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Tattoos, Symbolism and Aesthetics

An Independent Research Document Proposal

This essay aims to explore the three key words of 'Tattoos', 'Symbolism' and 'Aesthetics': with reference to artists and philosophers. The purpose of this will be to formulate a question that could be taken forward as a possible inquiry for the dissertation in third year. The artists that will be researched in this essay are Maude and Gus Wagner (Tattoos), Norman Keith Collins (Tattoos), Polynesian and Native American Tattoos (Culture) and Keith "Bang Bang" McCurdy (Social Media) who serve as a variety across the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Their work will be discussed in tandem with Paul Tillich (Culture), Jean Chavalier and Alain Gheerbrandt (Culture) and Friedrich Nietzsche (Social Media).

Tattoos

Tattooing is a form of body modification that "at its simplest, is the insertion of small amounts of ink into the skin, using a sharp tool like a needle" (Betts). It has been practiced by humans for millennia, as early as 3370 BCE (Hunter, 2019) and as such has gone through incredible amounts of development although the science behind it is still relatively the same. A design is chosen, and ink is deposited via needles into the skin's dermis, the layer under the epidermis, so that the ink does not fade away as skin cells die (TED-Ed, 2014). During the process of the tattoo, the body begins "the inflammation process" (TED-Ed, 2014) where white blood cells called macrophages 'eat' up the ink to get rid of what they recognise as "the invader of the body" (TED-Ed, 2014) these cells remain in the dermis as there is no way of getting rid of the pigment in the body. As such these cells hold onto the

ink creating the tattoo, and after the individual macrophages die more macrophages take its place, therefore making the tattoo permanent (TED-Ed, 2014).

“The oldest evidence of human tattoos is believed to be from between 3370 BCE and 3100 BCE” (Hunter, 2019), nicknamed Otzi the Iceman, he shows that tattooing has been in practice for a significantly large part of human history. Furthermore, tattooing was a fairly common practice in Ancient Egypt as researcher Daniel Fouquet suggests “they may have been performed as medical treatments” (Hunter, 2019) and Cate Lineberry believes that they had served as “permanent amulets” (2007) for pregnant women to protect them during the pregnancy and birth period. Additionally, tattooing has been culturally significant in many different civilisations such as Samoan where “tattoo ceremonies marked the ascension of a chief as well as rites of passage in people’s lives... representing and celebrating dedication to the culture and great endurance” (Hunter, 2019), “extensive facial tattooing was also used by Native American and Inuit” (Lineberry, 2007) people to mark certain rites of passage. Thus, showing that tattooing has a very long and rich history with both cultural and aesthetic significance throughout different civilisations and to the modern age.

Tattooing as we know it today in the West, emerged during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, at this point in time the majority of those with tattoos were circus performers and sailors. “Many of the tattoos were for identification purposes if a sailor fell overboard or drowned” (Hunter, 2019) although there were additional symbolic meanings, e.g., a turtle showed that the sailor had crossed the equator and a sparrow meant that the sailor had undertaken a journey of 5000 miles. This association with sailors and circus

performers is one of the reasons why there was such a stigma around tattooing in Western countries and this remained much the same until Maude and Gus Wagner. The two travelled the United States in fayres and circuses educating people on and giving them tattoos in the “hand poke style” (Farabee, 2013), the traditional style of tattooing that utilises single needles to create tattoos and was the dominant way of producing them before the invention of the electric tattoo machine in 1891 (barberdts.com, 2017). The style of tattooing created by the Wagner’s was a foreshadowing of the later and still very popular styles of Traditional and American Traditional (which came into vogue during the mid-20th century), showcasing bold black lines, simple illustrations and the notable “patchwork sleeve” (Robin, 2021) “meaning a sleeve made up of separate tattoos rather than one big image with a background” (Robin, 2021). The two artists are also largely credited with moving the practice of tattooing from primarily coastal towns to inland America “making it part of the culture of small-town America in the 20th century” (WebArchive, 2015).



