REVISITING (NOT SO) COMMONPLACE IDEAS ABOUT THE BODY: TOPIA, UTOPIA AND HETEROTOPIA IN THE WORLD OF TATTOOING

Dominique Roux

ABSTRACT

Purpose — This paper brings a fresh contribution to the role of space and places in Consumer Culture Theory. Investigating the context of tattooing, it conceptualizes the various articulations that link the body as a topos and a utopia, and the street shops (as “other” places or heterotopia) where consumers’ identity projects are undertaken.

Methodology/approach — Our approach is based on an ethnographic work, that is, the observation of the shop and interviews conducted with its two managers, three male tattooists, and a young female apprentice.

Findings — We show how the changes that affect heterotopic places in the world of tattooing impact the way body identity projects are taken care of. We highlight the material and symbolic exchanges that “take
place” and “make place” between the shop as a heterotopia and people’s utopias of the body.

Research limitations/implications — The research involves a single fieldwork and deliberately focuses on the female apprentice as the main informant of this study.

Social implications — This paper draws attentions to the emergence of women in the world of tattooing and their transformative role of highly gendered meanings and practices.

Originality/value of paper — In articulating the links between bodies, their utopias and heterotopic places where these are carried out, we contribute not only to the understanding of the meaning that consumers attribute to the transformation of their body, but also to the role played by spaces — sites as well as gendered bodies — in our understanding of these phenomena.

Keywords: Research paper; place; tattooing; body; identity project; heterotopia

"My body is like the City of the Sun, it has no place, but from it there emerge and radiate all possible places, real or utopian."

— Michel Foucault

PLACES IN CONSUMPTION

Various consumption practices have been investigated within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) from the standpoint of the identity project they are supposed to support. In the full sense of the term, these practices incarnate identity construction when, like tattooing, they involve the transformation of the body and act upon the self (Follett, 2009; Goulding, Follett, Saren, & Maclaran, 2004; Patterson & Schroeder, 2010; Pentina, Spears, & Sager, 2007; Sanders, 1989; Velliquette, Murray, & Evers, 2006). Although tattooing and its socio-cultural meanings are evolving (Sanders, 1989; Velliquette, Murray, & Creyer, 1998), the practice continues to exhibit a series of paradoxes (Taylor, 1997). Tattooing still stands at the boundary
between an “art world” (Becker, 1982) and “lowbrow craft” (Kosut, 2006), identity expression and identity construction (Pentina et al., 2007), permanence and transformation (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010; Velliquette et al., 2006), personalization and fashion (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), and deviance and mass consumption (Bengtsson, Ostberg, & Kjeldgaard, 2005).

Despite the embodied character of the topic, the place the body occupies in spaces where these transformations are performed remain evanescent. Whereas the issue of identity, even in its most problematic aspects (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010), is central to CCT studies, the role of space and places is overlooked. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a theoretical framework that articulates two types of places: first, the body as a place, a topia that we cannot practically escape, and at the same time a utopia, that is, imaginary places that are fantasized from the areas of the body that are unknowable directly (such as our back); second, the places (street shops here) where the transformation of the body and the achievement of utopias are undertaken. Following Foucault (1967/2001, 2009) in his reflection about places — real (topia), imaginary (utopia), and “other” (heterotopia) — the paper provides a theoretical framework that shows how the development of street shops, their increased openness and growing feminization alters the way bodies and their utopias are taken care of.

We investigate this phenomenon in the context of a street shop in a French provincial town — Studio 54 — where a group of self-employed tattooists work under a tattoo manager, a trend that underscores the rapid development of this practice in contemporary western societies (DeMello, 2000; Wymann, 2011). Our approach is based on an ethnographic work, that is, the observation of the shop and interviews conducted with its two managers, three male tattooists, and a young female apprentice whom we deliberately chose to make the main informant of this research. Our decision aligns with the evolution of the world of tattooing and its increasing openness. Long seen as “other spaces” in Foucault’s (2009) sense, tattoo parlors are gradually supplanted by street shops, which are more normalized and open places. Emerging from their isolated, marginal, closed, and largely male setting, street shops deploy new strategies to capture new segments of customers, especially young people and women, by recruiting freshly trained female tattooists. We show that the entry of women into the tattooing profession changes the way bodies and their utopias are accompanied. In articulating the links between bodies, their utopias and heterotopic places where these are carried out, we contribute not only to the understanding of the meaning that consumers attribute to the transformation of their body (Bengtsson et al., 2005; Goulding et al., 2004; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson,
2005; Patterson & Schroeder, 2010; Velliquette et al., 2006), but also to the role played by spaces — sites as well as gendered bodies — in our understanding of these phenomena (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006).

