

punctum.
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SEMIOTICS



ISSN 2459-2943
<https://punctum.gr>

06 | **01**
2020

Translation and Translatability in Intersemiotic Space

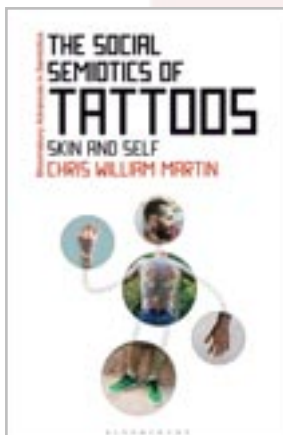
EDITED BY
Evangelos Kourdis & Susan Petrilli

PUBLISHED BY
THE HELLENIC
SEMIOTIC SOCIETY



Tattooing: Imprinting the Self

punctum.gr



Chris William Martin, 2019

The Social Semiotics of Tattoos: Skin and Self

London: Bloomsbury Academic (Series: Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics), EPUB/MOBI eBook, £14.35 (ISBN: 9781350056497)

This is a fine book on modern tattooing and tattoos, looked at through the perspective of Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity as sociological support to enhance the meaning-making potential for the study of social semiotics. The research took place in Canada, and the ethnographic data and socio-cultural context are Canadian. As the author explicitly states at the beginning of Chapter 1, it is "about the cultural resources individuals use as they go about creating and expressing meaning in their everyday lives through body art practices."

Next to the Introduction and the Conclusions, the book has six chapters and an Appendix with the research methodology. The chapters are organized around the ethnographic data that the author gathered during his research, and this makes the whole endeavor very interesting to the reader. The artists' ethnographic presentation is revealing to the non-connoisseur of the subject, as it allows the author to unfold the history of tattoos and their transformation in modern times. Thus, although in the West, tattoos started as a personal statement for deviant people, tattooing has become an art, an artistic expression, and is associated with other forms of art, painting, sculpture, and so forth. The presentation of the tattoos and their fans is very refreshing and informative. After each narrative of the tattooed person follows two parts, referencing and mapping, giving all

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 06

Issue: 01:2020

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2020.0016

Pages: 301-306

By: Lily Stylianoudi

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

the necessary information concerning the Canadian socio-cultural context, which enables the author to solidify and explain his analysis's different connotation levels. In this way, the non-Canadian reader can understand the meanings evoked by the tattoos, their interpretation within their cultural context. The tattoos are composed of images, symbols, letterings, colors, shades, etc. They represent styles and schools and are linked intimately to the person having them, as they are bearers of personal and intimate stories.

In Chapter 1, 'Tattoos and Tattooing in an Era of Liquid Modernity,' the author presents his theoretical framework. The analysis and synthesis of the different theoretical and methodological tools are presented in a manner accessible to the non-specialist reader. I find this element in a writer very important, as it shows respect for his readers.

His theoretical synthesis draws on symbolic interactionism, social semiotics, and Bauman's theory of liquid modernity. Symbolic interactionism, the cornerstone of the Chicago School of Sociology and its ethnography, is presented, while the main concepts of 'cognition,' 'self and identity,' 'communication,' 'relationships and collectivities' are explained as "human social activity" taking place in different situations where the actor forms a "line of conduct." All this happens in different social contexts: cultural, institutional, gendered, national, racial, economic, and historical.

Social semiotics, a term introduced by the British linguist Michael Halliday, focuses on the meaning-making aspect of the interaction of different actors in communication, as a superindividual and intersubjective activity. On the basis of this perspective, tattoos are polysemic and must be understood "as meaningful statements" that can function as indexes, icons, or symbols, depending on the point of view of the tattoo artist, the tattooee, and the viewer. These meaningful statements are inscribed in a "general system of values and forms agreed upon by a community." Tattoos are media and bearers of communication and can be seen as texts, as a language, and as messages, positioned on the body's surface, the skin. Skin and self are intertwined: the skin forms the boundary between a person's inner and outer space. Any ornamentation of the skin is linked to the sense of identity and belonging, the tattoo being a means of inscribing this identity on it. Whether traditional or modern, the tattoo enhances personal identity and the sense of personhood and selfhood as the body, in its fluent movements and everyday gestures, produces different narratives and tells stories projected in the everlasting.

Bauman's theory of liquid modernity provides the author with a sociological frame, as it describes the continually changing social conditions and the ephemeral nature of contemporary living, where "ideas, technology, fashions, consumer products, and even intimate relationships leave our lives as quickly as they enter it." In this respect, every modern man and woman become artists of their own lives searching for fulfillment and happiness. As tattoos are permanent, they provide their owners with a sense of stability, as opposed to our contemporary society's impermanence.