The Plaza Galley, 1907, Maude Wagner

Whilst the Wagner's are credited with creating a larger environment for tattooing to take place, one of the largest influences of modern tattooing is that of Norman Keith Collins more commonly known as 'Sailor Jerry.' Perhaps one of the most well-known tattoo artists of all time, Collins "greatly expanded the range of colours available to tattooists" (Levy, 2008) as well as contributing greatly to make tattooing "a safer as well as a less painful practice" (Levy, 2008). However, he is most noted for developing the style of Traditional/American Traditional, pioneered by older artists such as the Wagner's the style includes thick, bold black outlines that stand the test of time leading to the old adage in the tattoo community "bold will hold," Collins is also known for several reoccurring designs in his tattoos that have become synonymous with Traditional/American Traditional tattoos such as snakes, swallows (indicative of his sailing background), knives and other weaponry, pin up girls and eagles- patriotic tattoos were increasingly popular during Collins' career due to World War Two as well as several other American Wars (Hunter, 2019).



Collins, N.K, c. 1940s, Flash Sheet

Culture

“Tattoos have often been presented in popular media as either marks of the dangerous and deviant or trendy youth fads” (TED-Ed, 2014), and this has been the norm for much of Western society for hundreds of years epitomised in Albert Parry’s 1933 book *Tattoo, Secrets of a Strange Art as Practised by the Natives of the United States*’ in which he stated that those with tattoos were sexually deviant since he saw the act as being intrinsically linked to sex (Hunter, 2019), although this could easily be argued against since Parry famously was a supporter of Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud who argued many mundane things were a reflection of the psychosexual mind, the book was not at all well received by tattoo artists as it “infuriated the few tattoo artists literate enough to read it and understand what he was saying that one and all denounced him for doing their art a great disservice.” (Scientific American, 1934). Nevertheless, this notion of deviancy within the tattoo industry and those who get tattoos remained popular and still exists within many more socially conservative areas.

Although it should be noted that within a great many ancient and indigenous cultures, tattoos have been and still are considered an art form that for example Polynesian tattoos “known for the elaborate geometrical designs that were added to and embellished throughout an islander’s lifetime” (Cloak and Dagger Studio), ancients used “flat chisel-like instruments” (Cloak and Dagger studio) which through time evolved into what is known as a ‘tattoo comb,’ a number of needles bound together creating a comb like shape. In Tonga “carried heavy social and cultural importance” (Cloak and Dagger Studio) and were only to be completed by priests, with many strict rituals and rites throughout the process. In

Samoa, where it is thought the modern work for tattoo originates from (Hunter, 2019), “the artist typically tattooed men in groups of six or more, and the process was one of ceremony and celebration, with the ritual being attended by their friends and family” (Cloak and Dagger Studio), Polynesian tattoos are known for their beautiful and intricate geometrical patterns and use of shapes, unfortunately however many of these meanings are now unknown due to the violent colonisation and erasure of thousand year old cultures by the European ‘settlers.’



Lindauer, G. 1890, Tamati Waka Nene

Similar to the Polynesian islanders, Native American tribes of North America also embraced the art of tattooing in their cultures, the process and practice of tattooing was used “to mark achievements, social status, and the coming of age, as well as pay homage to their

spiritual beliefs and religious practices” (Cloak and Dagger Studio). The Sioux tribe believed that tattoos would act as an aid on the journey the spirit made after death, offering protection on the way to and entry into the Many Lodges, the most applicable comparison to this being Heaven, where it was thought that if a warrior did not have tattoos, then they would be denied entry “condemning him to a life of wandering as a ghost for all eternity amongst the living” (Cloak and Dagger Studio).

Despite this there is precedent of tattoos being associated with criminal activity and violent behaviours. Most notably in Japan where tattoos are synonymous with the organised crime groups known as ‘Yakuza’ who’s members “pledge their allegiance with full-body markings” (Marsh, Ogura, Kobayashi, 2017) and as such anyone with tattoos is usually unable to use public swimming pools, bath houses and gyms. It is because of varying cultures that the symbolism associated with tattoos is incredibly interesting, ranging from the previously discussed identification of sailors and the great cultural significance of tattoos in many indigenous cultures, to more modern and personal tattoos “symbols point beyond themselves to something else” (Tillich, 1965), showing great importance. Furthermore, “symbols are central to literature, religion and national identity,” (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt, 1969) showing that tattoos within the context of culture also take up symbolic meanings, adding to their relevancy and importance.

Social Media

It could be said that one of the most defining features of the 21st Century is the development and use of social media. “A collective term for websites and applications

which focus on communication interaction, content-sharing and collaboration,” (Wigmore, 2020) social media is what most people spend over “2 hours and 22 minutes” (Metev, 2021) using daily making it an ideal place for marketing and showcasing work as well as growing customer bases- due to this social media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest have led to “a revolution within the tattoo community” (Hunter, 2019).