REAL, OTHER, AND IMAGINARY PLACES

Places are central to consumption. Whether personal, public, or commercial, they are constantly shaped by activities related to them or that they determine. However, despite their importance and omnipresence, places are mainly viewed as backdrop that remains theoretically underdeveloped. Whether they be homes (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010), work places (Tian & Belk, 2005), cultural site (Kozinets, 2001), or “third places” (Karababa & Ger, 2011; Oldenburg, 1999; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), sites are generally considered simply as topias, that is, areas where the activities that research scrutinizes take place. Providing a brief but rich reflection on space, Foucault (1967/2001) has emphasized that, more so than time, life in contemporary spaces is still governed by a certain number of oppositions within the practices and institutions between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. His analysis on the various relationships that exist among the different sites result in two types being singled out: utopias and heterotopias.

From the former — utopias — Foucault takes the main features set out by More (1516/1997): utopias are place that are nowhere (Maclaran & Brown, 2005), sites with no real place (Foucault, 2009), “spaces that are fundamentally and essentially unreal” (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1574), but whose purpose is to remedy the deficiencies of the present world (Kozinets, 2001).

While utopias are unreal places, heterotopias are oppositional locations he proposes examining. Defined as real places — places that do exist in the society — they are governed by rules that support various human imaginary projects. These include for example libraries as the purpose of accumulating all knowledge; asylums, prisons or nursing homes as ways to manage and correct physical or moral deviance; cinemas and theaters as spaces of creation of and projection into imagination; cemeteries as sites for commemoration and cult of the dead. Modern technopian ideologies (Kozinets, 2008) can also been found within particular projects pertaining to space colonization, be they ships, planes, spacecrafts, space stations, or the Biosphere II project in Arizona, which represents the most ambitious closed
ecological system on earth. With some exception (Maclaran & Brown, 2005), CCT has come up with several examples of such “heterotopias” without explicitly stating so, for example, the Burning Man project (Kozinets, 2002), Napster music file sharing network (Giesler, 2006), flea markets (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Sherry, 1990) or back-to-nature communities (Belk & Costa, 1998) to name a few. In these various sites for exchanges, traditional rules currently applying to the marketplace are simultaneously “represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1574). Indeed, these places harbor transactions, which though are not based on common economic standards but on the restoration of alternative modes of exchange such as bartering, haggling, gift giving, and/or reviving traditional ways of life. From this perspective, though they delineate special places where deviant (re)presentations of aesthetics and relationships to the society are expressed, tattoo parlors or street shops have been seldom examined as heterotopic places. However, they host artists (tattooists) who struggle to assert a legitimate “art world” (Becker, 1982) as well as they provide people a place where to ink directly into their skin “personal myths” and need for recognition (Velliquette et al., 2006).

THE BODY AS A TOPIA AND A UTOPIA

The question of the body as the cornerstone of identity construction and the self has been largely addressed (Belk, 1988). Patterson and Schroeder (2010) for example have drawn on a series of metaphorical constructions of the skin – a container, a projection surface, and a cover to be modified – to flesh out this “embodied identity within CCT” (p. 263). However, reducing the body to one of its parts (Belk, 1988) offers a limited conceptualization of the body. Whereas previous literature has used the metaphor of the space as a body (e.g., Belk, 1988), little has been said about the metaphor of the body as a space (Mauss, 1934/1979). Differently from Goffman’s (1971) concept of “territory of the self,” Foucault (2009) has elaborated both on the body as a “topia” – a place from which one cannot escape because it is strictly identical with the space it occupies – and as a utopia. He stresses the fact that utopias are linked to the body (being for example invulnerable, giant, ultra-powerful, and eternal) precisely because utopias are born of the body. More precisely, the body contains inaccessible and fantasized zones that one can only know with the aid of a mirror, for example one’s back or the back of one’s head, so that the body is also constantly traversed by and
casted into the world. Though they both refer to a negation (utopia is a place that does not exist, and a myth is a story of events that are not real), topias differ here from “personal myths” (Velliquette et al., 1998). To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, the myth involves looking backward while utopia can be conceived as a dream forward (Abensour, 2000). People often try to reconnect with past events when getting a tattoo (Velliquette et al., 1998), but they also conceive their body as projected in another place and “linked to all the world’s elsewheres” (Foucault, 2009). For example, tattooing and tribal markings are ways of making the body a fragment of imaginary space that will communicate with the world of the gods or with the world of others, tattooists playing the game of the go-betweens.

