

Gaining and Losing Control: Tattoos and Interpretive Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which individuals are able to create their own bodies, influence the perception of others, and shape their memories by getting tattooed. Tattoos can be a powerful way of gaining control and experiencing oneself as an active creator of one's life. However, in the process of getting tattooed, people have to be passive: they are at the mercy of a person whom they usually do not know well and who has specific personal interests in tattooing others—working efficiently and earning money or a good reputation. Further, the tattooees cannot control how other people will interpret their tattoos. Yet, most tattooed individuals seem to regard the active aspects as more important than the passive act of getting tattooed and interpreted by others and develop strategies to reinterpret their loss of control.

I have never particularly liked tattoos—not because I interpret them as signs of a lower social class or consider most of them poorly executed, but because I have always thought they would interfere with, detract from, and fragment the appearance of the body as a whole; and getting a tattoo would lead to a fixation on appearance that I try to avoid. I enjoy changing my style, wearing different types of clothes—sometimes more bohemian, sometimes sportier—and I feel that I might want to change my style depending on what path life takes. Moreover, I consider it strange to permanently wear a picture designed by somebody else that may not have turned out the way it was supposed to.

Why would someone like me get a tattoo? There were very few visibly tattooed people in my family and among my friends, so there was no peer pressure.

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I also didn't feel the need to be different from them. Nevertheless, I got a tattoo some time ago, which made me think about my motivations, and I came to the conclusion that it was closely related to the feeling of maintaining and losing control. In this article, I examine the process of getting tattooed followed by the status of wearing a tattoo. My research took place in the western part of Germany, where I conducted twenty informal in-depth conversations with tattooed people between 2019 and 2020.

Of course, tattoos can emerge in very different situations, and the respective semiotic registers, understood as locale-specific models of communication (Agha 2009), vary significantly. For example, prison tattoos not only tend to look different from commercially executed tattoos but arise in different situations with different *dispositifs*. The term *dispositif* denotes a particular setup in which forces operate that are characterized by a specific disposition "in the sense of 'arrangement' and 'tendency'" (Kessler 2010). According to Michel Foucault, a *dispositif* is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statement, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" or the "relations that can be established between these elements . . . the nature of connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements" (1980, 194–95). Based on Foucault's considerations, Knut Hackett (1997) and Tom Gunning (2003) used the term to refer to forms of (mass) media and emphasized the different situations and historical contexts in which they arise (Gunning 2003, 24). The term can readily be extended to other social situations as well, such as getting a tattoo: prison tattoos, as well as tattoos that amateurs do themselves or receive from inexperienced friends, are consequently not only characterized by their different look but also tell a different story in terms of control and interpretation. In the discussion that follows, my focus is on commercial tattooing, that is, tattooing done under professional conditions in dedicated studios, and thus on tattooing practices that are understood as services for which the customer pays.

But let us first take a quick look at the history of perceptions of the body as a field of conflict. At least since Foucault's analysis, the body has often been seen as a socially constructed phenomenon. Anthony Synnott (1992, 80) discusses five principal turning points in the so-called Western history of the perception of the body: ideas such as body positivism and negativism marked ancient Greek debates, and the question of superiority of the body or the mind persists in contemporary debates (Burkitt 1999, 1). Early Christians viewed the body as sacred but also emphasized ascetic traditions, as in the Middle Ages. The Renaissance viewed the body more positively and incorporated it in the unification of physical

and celestial bodies through astrology. The Enlightenment started to look at the body as an understandable machine, whereas in the nineteenth century, the body became more and more defined as an economic and political entity. The twentieth century saw a consolidation of mechanistic and materialistic models of the body and more body-positive attitudes. The mechanistic model has been challenged by holistic medicine, and dramatic reconstructions of corporeality have led to the reevaluations of concepts such as gender and color (Synnott 1992, 104) and to the insight that body and culture can be understood as interdependent entities (Burkitt 1999, 2). A celebration of endless possibilities can nonetheless miss reality's constraints, as Bodo Lippl and Ulrike Wohler show in their analysis of the top model show (2011).