In Chapter 2, 'The Art and Artist behind Your Tattoo,' the author describes his involvement in a tattoo studio, where his ethnographic approach of participatory observation led him. His participation as an employee at the studio provided him with a clear view of the interaction of the two tattoo artists and an understanding of the "strategic interaction and impression management in the day-to-day practice of tattooing."

Chapter 3, 'Tattoo Artists as Artists', explains that tattooing practitioners nowadays establish themselves as artists since tattooing is freed from its deviant connotations and can be included in "the repertoire of art forms." The author introduces the concept of "neo-bohemian tattoo studios," located in "more artistic, postindustrial and less centralized neighborhoods" rather than in the urban centers that usually attract the best artists and their audience. This entails a description of the existing two schools of tattooing, the old versus the neo-traditional. While for the old school, tattooing is a craft for the neo-traditional school, tattooing is an art form. A table neatly summarizes the origins and key characteristics of the distinctive tattoo art styles and forms of these two schools. As tattoo practice leads to the artification of tattoos and tattooing, the notion of 'school' weakens and tattooing becomes a personal art allowing the tattoo artist to express himself artistically and introduce his own ideas and concepts concerning the images, icons, symbols, and colors that compose a tattoo piece, as well as his own, unique technique in the use of the tattoo tools, producing a highly personalized style of forms.

The author uses Greimas' semiotic square to help us understand the context whereby tattooing becomes a "true art form while also trying to maintain its craft roots." The pairs of relationships between the 'craft' and the 'art' of tattooing provide possibilities for "the way the practice could be culturally defined."

In this chapter, the tattooing process is examined as a dialogue between artist and client. And although this might seem as restraining the artist's expressive potential and performance, this dialogue leads to a mutual agreement between the two parties, an agreement that allows the client to inscribe on his body a more personal and meaningful artwork. It is often difficult for the artist to incorporate the client's demands within his artistic quality and expression standards in practice. However, the interaction between the artist and his client makes the tattoo full of meaning on different connotation levels and capable of "reflect[ing] the desires of both the client and the artist." Tattoo artists are creators evolving through and by their art, but more important is the fact that tattoo enthusiasts, over time, "add and amend the meanings of their body art, reflecting personal and cultural changes."

The following three chapters explore the personal meanings that tattoos carry for their bearers and tattoo enthusiasts, the latter being people who have more than one tattoo, experience interest, and enjoyment and feel connected, one way or the other, with the tattoo world. Their narratives are presented in three different chapters that ex-

plore themes of “self-identity, cultural change, gendered bodies, and artistic and emotional expression.” Presenting a well-documented qualitative analysis, these chapters aim to answer the question, ‘why get tattooed?’ Drawing from social semiotics and symbolic interactionism, the author also uses elements of the material culture method, which enable him to understand better the multiplicity of meanings a tattoo has for the tattooee, by being embedded in a broader cultural context. Each narrative’s “referencing and mapping” offer a cultural history and allow every tattooee to reflect on the tattoo’s impact on his/her personal and family history, thus creating a unique lineage and new clusters of meaning. This is perhaps the most seductive part of the book since it highlights the value that tattoos have for conveying messages about identity, selfhood, as well as personhood and personal evolution, at a time where many things are experienced as precarious, ever-changing, and sometimes hard to accept.

In Chapter 4, ‘Permanence as Rebellion,’ the interviewees seem concerned with building and maintaining a distinct self-identity. The tattoo ink inscribes on the body, permanently, the elements necessary to convey the personal meanings that form the story of someone who needs to establish his identity while belonging to an impermanent surrounding world. Identity and belonging are the main characteristics of tattooing in tribal societies, which during rituals of passage mark someone as a member of a particular tribe, bestowing on him/her the status of a person and consequently their rights and obligations towards the tribe. Except for the sense of individuality, an attribute of our societies, these elements are essential to modern tattooees and anchoring them to the tattooed group, providing them with the identity and group affiliation that are so badly needed in modern societies. As expected, the choice of designs varies according to what the individual wants to show with his/her messages, from personal to mythical symbols, from pictures of famous artists to ethnic symbols, from sophisticated choices of designs searched on the Internet, and so forth.

In Chapter 5, ‘Of Cultural Change and Gendered Bodies,’ the designs are linked to tattooing’s global history, from the South Pacific to Japan. The choice of the design evokes East and West’s aesthetics and culture, but mainly reveals the crisis in masculinity brewing in today’s liquid society. Gender problems are discussed from the perspective of the designs on male and female bodies, which evoke the individuals’ need to affirm their gender identity and separate themselves from any family or social roles assigned to them. In this way, a tattoo is an act of rebellion against any imposition of gender stereotypes prescribed by families or society, as the “confusion of roles felt by men and women in their desire to act out gender-appropriate roles in specific situations” must be overcome to establish new gender identities, free of the past.