**Tattoos Parlors as Evolving Heterotopic Spaces**

Utopias of the body are generally enacted in special places outside the profane world, which Foucault (2009) defines as heterotopias or “counter-spaces.” Tattoo parlors are inherently heterotopic places because they stand out in the social space to host extraordinary activities and people who are in crisis and/or on the margins of the society. Traditionally attended by deviant populations in western societies, tattoo parlors have long attracted individuals who wanted to inscribe in their bodies a demand for existence, identity recognition and rebellion (Le Breton, 2002). In Russia, for example, first tattoo parlors were opened in the 1990s by former prisoners who continued outside what they were previously doing in jails. The fact that tattooing has become commonplace since the 1980s (DeMello, 2000) highlights the homology between the topia of the places and utopias of the bodies that are worked on in these settings. Both are gradually permeated by fashion, accessibility, and democratization. The progression of the “fashion/adornment discourse” (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005) and the “marketization of tattooing” in the media (Bengtsson et al., 2005) now give rise to an increasing demand on the part of young people, and to a growing feminization of the clientele (Westlake, 1987). As a result, street shops flourish and tend to lose the heterotopic character of conventional tattoo parlors. This shift also favors the entry of women into the male professional body. The feminization of tattooing leads to various adaptations women must consent to in order to force their way into these places because to acquire legitimacy, they are subjected to the necessity of “doing” or “undoing gender” (Butler, 1990, 2004; Gherardi, 1995; Martin et al., 2006). In addition, such evolution might also play a role in altering the relationship to the body.
Our theoretical framework (Fig. 1) proposes an articulation of these different spaces — real, imagined, and “other” — and their relationships with the social space of circulation of norms, those in relation to the body as well as the gender. We examine how these evolutions are enacted in a street shop and how the treatment of the customers’ utopias is inflected by female practices (Goulding et al., 2004; Mifflin, 2013). We assume this will enrich our understanding of how various shifts in the world of tattooing reconfigure the relationships between topias, utopias, and heterotopias.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is an ethnography of Studio 54 that has been complemented by a series of interviews with A., a young female apprentice-tattooist aged 21, who has worked here for two years and a non-participatory observation of
her art work in and outside of the shop. A. is also a student at Nantes Art
College and is developing her artistic and conceptual thinking through var-
ious study projects in relation to the body and perceptions, carried out in
the framework of her training. To get a better idea of the context, we also
conducted photographic research on various websites and pages created by
tattooists on social networks, which helped us to analyze how they present
their work, and sometimes the interiors of their shop. Additional interviews
were conducted with A.’s tattoo manager and her male tattooist colleagues.
Yet, these data have intentionally only been used as an external source of
information for the aim of the paper was not to give a panoptic view of the
studio as such, but to explore how the personal viewpoint of a young
woman apprentice could shed light on the transformations that take place
in the world of tattooing. Our data clarify three phenomena: the feminiza-
tion of the world of tattooing and the way in which women have negotiated
their integration into the male world that is training them; the changes
in the relationship to the body that precisely stems from their gender; and
the relationships between the different forms of spaces — real, imaginary,
and other — in which tattooed bodies circulate. The choice of location
was made on the basis of privileged access to the Studio 54, whose man-
gers were open to the project and the researcher knew the recently hired
apprentice.

Differently from other “insiders” in this domain (e.g., Follett, 2009;
Sanders, 1989), the researcher is an “outsider” (Rubin, 1988), not familiar
with the world of tattooing or with experience of its practice. It follows
from this the advantage of greater decentering with regard to the belief
system of informants, but on the other hand runs the risk of misrepresen-
ting their interpretation of the world. Consequently, the conclusions were
discussed with the manager and A.’s male colleagues after the analysis
(Hogg & Mclaran, 2008; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

The Evolution of Tattoo Shops: Toward a Normalization of
“Other Spaces”?