Synnott concludes his mental time travel in a slightly solemn tone: "The body is no longer 'given' (meaning, traditionally, a gift of God); it is *plastic*, to be moulded and selected at need or whim" (1992, 101), and it can be added that it is even expected to be designed, fueled not only by the beauty and the fashion industries but also by the food industry, which emphasizes health and body shaping, as well as by companies offering services and goods related to the topic, such as fitness and yoga (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 17). Time and money are invested in the body and its style. Style can be understood as a phenomenon that relates to particular contexts (Nakassis 2016, 7) and expresses desires, concerns, and anxieties. As shown by Constantine Nakassis, style can be highly ambiguous and formulated in different ways, which, as will be illustrated below, can be also said about tattoos. Unlike other features of style, tattoos are permanent modifications of the body. There are very different interpretations of the phenomenon, from seeing them as "a psychic crutch aimed to repair a crippled self-image, inspire hope, keep noxious emotions at bay, and reduce the discrepancy between the individual and his aspirations" (Grumet 1983, 491) to a sign of reclaiming the body for oneself, as illustrated in Xuan Santos's analysis of the tattoos of Latino women in Los Angeles: "When Chicanas step outside socially prescribed roles by becoming tattooed, they are addressing their alienation from society's norm . . . by reclaiming the 'canvas' for themselves. This Chicana canvas . . . becomes an active means of self-affirmation that can express oppositions to barriers imposed by class, gender, race, and sexuality" (2009, 93).

The reasons to get a tattoo can vary from "beauty, art and fashion" to "personal narrative," "group affiliations," "resistance," and "spirituality and cultural tradition," as shown in a review of existing relevant literature by Silke Wohlrab et al. (2007). All these accounts have one feature in common: people want to take control of their bodies in a meaningful way.

In this context, the concept of “agency” is important. The term itself has been only recently brought into the social sciences by post-structuralist social theorists (Duranti 2004, 452). Following Alessandro Duranti, its working definition would be having control over those of one’s own actions that affect other entities and can themselves be objects of evaluation (2004, 453). Consequently “agency” is to be distinguished from simply “being active”: “An idol, who does not respond actively (by moving or speaking) is none the less ‘active’ as a patient with respect to the agency of others” (Gell 1998, 129). Furthermore, acting and suffering are closely connected, as Hannah Arendt observed: “Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin” ([1958] 1998, 190). In some languages, there are grammatical forms that can separate the doer from the deed (Ingold 2015, 145) and can illustrate such contexts more clearly. Agency, in our case, has to be seen both on the side of the tattooee, who wants a tattoo, selects it, pays for it, and willingly undergoes the procedure—even though they are passive in the course of receiving the tattoo—and on the side of the tattooer, who can be viewed as the executive body, although their being selected, instructed, and paid by the customer also depends on the latter. In addition, the audience, the people who look at the tattoo and interpret it, can be considered as having agency as well.

Approaching Tattoos with “Bodylore”

When analyzing how people shape their bodies, “Bodylore” offers an interesting approach: it understands the body as narrative text, as a space of discourse where various identities are mapped together. “The body is not simply inscribed into its discourses; it takes up its discourses. Postures and gestures of the body are perceived and experienced as manifestations or representations of states of mind” (Young 1994, 5). Bodylore identifies three typical methods to approach body-related topics: the auto-ethnographic approach allows the individual to describe experiences and sensations and “brings forward the lived corporeal experience of the individual” (Milligan 2019, 455). The second is “quite literally viewing the bodies of others” (455) and uses more traditional ethnological methods, such as (participant) observation. The third works with existing material, for example, photographic evidence, video footage, literature, and other secondary sources.

In this study, I mainly combine the first two methods, namely, auto-ethnography and (participant) observation of others. Combining the two seems necessary since it would be difficult to do participant observation in this field without having

undergone the practice oneself. I use these methods to examine various *dispositifs* and kinds of agency during different phases of the activities of tattooees, such as planning for or thinking about the tattoo, searching for a suitable tattooer, the moment of getting tattooed, and living with the new status of being tattooed. Some phases of this process are hard to observe in others and are better understood if also experienced oneself. Further, there is no “place to go” to live with tattooed people. To compensate for the weakness of auto-ethnography—that it might be biased and unrepresentative—I conducted twenty informal in-depth conversations with tattooed people, most of them during the course of my participant observation in a German tattoo studio where I was invited to witness several tattoo sessions and help with some simple tasks. Most of the interviews took place while the person was being tattooed, or, when this was not possible, as face-to-face, telephone, or chat interviews. The interviewees—twelve women and eight men—were between twenty-three and sixty-one years old, and either were employed workers or freelancers, or were students. Among them there were two university students, a nursery school teacher, a hairstylist, and a lawyer. Probably due to the low numbers of people of color in Germany, there were only White interviewees. Four interviewees were getting their first tattoo, while the others already had between two and “many.”