The reputation of tattoos as that of “bad- boy delinquent types” (Hunter, 2019) remained much the same in the West despite it becoming more and more popular notably when Janis Joplin became one of the first visibly tattooed celebrities in the 1960s. This changed in the 1980s and 1990s as tattooing “went from subculture to pop culture” (Perraudin, 2018) although it the world of tattooing was revolutionised in the 2010s (Rodriguez, 2020) due to the influence of Instagram. In 2020, William Ryan Force wrote that Instagram “engages tattooing’s deviant past alongside it’s increased acceptability as an art form,” creating an environment in which tattooing has exploded exponentially, for example there are over 66.6 million posts under the hashtag “#tattoos” as of 2021 (Instagram, 2021). Furthermore, “many artists estimate that more than 70% of their clients come from the phot-sharing app” (Rodriguez, 2020), this increased exposure of tattooing has led to more and more people getting tattoos as well as a variety of new and popular styles, such as watercolour, fine single needle work and ignorant style, as well as the resurgence of the hand poke tattooing method. However, there are many artists who believe that Instagram has created “an unsustainable” (Havva Karabudak quoted by Rodriguez, 2020) that is detrimental to artists as there is a constant pressure to post and grow one’s platform.

Moreover, the popularity of tattooing and sharing tattoo imagery online has led to the increased practice of stolen work (Inked, 2019) resulting in less originality and creativity in the industry as well as hundreds if not thousands of people walking around with the same tattoos. This poses a problem as “the skin serves as a useful canvas on which to portray statements of individuality, sexuality, belonging, machismo, frustration, boredom, and anger” (Wu, 2018) so it could be argued that these statements are weakened by the increasingly common practice of copied tattoos. Especially when one considers that with the rise of ‘influencer culture’ (Day, 2019) promoting ‘a false sense of what everyone else is doing’ (Wagstaff, 2019) aesthetics are valued more than ever on social media and it has created a tattooing scene of “No Shepard, one heard. Everyone wants the same, everyone is the same” (Nietzsche, 1883), where Nietzsche’s concept of The Everyman reigns supreme in his ability to follow the masses in what is popular.

Additionally, Instagram has led to the popularisation of styles that will not stand the test of time, e.g., watercolour tattoos will appear blotchy and badly saturated when completely healed and fine single needle work will all blur together within a few years. For example, artist Keith ‘Bang Bang’ McCurdy has made a name for himself as a celebrity tattoo artist specialising in single needle and fine detail work, “considered one of the most successful artists in the industry” (Desoto, 2017), outside of mainstream tattoo appreciators and social media, many artists look down upon McCurdy and his fine detail tattoos as he is credited with causing their popularity to skyrocket whilst also not educating people on the limited nature of their legibility. “Tattoos will inevitably fade over time” (Sorry Mom Tattoo Shop, 2021) due to sun and UV exposure, lack of care and simple aging of the skin, however the fine detail tattoos made popular by McCurdy barely remain legible for even a few years. For

example, Cara Delevigne's infamous tattoo of a fine detail lion on her index finger made by McCurdy in 2015 showed clean, crisp fine lines when it was initially completed and had all the hallmarks of a well-done tattoo. However, due to the area and the small size of the tattoo as well as the exclusive use of a single needle machine, the tattoo blurred and became much more illegible far quicker than a relatively larger tattoo created with needles and machines that are used to create lines compared to small details. The lack of awareness of the tattoo healing process due to social media has created an "unsustainable environment" (Hunter, 2019) full of misinformation where an artist can become incredibly popular and wealthy despite creating tattoos that will inevitably disappoint, especially when prices start at \$500 (BangBang FAQ,).



PopSugar Beauty, 2015,
Cara Delevigne's finger
tattoo



Braun, D. 2019, Cara Delevigne's finger tattoo

Having explored and researched these three key words, there are multiple questions that could be developed regarding the relationship between tattoos, culture and social media. For example, 'Has an increased importance of social media resulted in the loss of meaning

within tattooing, both personally and culturally?’ is a possible question to consider, or at least a starting point, for the independent research document. This would allow me to further explore tattooing, cultural tattoos, social media, body modification, identity, aesthetics, symbolism, cultural appropriation and misinformation as part of my research next year for the independent research document.

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