. With tattoo artist Jake Sawyer's cutting himself with 'au ta (Samoan tattoo instrument) in his attempt to learn pe'a, the tradition of tattooing, not only a deadly spirit gets released, but also cultural meanings surrounding the tattooed body gets unravelled.

In the scope of the paper, I have tried showing the movie's handling of the skin like a stage, where art is being performed to complete a process of signification. Tattooing is shown as a visual language, having its own vocabulary – a kaleidoscopic mix of traditional practices and new inventions, through which, like artists, we everyday cross boundaries of gender, national identity, and cultural selves. Since it is an 'intimate' art form, it continually formulates and re-formulates cultural assumptions about the desirable, and the appropriately presented body. In the movie tattooed bodies are invested with a kind of plastic significance, not only meant to decorate, but also to disturb both artist and viewer, forcing us to question its social project. Here I would also like to refer to Peter Greenaway's film *The Pillow Book* (1997) and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* (1951/ movie 1969), where we see that calligraphy on skin becomes a means to perform life. Like calligraphy, tattooing puts a mark on the lives of late modern subjects and establishes a dialectical relation between tattooing and performance, where on the one hand the body constructs a personal history of experiences – an opportunity for subjective security; and on the other hand, like any other performative act, is an object subject to the gaze of other/audience.

Being tattooed can be seen as a form of permanent diary that cannot be taken away, a notion that apparently seems to contest the basic precepts of performance studies, as elaborated by Peggy Phelan for whom "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (146). But in the movie we see that though ink on the body is permanent; the performance of it is not. With each display, it is being performed and every time as Lomi's ghost reshapes the tattoos drawn by Jake, a new conduit of communication gets created between them and the audience. Even the tattooed individual at times becomes his/her own audience, because every gaze to his/her tattoo generates different emotional response between the embodied mark and the conceptual self, thereby extending the performance of the tattoo.

Atkinson notes the tattoo possesses both communicative and performance aspects in its ability to be 'read' by others, and hence it is part of a person's 'doing identity' by transmitting a definition of a person, who becomes the object of *gaze* (2003: 141, 229). Richard Schechner's claim that any performance must have an audience is applicable in tattoo performances, through its display to an observer, who not only receives the performance but also validates the individual's transformation into a new identity from non-tattooed to tattoo-*ed*. The film in its revival of the Samoan tradition also links identity transformation through tattooing with a rite of passage, where as Alipathi tells Jake, "The pain of the tattoo, it changes you". It is a tradition where "designs are handed down from father to sons" (Sina); usually performed on young boys serving as an initiation into manhood, and is a cause for celebration. In the movie we see that men of the same age group get tattooed at the same time, making them ink-brothers. A

'tufuga' (tattoo artist) presides over the occasion, and as shown in the movie it assumes a ritualistic import, where tattooing becomes a community's symbolic demarcation of a territory in space and time by complex acts and techniques affecting the experience of identity of the participants away from individuality – clothed not to cover nakedness but to show that one is ready for life and service to his community; a chain where non-believers like Jake cannot be admitted. In the Samoan tradition, it is a technology with a very clear purpose. Its aim is to reduce the sense of individual self of the participants in order to achieve a sense of 'communitas' with respect to a territorial model. Tattooing in Samoan tradition is shown as symbolic acts through which the individual reclaims his own body. The body is freed from the Western regulatory beauty and sexual norms and it becomes a limitless field of experimental performance – transforming the body into a malleable medium for expressing their compliance to social norms.

The importance of the creation of a marked body and the development of a new language is central to *The Tattooist*. The bodies presented and transformed in the course of the movie are sites of encoding and decoding: messages are produced and are simultaneously received and understood by an audience. The film serves as a cultural text, an apparatus for transmitting cultural values and also a site for struggle over meaning. The term given to describe the constant shifting and multiple possibilities of meaning a text may have is polysemy, that is, a text has no one fixed meaning: aptly created in the movie through Jake's double Lomi, the ghost tattooist that Jake unleashes as he cuts himself with the cursed 'au ta. Everyone Jake marks after incident is remarked and their tattoos re-signified by Lomi, and their blood transforms into ink, making tattooing more than a skin deep thing.

If performance, as Phelan suggests, is comprised of the following: 1) "implicates the real through the presence of living bodies"; 2) requires consumption; 3) "plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory" because it cannot be reproduced; 4) offers the "possibility of revaluing that emptiness", I maintain the tattoos by Jake and its remake by Lomi fits into each of these categories. In all these ways, the tattoo is "simultaneously permanent and impermanent, a lasting performance upon the living body" (Phelan qtd in Wilson 6). This then gives us the opportunity to analyze audience response to the tattooed bodies as 'open' rather than 'closed' and the study of how cultural differences work in the reception of texts become productive.