In Chapter 6, ‘Tattoos as Artistic and Emotional Signifiers,’ tattoo designs reveal a desire for artistic form, where the work of the tattoo artist has to convey artistic taste and the emotional expression of its bearer. In this way, the tattoo-bearing body becomes

the vehicle of personal embodied meanings of profoundly human nature. Considering the tattoos within an aesthetic context, a modern aspect emerges through the history of tattooing: one which the author calls “tattoo classicism,” where form over expression becomes, again, the critical signifier, and where tattoos to “a substantial degree ... resemble painting, drawing, and carving.” The tattoo artists employ techniques that activate aesthetic principles like “pointillism, watercolor and, perhaps the most revered, portraiture.” This aestheticization of tattoo symbols assigns them a power “as emotional expressions and aesthetically infused semiotic resources.” Thus, the artification of tattooing “refers to the process by which a practice comes to be popularly defined and associated with the fine arts.” This artification has elevated the cultural capital of tattooing as it provides the means for personal proposals of establishing and affirming a ‘difference,’ a ‘distinction’ based on ‘taste,’ which in the last analysis are related to class distinctions, since we understand and interpret meanings according to our education linked to the class we are born into. But modern tattooing has always transcended classes, as it embodies deep and personal meaning regardless of the way artistic forms or techniques link it to art. Through the process of tattooing, the individual becomes a ‘tattooed person,’ and the tattoo becomes an “integral part of the identity of the person and part of the larger narrative of the self.”

In a final note, I would like to emphasize one of Martin’s conclusions (pp.165-166): that the way to understand the society around us is by understanding its margins, and his book is based on researching and recording lives lived on the margins since, although tattooing is expanding, tattooed persons still occupy the margins of society, in terms of general cultural appreciation and understanding.

I have read the book twice. During my first reading, I was concerned to understand it and give it a fair presentation. On the second reading, the ethnographic data gave me the full pleasure of their contents and inspired me to approach individuals in my environment (the author suggests that nowadays you can easily find them around you) and ask them for their narratives based on his questionnaire (slightly modified and adapted to the Greek context). Most of the tattooees that I spoke to were in or around their 30s, and I was impressed by their stories. Apart from the individuals attracted to tattoos because of fashion or their relation to TV shows (apparently in Greece, it is fashionable for chefs in television food shows to be tattooed!), their stories coincide in most parts with the narratives of Martin’s interviewees/ enthusiasts/ fans of tattoos. One point strongly stressed was the relationship between the fan and the tattoo creator; this relationship was incorporated into the fan’s personal story, becoming *the story behind the tattoo*. They were also interested in reading Martin’s book, especially the empirical part, to gain insights into their adventure of being tattooed; since this ‘custom’ reached Greece a decade after being practiced in Europe, they got some of their tattoos while traveling abroad and were scolded by family and friends on their coming back.

Now tattoo studios are springing up in areas of Athens, which can easily be defined as Neo-Bohemian, as Martin suggests in his theoretical introduction, which makes his book especially valuable for tattoo fans and tattoo artists.

Finally, I would like to make two suggestions: I would have wanted to see, at the end of the book, the semiotic square applied to Martin's ethnographic material, and specifically to the pairs of relationships between the tattoo artist and the tattooee, where the personal narratives of both would have provided us with a semiotic analysis of the different layers of meanings of the tattoo within our modern liquid society. This suggestion does not mean that his ethnographic data is lacking. On the contrary, his presentation and analysis are well done, as I have already explained. And this leads me to my second suggestion: In a future second edition, all the theoretical arguments should be incorporated into the main text, allowing for greater salience of the ethnographic data, their referencing and mapping, giving us a book on 'Tattooing and the Self in Modern Society.' I think this would attract a much wider audience, as the search for identity and the self in our liquid societies becomes a dire necessity, particularly among young people.

I want to round off this review using the writer's way of aptly summarizing his personal experience and scientific endeavor: "I hope you will enjoy reading about my experiences becoming heavily tattooed, working with – and becoming close friends with – tattoo artists, and speaking to over a hundred tattoo enthusiasts who indelibly mark their skin with ink in the pursuit of meaning, identity, and – well – even happiness. Through empirical research and social scientific rigor, my consistent goal has been to do justice to the practice and the interviewees in portraying their stories. I hope you learn as much as I did about yourself and others." Which, I can confirm, is happening while reading this book.

AUTHOR

Lily Stylianoudi (Ph.D.) is a Social and Legal Anthropologist, Director (rtd) of the Research Centre for Greek Society, Academy of Athens, Greece.





Punctum



ISSN 2459-2943
<http://punctum.gr>

PUBLISHED BY
THE HELLENIC
SEMIOTIC SOCIETY