Exerting Control

Styling or creating the body can be understood by the keyword *control*: “If we say, a person has control, we mean that she has the power to bring about, maintain or avoid a particular event . . . or a class of events” (Flammer and Nakamura 2002, 83);¹ and, furthermore, “control is something that people experience, to a certain degree, as satisfying” (84).² It is assumed that people who anticipate having control over situations are less pessimistic and resigned and more confident (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 2002, 29) and that they view being in control as desirable. Following Seymour Epstein, the need for control and orientation is even considered to be the most fundamental need (1990). However, many situations in our lives involve loss of control, making us subject to outer circumstances. According to August Flammer and Yuka Nakamura (2002), we then feel passive and powerless, deprived of the chance for agency.

1. “Wenn wir einem Menschen Kontrolle zusprechen, meinen wir, dass er die Macht besitzt, ein bestimmtes Ereignis . . . oder eine Klasse von Ereignissen herbeizuführen, aufrechtzuerhalten oder zu vermeiden.”

2. “Kontrolle ist auch etwas, das die Menschen bis zu einem gewissen Grad als beglückend empfinden.”

So how is getting tattooed related to exerting control? Several interdependent dimensions of control are at stake: control over the way the body is treated and how it looks, over perceptions others have of a body with tattoo designs, and over one's own life's narratives, which connect signs on the body to certain life events.

Control over the Body

In an epilogue to Armando Favazza's book *Bodies under Siege*, world-famous body artist and researcher Fakir Musafar points out that some people undergo body modifications after being abused in order to lay claim to the body, to heal the wounds (Favazza 1996, 329). Of course, getting a new dress or hair color could imply the same, that is, visibly taking control, but tattoos or piercings seems to go a step further since they are more unusual, more invasive, and more permanent.

"In tattoo narratives, the acquiring of the first tattoo is a significant turning point that appears as a part of the process of becoming independent. Tattoos work as personal rites of passage from childhood to adulthood" (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005, 115). The frequent comparison to rites of passage is appropriate since a tattoo can serve as a visual marker that the person has undergone some practice that changed their body and eventually also their inner state and status in society. Similar to Arnold Van Gennep's classical description, a *rite de separation*—in this case, not just leaving aside the status of being "non-tattooed" but also physically leaving one's everyday life to go to a tattoo studio—is followed by a *rite de marge* while getting tattooed, and by a *rite d'agrégation*, one's integration into the new status of being a tattooee ([1909] 1960). On the other hand, rites of passage are usually not chosen by the individual but rather are required by society. In the case of getting a tattoo, however, the person is choosing it themselves and thus possesses a greater degree of agency.

Yet, in this context, the question, "Can the body ransom us?" (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 17) may arise. When a person has little control over most areas of life, when they feel insecure, it seems very logical to put the body first, to focus on and invest in the one thing that really belongs to oneself: one's own body. Even if the individual feels heteronomous, determined by politics, by social relationships, by economic issues, by health or by fate, the permanent redesign of the body constitutes a kind of self-determination (Hefferson and Boniwell 2011, 188). Since the tattoo becomes a part of the person that cannot be taken away, investing in it is reasonable (Sweetman 1999) and becomes one of the last chances to exert control. Indeed, being tattooed is sometimes said to be an outcome of a subordinate position in society and of experiences of exploitation (Jeffreys 2000).

This sounds contradictory to the fact that at least some tattoos are increasingly understood as art since the 1990s, a period when “a spate of tattoo-related exhibitions were mounted in the influential New York City art world” (Kosut 2013, 2). As Mary Kosut points out, the acceptance of tattooing as art is evident inside the tattoo community even if its cultural status is in flux outside this community. However, artists such as the Italian Marco Manzo have long since established themselves in the art scene (Bryan 2017) and regularly exhibit their works in museums that are otherwise more traditionally oriented. The people on display may resemble exhibition objects, but, as a woman tattooed by Manzo assured me, they do not regard themselves as objects but as active and proud creators of their bodies as works of art.