In general, relatively few studies on the subject of tattooing examine the
places where the profession is exercised. Yet, their heterotopic dimension is
crucial for understanding the fact that the activity was/is physically carried
out in socially marginal environments. Historically, tattooing took place in
genuine heterotopic and isolated places such as ships or prison, involving
specific and often deviant populations. It functioned as a marker of chosen
or incurred integration/exclusion in relation to society and its definition of normality (Foucault, 2003; Le Breton, 2002; Sanders, 1989). With the “tattoo Renaissance” (Rubin, 1988; Velliquette et al., 1998), the commodification (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005) and “Artification” of tattooing (Kosut, 2014), the number of tattoo shops in cities has increased. This presence is manifested in two ways. The first is originally grounded in traditional, predominantly artistic tattoo parlors. These are located in cities but with often reduced visibility and accessibility. Tattoo artists become known through relation channels or by means of conventions they participate in. They attract a clientele that has chosen them because of their reputation (Sanders, 1988). Websites they create on social networks allow them to compensate for their lack of visibility by enabling customers — and/or others tattooists in the profession — to see their work and appraise their graphic talents. Videos of them at work are often added to testify to their skills.

The second and more recent type of presence is that of “street shops” (Wymann, 2011). Responding to a growing enthusiasm for tattooing (DeMello, 2000; Sanders, 1988), they have sprung up in busy, high visibility locations in large cities, which serve to attract a more ordinary and less selective clientele with regard to the artist’s reputation. A. sums up the characteristics of a street shop as follows:

What’s different about street shops is that there is a very different clientele. Because street shops are very smart and understand that traditional parlors have a very limited clientele — though this is deliberate — who ask them what they want to do. By contrast, we accept everyone. We inspire trust, even for people who would be put off by traditional stuff.

This commercial positioning also changes the look of the shop, which becomes more open, easy to reach and accessible. This spirit of openness leads street shops to merge more with the aesthetic codes of conventional retailing, as may be seen from Fig. 2.

A.: The shop window is designed to attract a very wide clientele, it’s classy, almost like a jeweler’s shop, and you can go in without worrying.

I: If you had to compare street shops to another type of shop, what would it be?

A.: A clothes store

This openness may also be attested through the way the tattooing cubicle is organized. In Studio 54, an open plan area is shared by all the tattooists, without any separating walls, apart from a so-called intimacy area reserved for tattoo work where the customer is naked.
In general, traditional tattooists present very few visual illustrations of their shop on the Internet whereas street shops do. In this case, pictures show a clear scenographic separation between the sales area and the tattooing cubicle. In the former, they adopt references to the Gothic, Celtic, Polynesian or “neo-trad” motifs that traditional tattoo artists often draw upon, but often tend to stand closer to the world of luxury by using a red and black or black and gold decor. In the cubicle, on the other hand, a clinical whiteness is called for to emphasize the hygienic character and conformity to health rules that all “serious” tattooists now pride themselves upon (Fig. 3).

Yet even democratized, the tattoo shop still remains an “other space” (Foucault, 1967/2001) for four reasons. First, compared to other service outlets, it makes definitive changes to the body, which affect appearance. A rite of passage or identity claim making the body a text (addressed to oneself and/or the other) (Le Breton, 2002; Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960), such permanent and definitive change obeys motivations which, like other radical transformations, are often related to an event, a transition, or a critical time.
in a person’s life (Sanders, 1988; Schouten, 1991). In fact, these shops function, even euphemistically, as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment within which they live, in a state of crisis” (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1575) or, at the very least, in transition (Schouten, 1991). Second, because of its liminal character, the tattoo shop is a place that is neither completely open nor completely closed. Even if the evolution of street shops has made them places easier to get in, one does not enter them by chance. In most cases, a person knows in advance why he/she is going there, and this type of decision departs from the prevailing social norms (DeMello, 2000; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Le Breton, 2002; Sanders, 1988; Wymann, 2011). Third, the tattoo shop also temporarily suspends time in the life of the individual. There is a before and an after the visit to the shop, from which one emerges transformed. And finally, in relation to the outside world, the activities that take place there also have a precise “function,” specific to heterotopia. Following Foucault, this function is to create “a space of illusion that that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1580). Since “all tattoos refer to the experience of transgression” (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005, p. 176), participating in the reappropriation of one’s body as personal, unique, transformable, inscribable, and expressive matter (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010) confers a highly heterotopic character on to these places.