French philosopher Jacques Lacan proclaims that a tattoo is the first mark that signifies, that points toward a meaning. He declares that "the subject himself is marked off by a single stroke, and first he marks himself as a tattoo, the first of the signifiers"(qtd in Ellis 46). The first signifier – first symbol that represents a meaning – is a tattoo. As Lacan tells it, a tattoo is the initial meaningful mark, and making such a mark creates both human subject and signifier. Creating a tattoo, one marks oneself, and then one becomes evident as separate from that mark. So,

one becomes a subject – a distinct individual – one who must come to terms with expressive marks (Ellis 46).

Tattoos in the movie readies one for the world. In an independent tradition that long predates Lacan's theories, Samoan tribes, too, see tattoo as making room for language. A tattoo is a first sign that seems to declare: 'I am tattooed, therefore my community speaks through me and I am able to speak in my community'. The Samoan believes it to be a gift from God, and if left incomplete, brings shame to the individual and his family. Samoan tattooing offers a distinct philosophy. Where criminologists see the practice as cutting an individual off from other humans, and where Lacan's lone hunter stalks through the forest without reference to other human beings and marks himself spontaneously, Samoan tattooing is created ritually in community, by community. Person and public shape one another mutually, with tattoos signaling their interaction. Designs are more than personal, carrying culture beyond a single individual's life span. A person's patterned skin is mortal, but designs travel onward, connecting future to past, creating a passageway that shows where an individual and a people have been and where they are going. Tattoos, moreover, help propel such a journey – a performance that precedes a lifetime.

The tattooed body emerges as a performative site for the Samoan community in the film, where ink on the body upholds social norms transforming identity into a manipulable 'mise en scene' of physical accoutrement and the 'self' becomes something as shifty as experimental tattoos on the skin. The subject of the 'appropriate' locus for the denotative body becomes most clearly "an issue not only of who bears the right to wield the explicit body in the frame of art, but, who bears the rights to explicate the socio-historical significances of that body and that frame" (Schneider 42).

Tattoos also generally assume a multiplicity of interpretations from self-adornment to a dramatic structuring of life history to a protective shield – almost a second skin, representing a narrative map. As Sina explores Jake's tattoos we see his skin at the intersection of various cultures. Life history gets easily narrated through the tattoos and memory moves across continents from Berlin to New York to Brazil. Tattooed bodies become a three dimensional performative representation bridging space, significant moments and affects together. Sina's transformation in and through tattoos is also very important. Initially she allows Jake to make a red flower on her waist, but this stray tattoo allows Lomi's chaotic designs to be implanted on her back. But Jake in the end not only saves her, he also restructures and redesigns her skin into a beautiful landscape. In the movement from stray tattoos to structured and re-structured tattooing, we see that ink helps Sina in giving a new coherence to life.

In post-postmodern society, ink usurps the function of blood, not only providing a sense of belongingness, but also pulsating social performance of the individual, whose subject position gets directly inscribed onto the skin – the most

expressive part of our body. While protective and waterproof, it remains frail and 'telling' – a canvas onto which our personal and social histories are engraved. In *The Tattooist*, we are presented the “anxious concern with the abject frailty and vulnerability of the skin, and the destructive rage against it exercised in violent fantasies and representations of all kinds” (Connor 9). Jake’s father’s peeling of his son’s tattooed skin as ‘devil’s mark’ to the Japanese man’s insistence that his dying son “needs a tattoo” to Alipati’s remarks that one breathes into a tattoo to Victoria’s joke “Think of it as losing your virginity”, all shows concern with the skin and its diverse meanings.

Tattoos tempt rendition in light of the worldview of the persons sporting them because they raise questions about a person’s identity and self-representation. Indeed, the body, especially the skin covering it, can be considered a powerful aesthetic and political tool. Drawing on Bourdieu, tattooing can be viewed as one of the many strategies for providing exclusivity to oneself, and provides a continuum of possibilities for the construction and display of identity, aesthetics/politics of the self. For Bourdieu, aesthetics and politics are matted: aesthetics is invariably political because it is about arrogating distinction, branding oneself as dissimilar within a social field which renders these meaningful. But the body is not only a site where identity is freely enacted; it is also the space that is socially patrolled. Tattooing responds to and is also shaped by the larger societal contexts that shape the bodies in question.