In the community I studied, people often find it difficult to draw boundaries between art and craft. This issue can lead to arguments between tattoo artists and clients, as when a customer wants a very ordinary, “un-artistic” design or a design that does not match the tattoo artist’s stylistic preference. The way the art is shown constitutes another peculiarity: carrying some kind of art on the body seems to transform the body into an exhibition space, a “canvas” as it is sometimes called in this setting. Yet, these mobile canvases do not necessarily display the tattoos to others. Further, bodies will age and so will the artwork they display. The tattoos themselves can get lasered, covered over, or extended with other motifs and may finally be lost once the tattooee has passed away. Consequently, the tattoo artist can neither keep his own work, nor trade with it, nor make further decisions about it. At best, the tattoo can be preserved in a photograph—that is, in a two-dimensional copy of the artwork as it originally was—which is often done by both tattoo artists and tattooees. Such a photograph constitutes the last means of control and a *memento mori*. This relationship between photograph and photographed has been described by many scholars (see, e.g., Blood and Cacciato 2014) but becomes especially evident in our case.

Control over Perceived Identity

The connections between tattoos and identity are manifold (see, e.g., Pritchard 2010). First, the design chosen can become a means for the individual to realize and communicate their identity. In unstable times, it represents a chance to commit to something, to something self-chosen. This willingly undertaken limitation in face of innumerable alternatives is one way to constitute an identity—identity understood as a decision in favor of something and at the same time against its alternatives (Niekisch 2002, 27; Abels 2017, 2). The tattooee knows that people imagine somebody with mandala tattoos to be different from someone

who has Disney-related tattoos. “I want to show who I am” was among the statements I heard the most when conducting informal interviews.

Moreover, “tattooing and body piercing tend to be broadly understood as transgressive practices as they have the power to violate normative expectations about appearance, gender, sexuality, or race” (Adams 2009, 105). This implies that getting a tattoo is a statement against mainstream society, a sign of rebellion. Even though this may not apply today to every tattooed individual in every case, associations of being wild, independent, and different still persist. More drastic statements can also be made, for example, in the case of ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) tattoos or HIV/AIDS tattoos: “The body can become a prominent site of display for intentional identity disclosure, as in the case of HIV/AIDS tattoos, where visibly asymptomatic individuals use this aesthetic and ritualistic practice of bodily inscription to engage in self-stigmatization” (Bock 2019, 971). HIV/AIDS and similar tattoos can serve various functions, such as marking group membership, but can also imply a refusal of the shame associated with the disease and an active intervention against stigmatizing discourses. None of my interviewees had tattoos that they would have considered extreme, but two people had disease-related tattoos. For them, these tattoos meant a reevaluation of their fate.

However, identity nowadays is also considered a never-ending project of manifold and even contrasting identifications (Brandes 2010, 15). This refers to public perceptions as well as to the individual’s thoughts and emotions. In public perceptions, a fresh tattoo can be regarded as more beautiful than an old one, and a new style or motif in tattooing can be seen as trendy for a while but later be considered uncreative or old-fashioned. Also, for the individual, the motivation for getting a tattoo does not have to stay identical over time. Sometimes the focus may get shifted, as observed by Asceneth Sastre Cifuentes: some individuals whom she interviewed indicated that, at the beginning, their tattoos had been intended as marking membership in a group or showing opposition to their families or other groups in society, but later, when this goal was achieved or no longer relevant to them, the tattoos became loaded with new, different meanings (2011, 188).

Control over Memory and Meaning

Tattoos are often meant to remember something, someone, or some occasion. Consequently, a tattoo can be regarded as “a memory inscribed on the skin” (Hirsch 2012, 96) or as an artificial memory (Douwe 1999, 10), as described in the process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000): a memory or an idea, sometimes also a painting or a photograph, becomes a sketch, and finally ends up on a person’s skin (which eventually will be photographed).

The things to be remembered often date back to a time before the tattoo was inked: “Tattoos tell the stories of a past, whether these are stories of violence or stories of desire; they are the site of memory and visual narrative. It is therefore not surprising that an individual describing his or her tattoo will not only comment on the visual features of the image but will often tell a story leading up to the tattoo’s creation” (Beeler 2006, 13), a fact, that I can confirm from all the conversations I have had. Heavily tattooed people often regard their tattoos as their diaries, and, as such, not every tattoo has to be beautiful, and the collection of tattoos does not have to form a coherent unit. Life is fragmented and can consist of many differently interwoven individual episodes, and so can the tattoos. Furthermore, covering up old tattoos with new ones is a way of rewriting the story in parts, allowing someone episodically to make something beautiful out of something ugly as it unfolds, which becomes evident in the typical narrative of cover-up shows on TV. Avoiding meaning in tattoos is impossible: even a spontaneously chosen, apparently “senseless” tattoo is based on a certain motivation, and such a tattoo reminds the tattooee of a particular moment, while communicating something about themselves to others.