The street shop’s openness and scenography thus go hand in hand with expectations that intimately affect the person’s relations with his/her corporeal identity. Street shops gradually try to adjust to the increasing numbers of new customers, particularly women. Consequently, their appearance is changing as well as their recruitment policy directed at women. But training a young female apprentice calls into question the issue of gender in a traditionally hyper-masculine subculture (Martin et al., 2006). The way by which the female body manages to be integrated into the male professional body of tattooing calls for an investigation of how gendered bodies simultaneously work in relation to the bodies of customers.

**From the Opening Up of Places to Gender Mixing: The Entry of the Female Body in the Professional Body of Tattooing**

A. says she entered the world of tattooing “more or less by chance.” An art student, she was intending simply to sell “flash” tattoo designs and not necessarily trying to join a system she perceived as “highly closed.”
I was going around tattoo shops showing them the designs I’ve done and saying “I’d like to sell some” and mostly they weren’t interested. There was someone who said, “Leave your CV and I’ll get back to you,” but they didn’t call back. Then there was the Studio 54, and they said, “I’ll give you an appointment for next Thursday.” Direct! So much the better! So, just like that, they gave me an appointment and I came back the following week and I met Alex, the “tattoo manager.”

While A. claims she had an interest in tattooing, having previously worked on in art projects, she also acknowledges having been “frightened by the milieu itself.”

In Paris, I’d met these people who I talked to about my projects for art schools and they appeared to me as archetypal tattooists — stupid, boorish and misogynist.

The apparent ease with which A. was asked to take on an apprenticeship contrasts with the historically closed and male nature of this subculture, but illustrates the desire for openness characteristic of the new street shops.

A: I went back there then because I was what they needed. Because they know that they appeal to a public with lots of 17 and 18 year old girls. And there are lots of girls who prefer to be with a girl. Only a week later, for example, I designed something. They needed someone. I was available. The girl definitely wanted me to design a little something for her, a girl who was only 17 or 18. She was with her mother and asked, “So, it’ll be with you?” And Sara — the sales girl — told her “We’ve got three tattooists” (as if she had forgotten that I was there). I looked at her and said “You’re kidding me!?” (because she was right in front of me). She said “Oh, sorry! In fact A. is also an option.” And the girl said, “Yeah, I’d really like that! I’d prefer her.” And so I have lots of feedback from young girls.

Learning the techniques nevertheless takes place in a male environment (Martin et al., 2006). It requires a capacity on the part of the apprentice to put up with mockery of her clumsiness and still unsure mastery of the know-how, as well as constant references to her gender, her body being constantly reduced to the level of a sexual object.

A: Well, you see, when you’re a girl, you’ve obviously got to expect jokes because you are a girl. So, for example, “she does chick tattoos” and things like that. It’s not a very subtle sort of humor, you know. They don’t think about it too much … I don’t know, maybe to retain a bit of authority or something. For example, the typical thing they’d say to me every time I came into the tattoo cubicle was “Hey! A! Show your tits to the customer … that’ll relax him!” It’s little things, funny, it isn’t humiliation. But they constantly play on it. The jokes become boring.

I: But it is unambiguously pitched at a level that clearly states what it means, i.e. that you are simply viewed in relation to your gender?
A: Yes, of course! And for example, there was another thing that was ... my ultimate punishment [laughs]. If I made a big mistake, my ultimate punishment, would be sodomy, like ...“Careful, you’re on the wrong way.” And later, it became almost a game. The last time, they were talking about it and I said to them, “I’ve been expecting that. I didn’t even see it coming.” It became almost a game. There were some people in the tattoo cubicle who didn’t even understand what we were talking about (Laughs).

Within the topic space of the street shop, the coexistence of the genders reproduces the power relations exercised by men, who are the bearer of the knowledge, know-how, and capital associated with the practice of tattooing. Like many professional and consumer contexts that have gradually had to contend with a more equitable mix, tattooing is undergoing a gender shift (Martin et al., 2006). “Undoing Gender” (Butler, 2004) thus consists of untying the normative investment traditionally attached to sex and, in this kind of work situation, reorienting it almost exclusively toward its technical function. This applies not only to A.’s male colleagues but also to customers, where attraction constantly threatens to subvert the work relationship (Fig. 4).