The pointless leisure and alienation of modern life seems to be captured in the tattooed bodies, both of Jake and those he tattoos. Subjects run the risk of being exposed, and yet are happy taking it – what is defined as personal is, in reality shared (Oksanen & Turtiainen 112). In a sense technological advancement seems to call for a new kind of primitive performance, as shown in Jake’s exposure to Samoan tradition in the post-modern Tattoo Expo. When life is distant, the skin starts speaking, but to what extent? – A question that is aptly raised and answered in the movie through the binary Jake/Lomi’s ghost. Reckoning one’s body as art is used to refer to its durable quality – no matter how devouring current culture is.

The tattooed body can be viewed as a performative project, where the skin is constantly worked and reworked like a theatre practice until it becomes ready for the final show – life itself. Dramatic changes in life calls for new marks on the skin, where the body’s revamping refers to the maximization of the visual capacity and outward appearance. The body is like a script constantly improved and adjusted upon. The ‘jouissance’ associated with tattoos springs from the sense of bodily control achieved through modifications. The ramifications of the ritual of tattooing, then, lies in the fact that the substantiation of individuality is based on distinguishing the body from a large non-marked portion of the population and attaching it to a non-standardized enclave characterized by similar mark.

Postmodern sociological and literary representations of tattooing have moved ahead from the earlier tendencies to defend tattoos by merits of socially

defined parameters of art to a focus on tattooed demographics and, more significantly the aesthetic tendency that has led to the recognition of tattooing as a tolerable form of social expression or artistic endeavour, integrating it with popular culture and mass media. In the effort to be deviant, the whole body is transformed into a picture gallery, and the idea of tattoo is elevated from a site specific sticker, towards what Modern Primitives call 'a full body concept'<sup>22</sup> as seen through Jake or later Sina's body. As a way of expression, indeed of performance, the tattoo is at once both multifariously telling and communicative.

Society has moved beyond the hunter-gatherer principle with innovative vistas of knowledge and ideological experimentations being opened up for us. In this restructuring of values, the urge for skin ornamentation is again undergoing a revival. In today's world, in the world of skyscrapers, tattoos are again being used to forge tribal affiliations – representing common aesthetic values, sometimes even invested with magical beliefs, reminding us of our ritual-oriented ancestors in the Amazonian jungles.

The modern industrial city is not only a space for limitless possibilities, but also a structured site where rituals are enacted from the cradle to the grave. From watching a cricket match to marriage to first day at work, rituals marks rites of passage, through which we continually play our desired role and are manipulated into unconsciously conforming to the hegemony of society. Tattooed individuals remind us of the constricting daily rituals, and their experimentation with body leads to a search for a new ideology. Tattoos provide the potential to belong to a different culture, where we can continually evolve from our past into a new future – from a mere societal being to a state of multiple becoming(s). The tattooed bodies provoke a viewer/spectator to think again – leading us to the messy impasse between essentialist and constructivist critiques of the body. The ultimate meaning of tattoos as sign consists either of "feeling or of acting or being acted upon" (Peirce 5). Tattoos actively project one's identity to others, where a single mark is invested with multiplicity of meanings, having potential significance across a vast array of cultures and time periods. At all levels – conceptual to performative – tattooing is inextricably linked to socio-cultural elements.

Tattoo is a sign that bears explicit significance for the tattooed individual in a world of endless signifiers. It performs for and on the body, reminding it of its concreteness. New tattoos also mark identity evolution, and alter the performance of the initial ones by extending it beyond its basic scope. Yet again one may see in this performance a process that unites permanence and temporality, a performance that changes in its repertoire but not in its archive, to use Diana Taylor's term (see Wilson 61).

This paper examines tattooing from the perspective of performance among ethnic groups and modern individuals, and tries to elucidate the negotiation of marks, meanings and the body into a process of embodied performance. Tattooing is considered in this paper as a performative practice that, through such inter-



subjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentring of the Cartesian subject of modernism. This dislocation is the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism. I would like to conclude, with few words borrowed from Antonin Artaud, which I feel provides a befitting conclusion to *Tattooing as Performance*:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of the action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it (52).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Etymologically the word 'tattoo' can be traced back to the Tahitian term 'tattaw'. In India it is popularly referred to as 'godhna'.

<sup>2</sup> Modern primitives are people engaging in body art thereby forging affiliations to ancient tribal rituals. Roland Loomis, also known as Fakir Musafar, is considered the father of this movement.

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