Just as the tattoo and its meaning can change, so can the memory connected with it: when a person looks at their own tattoo, they may not always experience the same feelings, and the emotions and cognitions that the tattoo evokes can change over time (Smith 2012, 109). The tattoo is permanent, but the memory not necessarily so; for example, the memory of the pain of getting tattooed often fades, and, depending on the tattooed person’s stage of life, they may ascribe varying significance to the tattoo at different times. However, the person’s decision to get tattooed is eternalized on their skin, and its permanence may discipline the self in certain ways. Some people with whom I spoke wanted their tattoo to remind them every day of something particular, for example, a loved one, a life motto, or their own inner beauty. Its visible permanence is supposed to exert a self-chosen control over their lives.

Of course, the situation of getting tattooed also belongs to the moments that are meaningful and memorable in the life story of an individual. I now turn to a discussion of these situations.

Losing Control

Is getting tattooed really a means to exert or retrieve control? The process of getting tattooed seems to suggest the opposite: “Getting tattooed” is a grammatically passive expression, and so is the procedure it denotes: something is done to the individual who, at this moment, has to suffer the pain.

Later, when the tattoo is ready, the individual is “looked at” by others, which is another passive expression. Both indicate that the person is apparently not active, is an undergoer, and does not control the situation themselves.

Getting Tattooed

Looking at the *dispositif* of getting tattooed, there seems to be a lack of agency on the tattooee’s side (see fig. 1): during the process, the person has to sit still, endure pain, and, most of all, trust the tattoo artist, who is someone they usually do not know very well. Depending on the part of the body that gets tattooed, the tattooee does not even see what is happening and consequently cannot intervene. Although the customer pays for the tattoo, it is also “an expression of the tattoo artist’s desire” (Beeler 2006, 6). The artist wants not only to make money but often also to create something that matches their style or ambition. Tattoo artists have little opportunity for vertical mobility and thus might aspire to receive recognition as artists (Fisher 2002, 99). Consequently, tattooees permanently wear something like another’s signature on their bodies. Most customers, who themselves have no idea about tattooing, neither know whether the design will turn out as they imagine nor can assess the skills of the tattoo artist. The profession is not a job linked to professional qualifications and accreditation in most countries, which creates



Figure 1. Tattoo artist Nikita adorns his customer Manuela’s arm with a tattoo that should express courage and refers to Manuela’s life story. Photograph courtesy of the author.

more room for insecurity. Since many tattooers see themselves as artists rather than as craftsmen, they may not be willing to copy a motif or implement a design by the customer. Tattoo studios also often reject motives that they regard as too trivial or harmful to the client in the long run (Fisher 2002, 98f.).

The process of getting a tattoo thus implies a loss of control. This loss of control may be intended and willingly agreed upon—and yet, surprisingly, it may not be anticipated by the individual, as most tattooees have told me, and as I can confirm from my own experience. This is probably because there is no comparable situation in everyday life. Physical treatments that involve interventions into the body usually take place only when visiting the doctor. Actions with clearly visible effects on one's appearance in everyday life happen when getting a new haircut or color, a new nail design, or cosmetic surgery. However, when people receive (cosmetic) treatments from doctors in Western countries, they know that the doctor has studied the subject and has professional accreditation; and when they get a new haircut or select a new nail polish, the process neither interferes with the body's integrity nor is connected to a permanent change. Getting tattooed differs from both. Moreover, aspirations toward aesthetical self-realization of the sort that are common among the better-known tattoo artists are usually not found among plastic surgeons, hairstylists, and beauticians. For a person unfamiliar with the procedure of tattooing, it can be surprising how quickly and routinely the life-changing inscription of the body is done and how much one has to trust the tattoo artist.

This loss of control seems to be compensated in various ways: some people regard the tattoo artist as a friend. More than one-third of the tattooees I talked to mentioned this, for example, by saying that they only paid a “mate's rate.” Other tattooees, approximately half of the persons I talked to, stress the artistic ability or popularity of their tattooer through statements like “he is the best” or “she has more than 10K likes on Instagram.” The smallest group, according to my impression, seems to have a rather different strategy: some people downplay the meaning of their tattoos and of the process of getting them, by saying that the decision was just a spontaneous idea, that they went straight to the first tattoo shop they saw. This strategy is reminiscent of Kristen Lauer's analysis of coolness. In her definition, coolness is characterized by “a lack of investment into coolness” that requires an “effort embodied by the cool individual” (2018, 57), a feature that she calls “apathy to cool.” This can also be used as a post-hoc rationalization of badly executed tattoos or tattoos that no longer correspond to the current identity. Hence, these different strategies can help the individual to justify the loss of control experienced when getting a tattoo.