With young men there is necessarily an element of attraction after a while, but it’s the same thing for a male tattooist with a young woman. There’s an ambiguous relationship that is created with the nakedness of the body. There are also positions, which necessarily create a sensual ambiguity. I cope with it by not altering my usual attitude. I would not adopt a specially motherly attitude. My thinking is that I’ll tattoo them as if I was tattooing myself. That is to say, I put them on a par with me.

Entering the world of tattooing thus requires, for a woman, taking on the element of masculinity that is at the heart of the activity and its symbolism (Martin et al., 2006). Acknowledgment, by her peers, of a successful adaptation is expressed in a funny way through the quips that her male colleagues address to her from time to time.

A.: before you were a pretty girl. Now you’ve become a weird guy.

But gender is not only a constraint to be negotiated through the power relations that are exercised in the world of work (Butler, 1990) and by constantly assigning a place to the body, that is to say at a certain distance from the other (Hall, 1959). It is also a way of being that accompanies, with its appropriate sensitivity, the utopias of the customer’s body. “Doing gender” (Gherardi, 1995) when working on the other’s skin thus involves reproducing certain role expectations, particularly in the gentle touch viewed as characteristic of femininity.
Female Accompaniment to Utopias of the Body

A street shop is organized differently from a traditional tattoo parlor. Whereas the independent tattoo artist is responsible variously for the design and graphic implementation of the tattoo as well as welcoming his clientele (Wymann, 2011), the tattoo manager job created at Studio 54 separates these tasks, enabling the tattooists to concentrate solely on their craft. Thus the tattoo manager greets customers on their arrival and conducts them, depending on the schedule and type of tattoo they want, to a specific tattooist. The way in which A. describes customer management emphasizes the different stages through which the customer is channeled (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Altering the Gender Relations Underlying the Operational Technique.
Someone comes into the shop and usually everyone's busy. So the first person who becomes free, the customer heads over to him and says, “Hi, I’ve come to find out about getting a tattoo.” Then there are two possibilities. Either there are tattooists available or at the design table, so they are sent there and in this case there’s direct contact with the customer beforehand. Or nobody’s free and Alex takes care of the person. He’s able to tell him the price, except when very large tattoos are involved, or very specific stuff, when he’ll see the tattooist in the cubicle and ask him. For example, he’ll come and see me and ask if I’m interested. We’ll discuss the price and he’ll go back and see the client to give him or her some information.

Most of the time, the customer has a design in mind and the tattooist works from this and interprets what the customer wants.

We need the person to give us a more or less well-defined design, because there are people who say, “I want a butterfly this size” and in fact their butterfly will have millions of small patterns in it, whereas we were thinking of a quite simple butterfly. There are so many graphic worlds that the only way to communicate is with images.

While authors tend to classify customers according to whether they are already tattooed or are intending to have one (Vale, 1999) and on the extent of their involvement in the practice (Goulding et al., 2004; Patterson & Schroeder, 2010), A. tends to categorize them more in terms of their style. A hierarchy of tastes is established around expert versus profane knowledge, giving rise to a cultural and aesthetic distinction (Bourdieu, 1984).

Tribal stuff, that’ll definitely be people who tune their cars. Or conversely, they’ll be pseudo beautiful body-building kids because they’ve seen guys on TV with tribal or Maori tattoos. And then there’s stuff for girls, you know they’ll often be girls who are leaving high school, real neat on them, who’ve seen it’s pretty, and suits them fine … I had a guy who asked me for a Ferrari horse, the Ferrari logo. It really speaks to the guy, he’s a car nut, a technician, and his dream is to became an F1 racing driver. The design he chose really says it all about the guy. Pretty much all the time, I know who
I’m going to be dealing with. Everyone who chooses the same design will have the same aesthetic tastes, including how they dress, how they look. In the art I work on, there are aesthetic categories, and as a result there are obviously some people who fit in with mine and those who don’t.

People’s tastes, moreover, lead to street shop tattooists making more compromises than independent artists would agree to. Whereas the former can hardly refuse a customer who comes to them, the latter turn down requests that do not fit in with their preferred graphic world. Nevertheless, A. expresses her discomfort when she is asked to respond to certain requirements, particularly tribal tattoos, arguing that she does not feel appropriate to answer expectations involving cultural meanings she does not truly know.