Another interesting finding in this context is the redefining of suffering as something productive (Hay 2010). This is reminiscent of our earlier discussion of the difficulty of defining agency and passivity, and of Alfred Gell's (1998) outlook on art as the attainment of agency. If we understand the tattooee's body as an artwork (DeMello 2014, 63), their agency is redeemed by being a canvas and sitting through the process. Accordingly, tattoo artists also talk about "cooperative" customers not only in the sense that they accept the tattoo artist's advice but also in that they handle the procedure well and sit still. The term *cooperative* suggests work on a joint project.

Getting Interpreted

After the loss of control during the procedure, tattooees experience a longer term loss of interpretative sovereignty: tattoos are visual signs, and, even if they contain a text, they remain aesthetically coded as visible images. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but it is often not clear which words or narratives the recipient supplies at the moment of looking at a picture (Berger 2002, 50) and which messages the tattooee actually wants to communicate through it. This tension—which Berger (2002) captions as the "ambiguity of the photograph" in his title—begins to emerge, in this case, when the status of being tattooed is acquired and, in the first instance, is independent of the chosen motif: being tattooed carries a message about the tattooee that is interpreted and evaluated by recipients, for example, as cool, as underclass, or as gangster style. And, of course, evaluations of the part of the body that has been tattooed and of the motif itself are incorporated within evaluations of the tattooee whenever such evaluations are formulated by recipients.

Every recipient can find their own interpretation, however, even if it opposes the tattooee's intention. Thus, a loss of control regarding the interpretation of the tattoos is inevitable. "Subjects have to face the conflict that although they can modify and (re)write their bodies they cannot control the meanings that other people give to their tattoos. Therefore the visualized body is in itself a battleground of contradictory meanings" (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005, 112).

Still, tattooed people will frequently be asked about the assigned meaning of their tattoos. Such queries enable tattooees to supply their own narratives to recipients and some tattooees regard the tattoos they get as opportunities to initiate such communication. More than half of my interviewees said that they like to tell the story of their tattoos, and some even reported that they get tattoos because they intend to be asked about them.

One tattooed person, however, emphasized that she considered the ambiguity of her tattoos valuable: her tattoos had very personal meanings, but she was also glad that they could be interpreted simply as fashion motifs, so that not everyone would know too much about her at first sight. In her case, then, the loss of control over the adequate interpretation becomes an opportunity to use misguided interpretations for her own benefit.

Open for Revisions: One's Own Interpretation

“People are often surprised by the different stories that a single tattoo . . . can generate and want to find out the definitive truth behind the image. However, these people will be sorely disappointed because I believe that the power of the tattoo lies in its ability to generate countless stories and multiple truths” (Beeler 2006, 12). Thus, there are multiple stories behind a tattoo, stories of agency, stories of control and of loss of control. The loss of control can be compensated for once the tattoo is finished by giving one's own interpretation to its process and appearance, even if it is not what the client had envisioned.

Many tattooees regard their tattoo as a reminder of their relationship to the tattoo artist, of the occasion of getting tattooed, and thus, to some degree, as a reminder of losing control: when asked about their tattoo, they often tell the story of where they got it, either emphasizing that it was done by a well-known artist or expressing a sense of friendship with the tattoo artist. People often stick with one artist for their future tattoos or collect tattoos from famous artists. If a cover-up becomes necessary, either because of the poor quality of a tattoo or because of the unbearable history of the tattoo, the tattoo artist who helps a person to get rid of an old tattoo by creating a new one is stylized into a hero, which is typically done in TV-shows such as *Horror Tattoos*.

Is getting tattooed ultimately a gain or loss of control? The answer to this question probably depends on the individual experience. From talking to tattooees and from my own experience, I have the overall impression that the gain is seen as far more significant than the loss and that tattooees consider themselves to be far more active in the overall process than is evident in the *dispositif* of a person getting inked and the phrase “getting tattooed.” There is a thought process underlying the decision, agency is required when looking for a suitable tattoo studio, and, again, the person has to decide which artist to book, which placement for the tattoo will be appropriate, and roughly which design and size to get. Most of all, the person decides why they want to have their body changed in this way and what it means to them. And this decision, unlike the decision to get the tattoo, can be revised.

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