The thing is, I’m not Polynesian, I don’t live in the Marquesas Islands, and the designs are really complex. I don’t know this art. And unfortunately you do Maori tattoos because that’s the fashion, but Maori tattooing means something and it’s highly coded and I don’t have the keys to do this stuff. Tattooing means something too! That’s why I don’t understand people who do knots, because that doesn’t mean anything. Tattoos really have a meaning, even if it’s personal … or else not, because for the Maoris it’s not personal, since they start from the principle that the body is a cosmos and that everything is connected. For the Maoris, tattoos are your identity card. It’s like sailors when they had tattoos, an anchor, that meant you done so many miles aboard ship. Tattoos are an expression of your life. But we can’t do that, we don’t know.

Going along with what the customer wants involves, in A.’s view, immersing oneself in the utopias of the other person’s body (Foucault, 2009), becoming familiar with their cultural and symbolic aspirations and, up to a point, sharing them. In this respect, she feels different from her male colleagues, whom she thinks are less empathetic toward and more unconcerned about what they are asked to do.

Would you think of writing in hieroglyphics to a friend without knowing what they mean? N., for example, he doesn’t care, you ask him to do it, he does it, whether it’s there on the Internet or not, it’s all the same to him. But me, I can’t. It’s something that’s really freighted with meaning.

Similarly, understanding the meaning of a tattoo implies to decode what it represents for a customer according to the design and the place where it is “inked,” thus sharing a mutual conception of his/her project.

There are places on your body that you are aware of but cannot see, your back or your face, and as a result you fantasize about, you imagine, and you only know indirectly, that is, in a mirror. They are areas you can never directly explore yourself and that you visualize through sensations and with your memory. On the upper back, that’s something you carry like a burden. It may also be a dagger in the back, something you can’t
see, but that you’ll have on it forever, like an April fool’s joke, everyone can see it except you. Wings, they can also represent hidden lies. People often ask for them on the shoulder blade because they say, “I don’t want become tired of the design, so I don’t particularly want to see it.” And it’s weird, they’re very much into a utopia of the body, because people don’t see it, so they fantasize about their tattoo throughout their life without really seeing it. They don’t get bored with it because they’ll simply imagine it.

More specifically, responding in an intimate way to what some female customers want, especially very one young ones, results, for A., in a particular type of relationship. This is expressed through the management of emotions surrounding the whole process and, during the tattooing itself, by using an appropriate body language.

There was this girl who’d just turned 18 and who came to get a tattoo of a butterfly with a ribbon, a symbol of flight and rebirth. And she said to me, “I want this butterfly because my life’s been shit, for the last three years a lot of bad things has happened and I’m having this tattoo as a renewal and because it represents the end of this disjointed life so that a new life begins.” And I thought it was really nice that she said that. It was like she was transferring to me the intention she wanted to be realized. She arrived with a sketch drawn by a friend. And once we’d got going, she knew from my movements that I’d have it in my head, at least being a silly bitch who didn’t give a damn about it. And at the end, I said to her, “I hope this tattoo brings you luck.” And it was as if in what I said there was also something imposing order … not a shaman, but the fact of saying it, it was as if there was a gri-gri. I had the impression at that moment of being inside a bubble, with the others outside around me. We’d enacted a ceremony around something to ward off misfortune.

The relation to the body of the other thus needs to be managed differently according to the person’s gender. Kept at a distance with men, the body acquires a central position with young women, and is a matter of helping them in their intimate, initiatory journey.

When I see these young girls, I behave kind of maternally. I ask in a quiet voice if it’s going okay. What’s more, it was on her back, on her neck. What I like very much about that area is that it’s an area of trust because you’d don’t see what the other person is doing. You’ve got to be trusting because the person could be doing anything to you. You don’t know if she’s screwing it up, you don’t see anything. You can even look and see how much pain she’s suffering. For example, I like to look and see if it’s causing pain. Here you’re completely blind. Like they say, blind trust. When I’m behind, I often have a support role, I help much more by talking to them because they can’t see me, I keep them abreast of what’s going on, for example, “I’m going to start now. Okay?” “I’m going to draw a little line, you tell me if it’s okay.” She answers, and I say, “See, it’s nothing much.” I talk so that the person feels trust, and to relax her. “And there, we’re coming to the end now, we’re nearly done.” I say there’s just one little line to do. You see, all the time I guide what’s happening.
Thus, in certain situations, the tattooing action evolves. Not so rough, gentler, more feminine, it constitutes another way of handling the body, despite the piercing of the skin, an inescapable part of tattooing. In trying to soothe the body as much as possible, A. introduces a fairly substantial shift in the symbolic of the pain that seals the masculine nature of the practice.

I pay a lot of attention to helping young girls feel okay and I let them know this by saying, “Hey, this is the easy bit, from here on in it’s going to be tough.” I’ve a number of stock phrases I use. Like, “This is going to hurt, but you’ll feel great afterwards.” And in fact, that helps enormously with the stage that follows. Basically, you clean up, you wipe off the surplus ink, blood and lymph, you dispose of it … it’s a bit like you’ve been crying. You wipe the stuff off, you get rid off what makes it all messy and dirty, you’ve been through a battle. And you return to something aesthetic, clean, beautiful. Then you take the ointment, and you massage the area, put a layer on, like when there are open wounds you put on mud. Shamans do that, that’s what it makes me think of, it’s to seal it off in fact. But hey, some tattooists slap on the ointment, and that’s it.

Pain is an integral part of tattooing, a major aspect of the rite of passage, if only for its cathartic value (Le Breton, 2002; van Gennep, 1960). When getting tattooed herself, A. says she “likes the pain,” which “makes her feel the body exists,” but she is also aware that the customer’s comfort depends on his/her own tolerance. Thus she feels that an overly male management of pain follows stereotyped patterns, that, in contrast to other tattooists, it’s useful to break with (Gherardi, 1995).

There’s one guy with a muscular build and he makes a big thing of it and that causes discomfort. Sometimes he says to the guy, “You’re gonna be a real man!” and so he ups the pressure. I think he might understand that’s not the best way. It’s even the kind of thing that suddenly triggers vagal discomfort. Discomfort, it’s purely emotional, it’s physical, but it’s triggered by the brain. You trigger discomfort. By being gentle, things often go better.

The inclusion of women in the world of tattooing shifts the symbolic relationship that customers have with the practice. It is not necessarily a matter of no longer wanting to suffer any pain, though feelings along such lines may sometimes be expressed, but of producing a smooth transformation in which female body movements are deployed to make it less alarming and ease some of its violence.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Long dominated by men, the world of tattooing is beginning to come to terms with a clientele that is changing with regard to its socio-cultural
characteristics and motivations (Martin et al., 2006). The utopias of the body, which oscillate between self-construction and the embellishment of appearance (Bengtsson et al., 2005; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Patterson & Schroeder, 2010; Pentina et al., 2007; Sanders, 1989), pass through a physical place amidst other bodies whose movements and gender impact the customer’s experience.

By producing definitions of normality in terms of being a body, the social space has created “counter-spaces” in which different and often deviant forms of individual existence have found room to express themselves. Tattoo shops are an example of these “other spaces” housing utopias of a transformed, appropriated, transfigured body that is reinvested in the biographical trajectory of the subject, including through its painful, indelible, and radical modification (Le Breton, 2002).

Symbolic exchanges operate between the dominant social space and these heterotopias, the ongoing transformation of which is noted by Foucault (1967/2001). The broader context in which fashion and media participate in increasing the visibility and democratization of tattooing seems to constitute the explanatory background for the integration of women into street shops and commercial response to these developments (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). In turn, the topia of the shops is transformed in a similar manner: the gender mix and the way the operational area is organized reflect the openness and feminization of the approach. Focusing on places as the location where these practices occur enriches the understanding of the symbolic exchanges that “take place” and “make place” in relation to body identity projects.

The proposed theoretical framework helps to anchor thinking about consumption practices within a spatial domain that organizes these symbolic exchanges. Focusing on places nevertheless only touches upon Foucault (1967/2001) recommendation to erect a genuine heterotopology. Further research in CCT could thus undertake additional descriptions and analysis of these “other spaces” that are a kind of challenge, at once mythical and real, to the space in which we live.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the management and staff of Studio 54 in Nantes, especially A. and the three male tattooists who work together and share the same “box”, for their welcome and the support they gave to this project.
The present paper could not have been written without their help and invaluable comments. I also warmly thank my reviewers and Jeff Murray for their very useful and constructive comments that helped me improve the paper. Finally, I extend my warmest thanks to Michael Westlake, my translator, for the quality of his work and the elegant fidelity with which he makes my texts travel overseas.

REFERENCES


78 DOMINIQUE ROUX


This article has been cited by:
